

*A report from the*

**SCHOOL, FAMILY & COMMUNITY  
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**THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
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**School-Family-Community Partnerships in Urban Middle Schools: A Focus on Progress  
and Improvement**

by

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Middle schools are responsible for educating students during one of the most critical stages of development -- early adolescence. For many students, early adolescence is a vulnerable period when various indicators of academic motivation, behavior and self-perception decline (Eccles and Midgley, 1988). To fully address the needs of early adolescents and to help them succeed academically, schools need the assistance of students' families and communities (Benson, 1997). However, involvement for most families decreases as their children progress from elementary to middle school (Epstein, 1992).

Middle schools can help reverse this decline by developing comprehensive, permanent school-family-community partnership programs. The 75 middle schools that are members of the National Network of Partnership Schools use Epstein's framework of six types of involvement: 1) parenting, 2) communicating, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making and 6) collaborating with the community, and the action team approach to partnerships to improve and expand connections with students' families and communities (Epstein, et. al., 1997). Action Teams for School-Family-Community Partnerships consist of six to twelve members including family members, teachers, administrators, other school staff (i.e. counselors, nurses, parent liaisons), community representatives and students in the upper grades to ensure that school,

family and community representatives share responsibility for the development, implementation and evaluation of partnership practices. Based on interviews with eight administrators, teachers, parents and community volunteers in the spring of 1997, this paper reports the progress and challenges of two urban middle schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools<sup>1 2</sup>.

### Middle Schools

**Southbend Middle School.** Southbend Middle School<sup>3</sup> is located in a poor, industrial section of the city. It serves 412 students in grades 6 through 8. About 74% of its students receive free or reduced-price lunches, and 23% receive special education services.

Approximately 40% of the student population is African American and 60% of the population is European American. The mobility rate is high with about 14% of the student population entering and 36% withdrawing from the school during the 1995-96 school year. The student average daily attendance rate is about 85%.

For three decades, Southbend Middle School has had a reputation for vandalism, poor achievement and high dropout. These features are seen as a contributing factor to the school's historically low level of parental and community participation. The new principal, Ms. Harris, is working to improve the school's climate and reputation through a number of reforms to enhance

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<sup>3</sup>Fictional names are used to ensure the anonymity of the participating schools and the individuals interviewed.

student behavior, achievement and attendance. According to Ms. Harris, school-family-community partnerships and the school improvement efforts that she has initiated must occur simultaneously. She states, "I think that family and community involvement and school improvement should be joint efforts. I really don't want one to happen without the other. I think they support each other. I think that they go hand in hand."

**Harbortown Middle School.** Harbortown Middle School has more than double the population of Southbend, serving 861 students in grades 6 through 8. About 86% of its students receive free or reduced-price lunches, and 18% receive special education services. The student population is predominantly African American (98%). The school's mobility rate is high with about 16% of the student population entering and 26% withdrawing from the school during the 1995-96 school year. The student average daily attendance rate is about 82%. The school is located in an economically depressed area close to the city's growing cultural and commercial center.

Like Southbend, Harbortown Middle School is also facing change. As a result of school closings and subsequent re-zoning, the majority of the school's student population lives outside of the immediate area. Traveling to and from the school is difficult for many of Harbortown's families, which negatively affects parental volunteering and attendance at school meetings. Public housing reform and school restructuring promise to keep the school's student population in a state of flux. Effectively educating students in this uncertain environment is the school's mission, as well as its challenge. Ms. Ross, the school's assistant principal, sees school-family-community partnerships as central to achieving this goal, saying it is, "The only way that we can succeed really. The families and the community people are the ones who drive the image of the

school. They're your spokespersons. The way people talk about the school outside is the impression that people will get forever."

### **Putting Words into Action**

Educators and parents interviewed for this study spoke about the importance of school-family-community partnerships for student success. The respondents have a very broad definition of the term, "partnerships." The breadth of their definition reflects the range of family and community involvement included in Epstein's framework of six types of involvement. Although the schools have not yet implemented activities for each of the six types of involvement, each school has made substantial progress toward developing a comprehensive program of partnership.

**Type 1 - Parenting.** Type 1 activities assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students. For example, parents play a key role in helping students get to school on time every day. Schools can help families understand and carry out this parenting responsibility in a number of ways. Southbend Middle School has hired two of its volunteers as attendance monitors. These volunteers -- Ms. Stevens, a community member and Ms. George, a parent -- work with students, teachers, and especially families to help improve student attendance.

According to Ms. Stevens:

We do a lot of things as attendance monitors. We make home visits, and we call parents to find out why the child is not in school. We also call to encourage parents, and to let them know that they are the first and primary educators of their children. We encourage them to come in and volunteer time, find out why the child does not want to attend school, find out what the problem is.

Attendance monitors at Southbend Middle School help families to carry out their parental responsibility to monitor their children's school attendance. This is the first year that the school has implemented this Type 1 activity and is pleased with the results. Ms. Stevens reports that students have responded well to this partnership activity, and are aware that the school is working closely with their families to encourage regular school attendance.

Harbortown Middle School has also implemented Type 1 activities. To help families develop skills that they can use to improve their own educational and professional opportunities, and ultimately, opportunities for their children, the school has a computer class for parents every Tuesday. The Action Team chairperson, Ms. Gunthrie, reports that attendance at the computer class was good during the first semester of the school year, but tapered off during the second semester. She and others on the Action Team are working with a community group to find better ways to inform parents about the class and other services that the school offers.

**Type 2 - Communicating.** Type 2 activities include school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and students' progress. Harbortown knows the importance of good communication with its families. It found that communicating with families helped the school to improve students' attendance and test scores. According to Ms. Ross, "We did a lot of communicating with parents for both those things. For all of the major testing sessions, parents were notified about what their children needed to do to prepare, and what parents could do to help them prepare."

Harbortown Middle School is also proud of its telecommunications system, which permits important information to be communicated efficiently to all families. Ms. Green, the parent liaison, who is also a member of the Action Team explains, "[W]e can feed school

information to the system, and it will automatically call every parent in the school and provide that information.” The Action Team chairperson for Harbortown, Ms. Gunthrie, further explains, “. . . Once a month everything that is happening for the month that needs to be publicized, like immunizations, is on the Parentel. Our Parentel will dial parents until it gets an answer.”

Because Southbend is working to change its long-standing negative reputation, communicating with its students’ families is very important. But how does the school communicate with families who are unwilling to come to the school? Southbend decided to go to the families. Southbend school teacher and Action Team chairperson, Ms. Carl, describes the “Get to Know the Principal” teas as one of the school’s “most successful” partnership activities. To give families from the three different communities around the school the opportunity to meet and talk with the new principal, the Action Team for School-Family-Community Partnerships planned a series of teas. One tea was held at a health center, another at a recreational center, and the third at a local church.

**Type 3 - Volunteering.** Type 3 activities enable families to give their time and talents to support schools, teachers, and children. The framework of six types of involvement includes attendance at school events and activities as a form of Type 3 involvement because family members are volunteering their time to celebrate the accomplishments and talents of students. Harbortown has very little trouble with this type of family and community volunteering. The parent liaison and Action Team member, Ms. Green, explains that although families may hesitate to volunteer their services at the school, they enjoy watching their children perform. When discussing how to get more families to volunteer as classroom helpers, cafeteria monitors, and in other ways, Ms. Green states:

To really get them more involved, we have to first let the children perform. Then, talk to them about other things we would like for them to become involved in, and explain those things so that they can better understand them.

It is important for schools to identify volunteer opportunities that will help provide students with meaningful learning opportunities in safe, nurturing environments.

Southbend Middle School has developed, for example, a parent patrol. The school had a discipline problem and many students walked the halls when they should have been in their classrooms. The parent liaison and Action Team member, Ms. Taylor, believed that parents could assist school personnel in monitoring the hallways. She began a parent patrol program with 25 volunteers. When describing the initial results of the program, Ms. Taylor states, "When the kids found out that their parents were coming to school volunteering, there was a big turnaround. And, it wasn't just fear, some of the students were proud that their parents were a part of the school." Southbend is planning a volunteer celebration for the families who assisted the school in monitoring the halls and other activities. The celebration is the school's way of thanking volunteers for making a difference.

**Type 4 - Learning at Home.** The type of involvement that families are most interested in is how they can help their children with learning at home (Epstein, 1995). Indeed, research in the United States (Lee, 1984; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995) and abroad (see Sanders and Epstein, 1996) has shown that when families get involved with students' learning at home, students' attitudes toward learning and school performance improve.

At this time, Southbend does not have well developed Type 4 activities. Harbortown, on the other hand, has been able to implement a successful activity to assist families' in monitoring their children's homework. The school has established a homework line. Each teacher in the



school has a code number which parents are given at the beginning of the school year. When a parent wants to know his or her child's homework assignment, the parent can call the homework line and enter the teacher's code number. The school hopes that over time, more families will use the homework line. According to Ms. Gunthrie, the Action Team chair at Harbortown Middle School, "Some parents use the homework hotline, but for those parents who need more encouragement, we will focus on them next year."

**Type 5 - Decision making.** Type 5 activities enable families to participate in school decisions that affect their own and other children. Family representatives on school councils, committees and other decision making bodies, and in the PTA, PTO and other parent organizations ensure that parents' voices are heard and incorporated into school decisions. Southbend and Harbortown have parent representatives on their school improvement teams and on their Action Teams for School-Family-Community Partnerships, but would like to re-establish strong parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) to encourage more family involvement in school decision making. The parent liaison at Southbend, Ms. Taylor, plans to use the school's volunteer celebration to identify parents interested in establishing a PTO.

Harbortown Middle School is also working to re-establish its PTO. According to one of the school's Assistant Principal's, Ms. Ross, the school has not had an active PTO in over a year. Ms. Gunthrie, the Action Team chair explains, "We had a nice PTO, but there was a breakdown somewhere and the parents just lost interest in coming. Usually we have something going fine during the first part of the school year, then it falls off. We are looking to ourselves, maybe our interest dropped which caused the . . . [parents' interest] to drop."

Harbortown is working to revive the PTO through other Type 5 -- Decision Making

activities, such as their community meetings. When the school had problems with student discipline on the school bus, they held meetings in the community to decide how to address the issue. Ms. Gunthrie, the Action Team chairperson at Harbortown Middle School, hopes to "build a resource list" from participants at the community meetings. From the list, she hopes to recruit members to re-establish a strong parent-teacher organization at the school.

**Type 6 - Collaborating with the Community.** Type 6 activities facilitate cooperation and collaboration among schools, families, and community groups, agencies and individuals. Harbortown and Southbend have developed productive community connections. For example, Southbend worked with a national volunteer organization, Americorp, to create a beautiful parent room where parents can meet and volunteers can work or relax with a cup of coffee. The room is freshly painted with colorful decorations that create a warm and inviting atmosphere. Above the room's large windows is a banner that reads, "VOLUNTEERS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE." The room has a bulletin board listing the latest school news, a large work table, and books on child development. The room also has a refrigerator, a soda machine and a microwave oven.

Southbend Middle School has also been able to provide students with additional counseling services through its partnerships with a local university and a counseling agency. The school's principal, Ms. Harris, plans to continue to reach out to community agencies and organizations to provide needed resources for Southbend's students and families.

Harbortown's community connections also have been beneficial to the school, its students and their families. The school works closely with a team of individuals from several institutions, including a local college and the juvenile justice system. The group has worked with the school to survey families to better understand their needs and concerns, to plan community meetings,

and to mentor students. In addition, the school has developed connections with a local high school, which has proven mutually beneficial. Ms. Gunthrie, the Action Team chairperson explains, "As a part of our community involvement, high school students, especially those who . . . attended [Harbortown Middle School], . . . earn their service credits by working with our students and tutoring them. Or, if we have an affair and want parents to come, we let them help with babysitting."

Harbortown has other community connections that have resulted in the school being repainted and parents being taught more about managing household budgets. However, the school's assistant principal hopes for still greater participation from the surrounding community, "so that the kids can see that others are taking an interest."

### **Improving the Process**

Although Southbend and Harbortown Middle Schools have implemented a variety of worthwhile partnership activities, there is room for improvement in each school's program. For example, each of the schools could add to the activities it now conducts to ensure that its program has at least one well designed activity for each of the six types of involvement, and that the activities implemented are linked to specific school improvement goals. Further, each school could improve how it currently meets the challenges of the six types of involvement (Epstein, 1995), such as providing all families with regular, two-way forms of communication about school activities and concerns, and implementing a regular schedule of interactive homework to encourage family participation in children' learning at home (Epstein, Salinas and Jackson, 1995). Each school has acknowledged the gaps in its partnership program and has expressed the

desire to make improvements.

A large part of each school's progress will be determined by the quality of its Action Team for School-Family-Community Partnerships, the action arm of the partnership program. A well-functioning Action Team ensures that planning, implementing and evaluating partnership activities are responsibilities shared by administrators, teachers, parents and others in the school and surrounding community. The team approach also reduces the likelihood of individual burnout and increases the likelihood that programs become permanent. However, developing a well-functioning Action Team is a process that takes time, commitment, organization and excellent communication.

For example, Southbend's Action Team has faced a number of challenges because the chairperson of the Action Team did not know of her position until after the school year had begun. As a result, she found it difficult to coordinate the team and delegate to its members specific roles and responsibilities. Because Southbend's current principal, Ms. Harris, is committed to improving the partnership program, she is working with a district facilitator for school-family-community partnerships to carefully identify and train a new Action Team. She is also working to schedule a date during the summer when the team can create a three year outline and one year action plan for the upcoming school year. By establishing a common agenda and clarifying goals, roles and responsibilities of team members prior to the beginning of the academic year, Southbend's Action Team will be much better prepared to develop and carry out an effective, comprehensive program of partnerships.

Harbortown Middle School's Action Team has been more stable than Southbend's. The Action Team chairperson, Ms. Gunthrie has been in the position for three years and has learned

much about the process during that time. When describing her growth as Action Team chairperson, she states:

I have learned from meeting with the [the district facilitator] how to delegate authority rather than trying to take it on as a one man show, and so its gotten a bit easier. Now we have a chair for each of the types of involvement and that makes it easier. I oversee it all and just monitor what the team is doing.

Harbortown's Action Team, however, still has areas in which it can improve. For example, some members of the Team do not know the names, positions or responsibilities of other members. All members of the Action Team for School-Family-Community Partnership should be able to articulate its structure, functions and activities as well as the chairperson does. Further, each team member should be aware of all planned activities. Achieving these goals may require that the Action Team chairperson develop a regular meeting schedule to improve team awareness, planning and communication.

### **Conclusion**

The educators and parents interviewed at Southbend and Harbortown Middle Schools strongly believe that school-family-community partnerships are as important for young adolescents in middle school as they are for children in elementary school. The middle schools in the study have been using the framework of six types of involvement and the action team approach to partnerships for three years. During this time, they have made progress in developing their programs of school-family-community partnership. Each school presently conducts a variety of meaningful activities to involve families and communities in students' learning and development as it works to further improve its partnership program.

Program improvement, however, is an incremental and often, nonlinear, process. The schools face challenges, such as personnel changes and shifting student populations that require them to identify and train new Action Team members, modify partnership activities and strategies, and evaluate team effectiveness on a regular basis. The difficulties of the middle schools in this study call attention to the importance of Action Teams that are thoughtfully selected, well organized, and trained to plan, implement, evaluate and continually improve programs of school-family-community partnership. With well-functioning Action Teams and time, these middle schools will be able to develop partnership programs that support all students' learning.

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# School Programs and Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement in Inner-City Elementary and Middle Schools

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## Abstract

This study uses data from 171 teachers in 8 inner-city elementary and middle schools to examine the connections between school programs of parent involvement, teachers' attitudes, and the practices that teachers use to involve parents of their own students. Patterns are examined at 2 levels of schooling (elementary and middle), in different academic subjects, under various classroom organizations (self-contained, semi-departmentalized, departmentalized), and under different levels of shared support for parent involvement by the teachers and significant other groups. Each of these variables has important implications for the types and strengths of school programs and teachers' practices of parent involvement. The results add to the validation of Epstein's typology of 5 types of school and family connections. The data used in this study were collected as the first step in a 3-year action research process in which the sampled schools are engaged. The process is outlined in terms that any school can follow to improve programs and practices of parent involvement.

An extensive and growing literature documents the importance of school and family connections for increasing student success in school and for strengthening school programs. The theory of overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools on students' learning and development and on family and school effectiveness (Epstein, 1987a) is supported by a growing number of studies. For example, when teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the elementary grades, and rate the teachers as better teachers overall; and students improve their attitudes and achievement (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986, in press).



Despite increased attention to the topic of parent involvement over the past decade, few studies have focused on teachers' practices of involving parents in "difficult" or "disadvantaged" inner-city schools. Indeed, a recurring theme in many studies and commentaries is that less educated parents cannot or do not want to become involved in their children's education (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Lareau, 1987). Other research challenges this generalization by showing that there is wide variation in the nature and quality of the involvement of less educated parents (Clark, 1983; Scott-Jones, 1987) and that, when teachers help them, parents of all backgrounds can be involved productively (Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Epstein, 1986).

Even studies that report average differences in involvement based on parent education or social class, however, recognize that *family practices* vary within any group of parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lareau, 1989; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Useem, 1990). Part of the variation among families is due to the fact that schools vary in how much and how well they inform and involve families.

An earlier large-scale study of elementary teachers, parents, and students showed, for example, that teachers who were "leaders" in the frequent use of parent involvement did not prejudge less educated, poor, or single parents. They rated all groups of parents higher on helpfulness and follow-through on learning activities with their children at home (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986, 1990). In contrast, teachers who did not frequently involve parents in their children's education made more stereotypic judgments about the involvement and abilities of less educated parents, socioeconomically disadvantaged parents, and single parents. Thus the attitudes and practices of the teachers, not only the educational, socioeconomic status (SES), or marital status of parents, are important variables for fully understanding whether and how parents become knowl-

edgeable and successful partners with schools in their children's education.

Studies will continue to show that better educated families are more involved, on average, in their children's education until researchers include measures of teacher practices to involve all parents. Most parents need help to know how to be productively involved in their children's education at each grade level. School programs and teacher practices to organize family and school connections are "equalizers" to help families who would not become involved on their own.

### Five Types of Involvement

Earlier studies and reviews suggest that five major types of involvement are part of schools' comprehensive programs to share responsibilities with families for the education of their children (Epstein, 1987b).

1. *Basic obligations of families* include providing for children's health and safety, developing parenting skills and child-rearing approaches that prepare children for school and that maintain healthy child development across the grades, and building *positive home conditions* that support school learning and behavior all across the school years. Schools assist families to develop the knowledge and skills needed to understand their children at each grade level through workshops at the school or in other locations, home visitors, family support programs, and in other forms of education, training, and information giving.

2. *Basic obligations of schools* include *communications* with families about school programs and children's progress. This includes the memos, notices, phone calls, report cards, and conferences that most schools conduct and other innovative communications with parents that some schools create. Schools vary the forms and frequency of communications and greatly affect whether the information sent home can be understood by all families.

3. *Involvement at school* includes parent and other *volunteers* who assist teachers,

administrators, and children in classrooms or in other areas of the school. It also refers to family members who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events. Schools can improve and vary schedules so that more families are able to participate as volunteers and as audiences. Schools can improve recruitment and training so that volunteers are more helpful to teachers, students, and school improvement efforts.

4. *Involvement in learning activities at home* includes requests and guidance from teachers for parents to assist their own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children's class work. Schools assist families on how to help their children at home by providing information on skills required of students to pass each grade. Schools provide information to families on how to monitor, discuss, and help with homework and when and how to make decisions about school programs, activities, and opportunities at each grade level so that all students can be more successful in school.

5. *Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy* includes parents and others in the community in *participatory roles* in the parent-teacher association/organization (PTA/PTO), advisory councils, Chapter 1 programs, or other committees or groups at the school, district, or state level. It also refers to parents as activists in independent advocacy groups in the community. Schools assist by training parent leaders and representatives in decision-making skills and in ways to communicate with all of the parents they represent and by providing information needed by community groups for school improvement activities.

A sixth type of involvement has been suggested as an important component in schools' comprehensive programs for involving families and communities in their children's education (California State Board of Education, 1988):

6. *Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations* includes connections with agencies, businesses, and other groups that share responsibility for children's education and future successes. This includes school programs that provide children and families access to community and support services, including after-school care, health services, and other resources and that coordinate these arrangements and activities to support children's learning. Schools vary in how much they know and share about their communities and how much they draw on community resources to enhance and enrich the curriculum and other experiences of students.

This type of involvement was not part of the earlier research that helped to identify the five major types of involvement, nor is it included in the present study. Future research will determine whether and how this is a separate type of involvement or whether these collaborations offer strategies for strengthening the five types of school and family connections by calling on and coordinating community resources for workshops, communications, volunteers, learning activities at home, and decision making (Epstein & Scott-Jones, in press). Other types of involvement and different typologies will be suggested by other researchers and practitioners and will require study. The typology offered in this article is designed to be helpful to educators who are analyzing their schools' practices and developing new programs. Although the five types are not "pure" and involve some aspects that overlap, most practices that schools use to involve families in their children's education fall under one of the five types.

Schools with programs including the five types of involvement help parents build home conditions for learning, understand communications from the schools, become productive volunteers at school, share responsibilities in their children's education in learning activities related to the curriculum at home, and include parents' voices

in decisions that affect the school and their children. There are, literally, hundreds of practices that can be selected to implement each type of involvement. Most practices have not yet been formally evaluated, but the available evidence indicates that the different types of involvement lead to different outcomes for parents, teachers, and students (Brandt, 1989; Epstein, 1986).

Research on the typology provides evidence of its validity, and a study of a large sample of parents using measures of the five types of involvement found moderate to high internal reliabilities ranging from .58 to .81 (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Data from teachers in earlier studies were used to study the design and effects of types of involvement but did not provide information on whether the five types were separable. This study uses reports from teachers about the five types of involvement in school programs to further examine the typology.

Earlier studies of parent involvement have focused on one level of schooling, either elementary (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986, 1990, in press; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987), the middle grades (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Useem, 1990), or the high school level (Bauch, 1988; Clark, 1983; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987), but studies have not included comparisons across levels of schooling. This study compares school programs and teachers' practices of parent involvement in elementary and middle schools. Dauber and Epstein (1989) present a related study on the attitudes and practices of the parents in these elementary and middle schools.

### Method

Data were collected from 171 teachers in five elementary and three middle schools in Baltimore on the teachers' attitudes and practices of parent involvement. The eight schools were selected at random from a set of comparable Chapter 1 schools in economically and educationally disadvantaged

neighborhoods to begin a 3-year initiative to improve parent involvement programs and practices.

Teacher representatives for parent involvement from the eight schools were invited to attend a summer workshop. They were paid for their time, were provided a background on the topic, helped write questionnaires, received a planning grant to administer the survey to teachers and to parents, and planned an initial activity based on the survey results. The teachers were assured of 3 years of support in a series of small grants to design, conduct, help to evaluate, and expand practices of parent involvement in their schools to increase the achievement and success of students. The program is presently ongoing in the eight schools.

The teacher questionnaire on which this study is based is organized into 10 questions with many subquestions that obtained 100 pieces of information on teachers' general attitudes toward parent involvement; teachers' practices of communicating with students' families; use of school and classroom volunteers (including the numbers, frequency, tasks, and training of volunteers); strength of school programs on the five types of parent involvement; importance of specific practices of five types of parent involvement to the teacher for his/her grade level and subjects taught; teachers' expectations of parents; the involvement of hard-to-reach subgroups of parents; the level of support for parent involvement of the teacher, other school staff, parents, and community; the characteristics of the student population; classroom organization; subjects taught; grade level(s); numbers of different students taught; and years of teaching experience. Open-ended comments about parent involvement practices and problems were also solicited from the teachers.

Two stages of analyses were conducted. First, descriptive statistics were provided to the teachers, principals, and parents in each school. Each school was given two profiles

or "Clinical Summaries" based on the data collected from teachers and parents. These profiles summarized the strengths and weaknesses of the school on the five types of parent involvement as perceived by the two groups of respondents and reported summary statistics for all survey questions (Epstein, 1988; Epstein & Salinas, 1988). Schools used these data to develop their initial projects to improve parent involvement programs and practices.

Second, in this study, the data from teachers in the eight schools are combined for more formal analyses of patterns and connections of teacher attitudes about parent involvement, school programs, and the actual practices that teachers use at two levels of schooling (elementary/middle); in different academic subjects; under three classroom organizations (self-contained, semidepartmentalized, departmentalized); and under high or low support by significant other groups for parent involvement. In the next sections we present correlates of strong school programs of the five types of involvement, add information to validate the typology of five major types of involvement, discuss the practices of teachers of specific academic subjects, and demonstrate the importance of a school climate for parent involvement. These analyses provide new information on programs of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. Finally, we outline the process that these schools are using and that any school could use to improve its connections with families in order to benefit students.

## Results

### Teachers' General Attitudes about Parent Involvement

Overall, teachers in the inner-city elementary and middle schools in this sample have strong, positive attitudes about parent involvement. A 10-item scale, scored 1-4 for negative to positive attitudes on each item, has an average mean score of 3.07 (with a standard deviation of .32), indicat-

ing strong agreement overall and little variation in teachers' attitudes. Compared to other teachers, attitudes are more positive for teachers who teach in self-contained classrooms (correlation coefficient,  $r = .234$ ) and for those who perceive high support for parent involvement from their colleagues and students' parents ( $r = .336$ ). Teachers with more positive attitudes toward parent involvement place more importance than other teachers on such practices as holding conferences with all students' parents, communicating with parents about school programs, and providing parents both good and bad reports about students' progress. More positive attitudes also are positively correlated with more success in involving "hard-to-reach" parents ( $r = .383$ ), including working parents, less educated parents, single parents, parents of older students, young parents, parents new to the school, and other adults with whom children live.

### Separate Contributions of the Five Types of Parent Involvement

The items in the questionnaire were designed to measure the five types of involvement described previously. The five types are significantly interrelated, with correlations ranging from  $r = .303$  to  $r = .569$ , as shown in Table 1. The modest correlations indicate, however, that the five types also make separate contributions to comprehensive programs of parent involvement.

The range of coefficients suggests a Guttman-scale-like pattern—a cumulative property such that schools with more difficult components of parent involvement have the easier ones in place. For example, a strong school program in *communications* from school to home (type 2) is least predictive of the other types (range of  $r = .303$  to  $.449$ ; range of  $r^2 = 9\%$  to  $20\%$ ). Because most schools communicate with families in notices, phone calls, conferences, and in other ways, the power of this type of involvement to predict other types is relatively low. Knowing a school had a strong

TABLE 1. Intercorrelations of Measures of Five Types of Parent Involvement

Type of Involvement	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parenting skills, child development, and home environment for learning		.378	.482	.569	.467
2. Communications from school to home			.341	.449	.303
3. Volunteers at school				.561	.519
4. Involvement in learning activities at home					.567
5. Decision making, leadership, and governance					

NOTE.—All correlations are significant beyond the .001 level.  $N = 171$ .

program of communications would not help much in predicting whether other types of parent involvement were also in place. By contrast, a strong school program in *learning activities at home* (type 4)—perhaps the most difficult type of parent involvement—is more predictive of the other types (range of  $r = .449$  to  $.569$ ; range of  $r^2 = 20\%$  to  $32\%$ ). That is, if schools are conducting programs to involve parents in learning activities at home, you could predict with up to 32% accuracy that one or more of the other types of involvement also were in place. The other three types of involvement—in workshops, volunteers, and decision making—are less distinct in their intercorrelations and their predictive powers. It appears that they are usually added to school programs *after* communications practices and *before* involvement in learning activities at home.

The values show that there is considerable flexibility and unpredictability in which types of involvement are strongly implemented in schools. We are finding in this project, for example, that, with guidance and with small grants to enable teachers to obtain and use data from teachers and parents, schools proceed in different ways to build or strengthen parent involvement programs. For example, if schools learn that parents want this information, they initiate type 4 activities to involve parents in their children's learning at home earlier than is typical in the sequence. The data help us see typical patterns, but the actions taken by individual schools help us understand

that these patterns are not fixed. Schools can take different directions in program development if they learn about the needs and interests of their families, students, and teachers.

Other cluster analyses not reported here indicate clear connections between specific school programs and teachers' practices of the same type. For example, teachers' own communication practices correlate significantly with the strength of the school communication program ( $r = .154$ ) but not with the strength of the school volunteer program ( $r = .058$ ). Teachers' own volunteer practices correlate significantly with the strength of the school volunteer program ( $r = .390$ ) but not as strongly with the school communication program ( $r = .155$ ). Teachers place more importance on their own practices in the type or types of involvement that are strong in their school as a whole.

#### Correlates of Strong School Programs to Involve Parents

Table 2 reports the zero-order correlations of the strength of the five types of parent involvement with school level—elementary versus middle schools. Teachers in elementary schools report significantly stronger programs of parent involvement than teachers in middle schools on four of the five types of involvement ( $r = -.212$  to  $r = -.484$ ), in parenting and child development, volunteers, learning activities at home, and decision making. The exception is that elementary and middle school teachers do not report much difference in their

schools' programs to communicate with parents ( $r = -.121$ , not significant). Specific communications practices, however (including informal notes, telephone calls, the actual number of children's families involved in parent-teacher conferences), are used significantly more often by elementary grades teachers than by their middle grades counterparts ( $r = -.232$ ).

Other analyses not reported here show similar, slightly weaker correlations of the types of involvement in Table 2 with classroom organization (Epstein & Dauber, 1989). Teachers in self-contained classrooms use significantly more parent involvement than teachers in departmentalized classes ( $r = -.155$  to  $r = -.321$  for the different types). School level is, however, the stronger correlate. More elementary classes are self-contained and more middle grades classes are departmentalized ( $r = .631$ ), with some overlap in semidepartmentalized arrangements. Elementary teachers in self-contained or semidepartmentalized classrooms are more likely than middle school teachers to have some school programs and some individual practices that include parents in their children's education. Still other analyses show that *within* elementary schools, the lower the grade level, the more likely the teacher is to use parent involvement, especially volunteers in the classroom. With considerably different measures, Stevenson and Baker

(1987) show that parents of younger children (compared to older students through adolescence) are reported by teachers to be more involved in meetings and conferences at their children's schools.

There were no significant correlations of the types of involvement and the percentage of students below average in ability in the teachers' classrooms. All of the schools in this sample have high proportions of low-ability students—about 70% of the teachers report that over half of their students are below average in ability. Teachers with fewer years of experience in these schools have slightly more communications with their students' parents ( $r = -.178$ ) and are in schools that use more volunteers ( $r = -.169$ ). Years of teaching experience do not correlate significantly with teachers' reports of the strength of their schools' programs to involve parents in workshops, home learning activities, or decision-making opportunities.

#### Effects of School Level, Student and Teacher Characteristics, and Teacher Practices on Parent Involvement Programs

Table 3 extends the previous discussion by showing the results of multiple regression analyses that identify the influence of four variables on the strength of three types of school programs of parent involvement. The four variables are *school level* (coded as

TABLE 2. Zero-Order Correlations of Five Types of Parent Involvement with School Level

How Strong Is This Type of Involvement in Your School or in Teacher's Own Practice?	School Level, Elementary (0) vs. Middle (1)
1. Workshops (school)	-.403
2. Communications:	
School	-.121
Teacher	-.232
3. Volunteers (school)	-.484
4. Learning activities at home:	
School	-.343
Teacher	-.212
5. Decision making, leadership (school)	-.273

NOTE.—Correlations of .14 are significant at the .05 level; .19 at the .01 level.  $N = 171$ .

TABLE 3: Summary Table Explaining the Strength of Three Types of Parent Involvement

Characteristics and Practices	How Strong Is This Type of Involvement at Your School? <sup>a</sup> (Standardized Regression Coefficients)		
	Communications from School to Home <sup>b</sup>	Volunteers at School	Learning Activities at Home
School level (elementary/middle)	-.104	-.360***	-.310***
Years of teaching experience	.003	-.176*	.016
Percentage of students below average ability	-.056	-.022	-.124
Importance to teacher of this type of practice <sup>c</sup>	.232**	.237**	.163*
R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.30	.16

NOTE.—N = 171.

<sup>a</sup>Responses range from 1 = not important, 2 = need to develop, 3 = need to strengthen, or 4 = already strong.

<sup>b</sup>Strength of school program of communications includes three items, volunteers includes two items, and learning activities at home includes two items.

<sup>c</sup>Teachers reported how important school and family connections were at their own grade level; *communication practices* includes five items on conducting formal conferences with all parents at least once a year, attending evening meetings, and contacts about students' report cards and progress; *use of volunteers* by the teacher includes the frequency of volunteers in teachers' classrooms in an average week; *learning activities at home* includes nine items on giving information on required skills, providing parents with ideas on how to talk with and help students on school work, listen to students read, practice reading, spelling, writing, and social studies, skills, and discuss television shows.

\* $p < .05/.06$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

elementary = 0 or middle = 1), years of teaching experience, percentage of students below average in ability, and the importance to the teachers of specific practices for their own grade levels and students. Data on teachers' practices were available for three types of parent involvement—communications from school to home, volunteers at school, and learning activities at home. Standardized regression coefficients report the independent effects of each variable, after statistically controlling the other variables in each equation.

The first column of Table 3 shows that strong programs of communications from school to home are not strongly influenced by school level, years of teaching experience, or percentage of students below average in ability. The strength or weakness of school programs of communications with families is explained mainly by the teachers' attitudes and practices of communicating with their own students' families (standardized regression coefficient  $B = .232$ ).

The second column shows that, with other variables statistically taken into account, strong programs of volunteers at school are explained by school level—more volunteers are used in the elementary grades ( $B = -.360$ ); years of teaching experience—newer teachers are more likely to report that their schools have strong volunteer programs ( $B = -.176$ ); and individual teachers' practices concerning volunteers—teachers who use volunteers themselves say that their school volunteer program is strong ( $B = .237$ ).

The third column shows that strong school programs to involve parents in children's learning activities at home are most influenced by school level—elementary schools are more likely than middle schools to have strong programs of this type of involvement ( $B = -.310$ ). Regardless of level, however, reports of strong school programs to involve parents in learning activities at home are also explained by teachers'



own emphases on practices that help their students' parents know how to help their children on schoolwork at home ( $B = .163$ ).

The four variables explain little of the variance in the strength of communication programs ( $r^2 = .07$ ), a moderate amount of the variance in the strength of programs for increasing involvement in learning activities at home ( $r^2 = .16$ ), and a considerable amount of the variance in the strength of programs to involve volunteers ( $r^2 = .30$ ).

We know, of course, that level of schooling and associated features affect programs and practices of family involvement because the influence process cannot go the other way. However, because these data are cross-sectional—taken at one point in time—the direction of influence of school programs and teacher practices cannot be determined. It may be that the importance teachers place on specific practices of parent involvement at their own grade levels influences their perceptions of the strength of the programs at their schools. That is, the teachers' personal attitudes and practices color their reports of the school as a whole. Or the strength of particular school programs in communication, use of volunteers, or learning activities at home may influence teachers to involve students' parents in these ways. That is, the schools' programs affect the practices individual teachers use.

There is evidence from other schools that, when some teachers succeed with new activities (such as the use of volunteers), other teachers are influenced to use the same practices, thereby strengthening the school program overall (as discussed by Delia Vargas, June 1990 progress report for Schools Reaching Out project on P.S. 111 in New York). Indeed, among the schools in this study, all of these influence processes have been observed, suggesting that over time school programs and teacher practices change and improve in concert. Longitudinal data would help document and define this continuous process in which school programs and teachers' individual practices influence each other.

#### Parent Involvement Practices of Teachers of Different Subjects

Teachers were asked to check all of the subjects that they taught in an average week. Analyses of these data show that teachers of the major academic subjects—English/language arts, reading, math, science, and social studies—tend to stress different parent involvement practices (Epstein & Dauber, 1989). *Teachers of reading* (compared to teachers who did not teach reading) place more importance on involving parents in listening to their children read aloud ( $r = .141$ ) and on involving parents as volunteers in their classrooms ( $r = .138$ ).

*Teachers of English/language arts* (compared to teachers who did not teach the subject) emphasize the importance of helping parents become involved in several types of learning activities at home, including listening to the child read ( $r = .160$ ), discussing television shows ( $r = .164$ ), practicing skills for spelling and other tests ( $r = .133$ ), listening to the child's writing assignments ( $r = .168$ ), and assigning homework that requires parent-child interaction and discussion ( $r = .143$ ). These teachers also stress the importance of conferences with all parents ( $r = .164$ ). The specific practices of the reading and English teachers encourage parent involvement in language and reading skills and help promote students' success in these subjects. Teachers of reading and English also report stronger and more positive involvement of parents who are typically "hard to reach," including less educated parents, single parents, young parents, and other adults (not parents) with whom some children live. In effect, they are more likely than other teachers to use practices to involve children and all families in subject-specific activities as part of their regular teaching practice.

*Teachers of math, science, or social studies* (compared to teachers who did not teach these subjects) do not place great importance on these parent involvement practices. Compared to other teachers, math



teachers are significantly *less* supportive of attending evening meetings or activities ( $r = -.135$ ); science teachers are significantly *less* supportive of informing parents of the skills required to pass their subject at each grade level ( $r = -.117$ ); and social studies teachers are significantly *less* supportive of participating in student-parent-teacher clubs and activities ( $r = -.148$ ).

Earlier research found that elementary school teachers who frequently involve parents in learning activities at home are most likely to request involvement in reading or reading-related activities (Becker & Epstein, 1982) and that these practices have some positive influence on students' growth in reading scores (Epstein, in press). In the present data from elementary and middle grades teachers, we see some subject-specific connections between the academic subjects taught and the teachers' use or lack of use of particular practices. Teachers of math, science, and social studies may need even more assistance than other teachers in preservice and in-service education to understand how to involve parents in their children's learning activities in those subjects.

#### School Climate for Parent Involvement and Program Strength

Teachers were asked about their own and others' support for parent involvement to indicate the climate at their school for supporting school and family connections. They rated their own level of support (i.e., on a 4-point scale of none, weak, some, or strong) and estimated the level of support for parent involvement of their principal, other administrators, their teacher colleagues, the parents of students in the school, and others in the community. "Discrepancy scores" were derived to represent the differences between the teachers' own support and their perceptions of the support of other individuals or groups around them. We hypothesized that *greater discrepancies* between teachers and others in the school

would be linked to *weaker programs* of parent involvement.

Overall, the teachers report that they are similar to their principals in their strong support for parent involvement. However, they believe that they, as individuals, are stronger supporters of parent involvement than their teacher-colleagues and much stronger supporters than the parents or others in the community.

Table 4 shows that greater discrepancies between teachers' beliefs about their own and parents' support for involvement occur in schools that have more students below average in ability and more departmentalized programs. Teachers in these schools believe that they are more supportive of involvement than are the parents. When teachers differ culturally and educationally from their students (as in schools with many below-average students), or when they teach greater numbers of students (as in departmentalized programs), they are less likely to know the students' parents and, therefore, more likely to believe that parents are disinterested or uninvolved.

The next section of the table shows that greater discrepancies between teachers and parents are linked to weaker programs of the five major types of parent involvement, with the exception of communications. As noted earlier, just about all schools conduct some communications with families, regardless of teachers' personal attitudes or beliefs. If the teachers believe parents are less supportive of parent involvement than they are, however, the teachers report that their schools have fewer workshops ( $r = -.152$ ), fewer volunteers ( $r = -.140$ ), fewer methods to involve parents in learning activities at home ( $r = -.230$ ), and fewer opportunities for decision making ( $r = -.132$ ).

The bottom of the table shows that greater discrepancies between teachers' reports about themselves and parents are linked to less successful connections with several groups of "hard-to-reach" parents. If teachers believe that parents are not in-

TABLE 4. Discrepancy Scores: Correlates of Teachers' Reports of Differences between Their Own and Parents' Support for Parent Involvement

	Correlation Coefficient <sup>a</sup>
Classroom conditions:	
Percentage of students below average	+ .142 <sup>b</sup>
Number of different students	+ .172
Self-contained vs. departmentalized	+ .180
Strength of school program:	
Parenting skills, home conditions	- .152
Communications from school to home	N.S. <sup>c</sup>
Volunteers at school	- .140
Learning activities at home	- .230
Participation in decision making	- .132
Involvement of hard-to-reach parents:	
Working parents	- .175
Less educated parents	- .209
Single parents	N.S.
Parents of older students	- .222
Parents new to the school	- .192 <sup>b</sup>
Other adults with whom children live	- .200 <sup>b</sup>

NOTE.—Correlations of .14 are significant at the .05 level; .19 at the .01 level; N.S. = not significant.  $N = 171$ .

<sup>a</sup>A (+) correlation suggests that a positive discrepancy score (i.e., teachers' views of own support for parent involvement are higher than their views of parents' support) is associated with a higher level of the measured variable; a (-) correlation suggests a positive discrepancy is associated with a lower level of the measured variable.

<sup>b</sup>Indicates significance when discrepancy is high between self and principal.

<sup>c</sup>Indicates significance when discrepancy is high between self and colleagues.

terested in becoming involved in their children's schooling, teachers make fewer efforts to contact, inform, and work with them—especially those parents who are hard to reach and especially on more difficult types of involvement such as involving parents in learning activities at home.

Other analyses indicate that discrepancies with principals and colleagues also reduce practices of parent involvement, as noted on the table. For example, greater discrepancy between self (teacher) and principals occurs in schools with more disadvantaged students. Also, teachers who think that they and their principal differ in supporting parent involvement make fewer contacts with hard-to-reach parents. Greater discrepancy between self and colleagues is linked to weaker school programs and fewer individual practices of traditional communications with families.

Highly discrepant environments (where teachers believe that they differ in attitudes

from others at the school) are less likely to support strong, comprehensive programs of parent involvement. Less discrepant environments (where teachers see themselves as more similar to their own school administrators, colleagues, and parents) are more likely to support strong school programs and encourage strong teacher attitudes and practices.

### Discussion

This survey of teachers in inner-city elementary and middle schools offers new information about the strengths and weaknesses of programs and practices of parent involvement. We draw the following conclusions from the data.

#### School Level

Elementary school programs of parent involvement presently are stronger, more positive, and more comprehensive than those in the middle grades. This is espe-

cially evident for workshops for parents on parenting skills, child development, and school programs; volunteers at school; learning activities at home; and involvement in school decisions. One partial exception concerns school programs of communication. Although teachers in elementary and middle schools report their schools have about equally strong communication programs or policies, middle grades teachers use fewer specific communication practices and communicate less often than elementary teachers with fewer individual families. Middle grades parents receive less information or guidance at the very time they need more information and more guidance in how to be involved in larger and more complex schools and in new and more complex class schedules and subjects (Useem, 1990). This pattern is changing and will change more as middle grades schools and middle grades teachers increase their understanding of school and family connections in early adolescence and begin to develop stronger and more comprehensive programs.

#### Classroom Organization

Programs of parent involvement are stronger in self-contained classrooms. The organization of classrooms (e.g., self-contained, semidepartmental or teamed, and departmentalized programs) determines the number of students that are the teachers' responsibility and affects the frequency and reasons that teachers contact students' parents. Teachers in self-contained classes (mainly in elementary schools) have fewer students to teach and are more apt to make frequent and diverse contacts with parents. They may feel more familiar with a small number of parents or more fully responsible for the students' school programs, including home learning activities.

Students with many teachers for different subjects could benefit greatly if their parents knew how to monitor and discuss schoolwork and school decisions with their children. To adjust for the difficulties of

working with large numbers of students and families, teachers in middle schools and some elementary schools will need extra information, staff development, and guidance in efficient and effective practices that can be used to involve parents of students in departmentalized or semidepartmentalized programs.

#### Academic Subjects

Teachers of certain academic subjects—particularly English and reading—use more practices than teachers of other subjects to involve parents in their children's education. Although this is presently the pattern, many of the same techniques used by English and reading teachers could be used by teachers of any subject (e.g., teachers can ask parents to listen to a child read something the child wrote, practice skills before quizzes or tests). Teachers of any subject can design and assign homework in a way that requires students to interact with a parent about something interesting that they are learning in school.

#### Support for Parent Involvement

Discrepancy scores show that *greater differences* between self (teacher) and principal, self and teacher-colleagues, and, particularly, self and parents are associated with *weaker* parent involvement programs and practices and less involvement with families who are typically hard to reach. Conversely, *greater similarities* between self and others are reported by teachers in schools with *stronger* parent involvement programs and practices. Teachers who believe that they share similar beliefs with parents about involvement make more contacts with parents who other teachers find hard to reach, conduct more types of activities to involve families, and are less affected by disadvantaged characteristics of the student population and by different classroom organizations. The analyses of discrepancy scores suggest that it is important to build common understanding about shared goals and common support among

teachers, parents, and principals so that teachers' feelings of isolation or separateness from others will decrease and so that school and family partnerships will increase.

#### Five Types of Involvement

The five major types of parent involvement are related but separable. In these schools, type 2 activities (communications from the school to the home) are more prevalent and, therefore, less predictive of other types of parent involvement programs or practices. In contrast, type 4 activities (involvement in learning activities at home) are difficult for many teachers to organize and so are implemented in fewer places and by fewer teachers, usually after other more standard practices are in place. Information from parents at the schools in this study showed that parents wanted more information on how to help their own children (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Some schools used that information to develop type 4 activities even before strengthening other types of involvement. The results support earlier studies that suggest that schools can invest in different types of involvement to address various needs and to attain different benefits.

#### Families in Inner-City Schools

Educators and researchers often view minority families and families of educationally disadvantaged students in terms of their deficiencies. Often, however, the deficiencies lie in the schools' programs. In this sample of eight inner-city, Chapter 1 elementary and middle schools, some schools and, within schools, some teachers have figured out how to mobilize the support of educationally and economically disadvantaged families. In the 3-year action research program, all of the inner-city schools are discovering that, regardless of where they started from, they can systematically improve their practices to involve the families they serve.

#### Linking School Programs and Teacher Practices

The study demonstrates important linkages between school programs and teachers' individual practices to involve parents. Although the direction and process of causality remain to be determined in longitudinal studies, this study provides evidence that strong school programs in particular types of involvement go hand in hand with the importance teachers place on the same types of involvement.

Other variables also may influence school programs and teacher practices. In a study of elementary schools, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1987) found that *teacher efficacy* (feelings that one is an effective and capable teacher) is related to the strength of school programs of parent involvement, including conferences with more parents, more volunteers, and more interactive homework activities. Although their measure of teacher efficacy raises some questions because it includes estimates of students' ability to learn, the conclusion that schools with more confident teachers use more involvement strategies is provocative. The authors also found that schools with more confident teachers, on average, report more support from parents.

Another study of parent involvement in elementary schools found that parents and principals rated teachers higher in overall teaching ability and interpersonal skills if the teachers frequently used practices of parent involvement (Epstein, 1985, 1986). Teachers' confidence may be boosted by high ratings and appreciation from parents and administrators that result from the use of more involvement practices and that encourage continued and expanded use of these practices.

Studies are needed that press these questions further to increase an understanding of the links between school programs and individual teachers' practices across the grades, in different subjects, and in a variety of school communities. This study is based on a small sample of schools and teachers

selected because of their initially low and infrequent family and school connections. Despite the somewhat restricted conditions in these schools, the analyses yield robust and credible results about the connections of parent involvement with the level of school, subjects, types of involvement, and climate of support. Other studies of these patterns in more varied sets of schools will help clarify the reported results.

### **Implications for Improving School and Family Connections**

The schools in this study are participants in the Baltimore School and Family Connections Project—a long-term process to improve school and family connections in order to improve students' success in school. The process is one that may be followed or adapted by any school that is not satisfied with its present types or strengths of parent involvement. In this case, educators work with researchers and a community foundation that makes small grants to teachers to develop more responsive programs and practices of parent involvement. Small grants can come from other sources, however, such as district and school funds for school improvement and various federal, state, and local programs. Small grants that support and recognize teachers' practices of parent involvement also have been successful in other projects (Davies, 1990; Krasnow, 1990). We have learned of several steps that may maximize success.

1. *Assess present strengths and weaknesses.* Each school needs to identify its own "starting point" on practices of parent involvement in order to move ahead with more comprehensive and improved programs.
2. *Identify hopes, dreams, and goals.* How would parents, teachers, students, and administrators like the school to involve parents 3–5 years from the starting point? Rather than looking back at errors or failures in their practices and relationships, we ask the

partners in education to look ahead to their goals for the future. What new goals for parents, for students' success, and for teacher and administrator practice could be attained?

3. *Identify who will have responsibilities for reaching the goals.* Over a 3-year period, progress can be made in clear steps, but some individual, team, group, or committee must be put in charge and supported in its responsibilities to conduct and supervise specific activities, revise practices, evaluate progress each year, and expand programs. Comer's (1988) process of school site management to include parents emphasizes formal committee structures; our work acknowledges and develops committees and other flexible arrangements such as large and small teams and groups to design and improve practices. In either case, responsibilities must be clear and efforts must be supported.
4. *Evaluate implementations and results.* It is important for teachers, administrators, parents, and students who invest time and energy into a new process and activities to know how well the program is implemented (e.g., are they reaching those they want to reach?). And, if programs are successfully implemented, one must evaluate whether and how well they promote student success or other goals. Based on each year's evaluations and reviews, programs may be revised, maintained, or extended to move toward ever more effective connections with more families.
5. *Continue to support program development activities.* Parent involvement is a process that requires teachers, administrators, parents, students, and others in the school community to plan, implement, and reflect on their efforts and goals. This takes time. We are finding that 3 years of small

grants to teachers provide a minimum period in which to make a good start to improve some practices, particularly if principals exert their leadership to reinforce the concept of partnership with families and to recognize and extend specific activities. As with any aspect of school effectiveness, however, school and family connections are ongoing investments that require continuous attention and support.

### What Questions Must be Asked?

The schools in this sample started with surveys of teachers and parents that the teachers helped design. These questionnaires are available for others' use or adaptation. There are, however, other ways schools can assess where they are starting from. These include gathering information from panels of teachers, parents, and students at PTA meetings, grade-level meetings, or other special convocations. Or, principals may conduct focus groups or breakfast meetings with specially invited teachers and parents to outline goals and plans for parent involvement. Questions for panels, focus groups, or discussion groups about their own schools include:

1. Which practices of each of the five types of parent involvement are presently strong at each grade level? Which are weak? What practices are particularly important at each grade level? Which practices should change from grade to grade, and which should be continued?
2. Are our parent involvement practices coherent and coordinated or are different groups fragmented and following their own agendas? How are all families, Chapter 1 families, limited English proficient families, special education families, and other families who seem "hard-to-reach" provided with information

and included in their children's schools and education at home?

3. Which families are we reaching and which are we not yet reaching? Why are we having problems reaching some families, and what can we do to help solve problems of communications and relationships?
4. What do we expect of each other? What do teachers expect of families? What do families expect of teachers and others in the school? What do students expect their families to be able to do to help them in appropriate ways at each grade level?
5. How do we want this school to look 3 years from now in its practices of the five types of parent involvement? How would we like parent involvement to work here? What would teachers do? What would parents do? What would administrators do? What would students do? What are specific goals that we want to reach at the end of 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years?
6. How are our students succeeding on important measures of achievement, attitudes, and other indicators of success? How could parent involvement help more students reach higher standards and higher levels of success? Which types of involvement will help students boost their achievements, accomplishments, attitudes, and behaviors?
7. What steps can we take to reach the 3-year goals? Who will be responsible for developing, implementing, and evaluating each type of involvement?
8. What costs are associated with the desired improvements? Will staff development, district resources, and/or school leadership and resources be needed? Will small grants or other special funds be needed to implement the programs? How will teachers, parents, and

others who design and conduct activities be supported, rewarded, recognized?

9. How will we evaluate the implementation and results of our efforts to improve practices? What results do we think will actually be attained in 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years, and what indicators, measures, observations will we use to learn how we are progressing?
10. And other questions about starting points, plans, goals, responsibilities, implementations, and evaluations.

Whether questionnaires, telephone surveys, focus groups, or other group discussions are used, each school must gather information to create a profile of present practices and a coherent plan of action to improve practices in the future.

### Summary

Although teachers individually express strong positive attitudes toward parent involvement, most school programs and classroom practices do not support teachers' beliefs in the importance of school and family partnerships. In this survey most teachers wanted all parents to fulfill 12 parent involvement responsibilities, ranging from teaching their children to behave, to knowing what their children are expected to learn each year, to helping them on those skills. Most schools and teachers have not yet implemented practices to help families fulfill these responsibilities at each grade level. Most teachers believe they are stronger supporters of parent involvement than are the other teachers in the school. This is, of course, logically inconsistent and indicates that the teachers do not know their colleagues' attitudes. Teachers say that parents and others in the community are not strong supporters of parent involvement, but surveys of parents in the same schools contradict the teachers' beliefs about parents (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Thus, educators may create false or exaggerated discrepan-

cies between themselves and others about parent involvement.

As schools in this study found when they assessed the attitudes and aims of their teachers and parents, more similarities exist than many realize. There is, then, an important (though often hidden) base of shared goals, interests, and investments in children's success on which to build more effective programs of school and family connections.

### Note

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THIS WE BELIEVE AND NOW WE MUST ACT

## Improving School-Family-Community Partnerships in the Middle Grades

Joyce L. Epstein

**T**his *We Believe*, the position paper of the National Middle School Association, discusses 12 characteristics of responsive middle-level schools. The beliefs set high expectations for good people, good places, and good programs in the middle grades. They are presented as important goals to improve the quality of life in schools and the quality of education for all young adolescents.

One characteristic of a responsive middle level school is "family and community partnerships." This goal is on every list for school improvement, but few schools have implemented comprehensive programs of partnership. This article addresses three questions to help middle-level educators move from their beliefs to action: (a) What is a comprehensive program of school-family-community connections in the middle grades? (b) How do family and community partnerships link with the other elements of an effective middle level school? (c) How can schools answer the call for action to develop and maintain productive programs of partnerships?

### A Framework for a Comprehensive Program of Partnerships: Six Types of Involvement

For decades studies have shown that *families are important* for children's learning, development, and school success across the grades. Research is accumulating that extends that social fact by showing that *school programs of partnership are important* for helping all families support their children's education from preschool through high school. Left on their own, few families continue as active partners in the middle grades. Currently, few families understand the ins and outs of early adolescence, middle level

education, school and community programs and activities available to their children, the school system, and other issues and options that affect students in the middle grades. Studies show that if middle level schools implement comprehensive and inclusive programs of partnership then many more families respond, including those who would not become involved on their own.

*What is a comprehensive program of partnerships?* From many studies and activities with educators and families, I have developed a framework of six types of involvement that helps schools establish full and productive programs of school-family-community partnerships. This section summarizes the six major types of involvement with a few sample practices that may be important in the middle grades. Also noted are some of the challenges that must be met for good implementation of partnership practices and examples of the results that can be expected from each type of involvement in the middle grades.

#### Type 1—Parenting

Assist families with parenting skills, understanding young adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Obtain information from families to help schools understand families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for their children.

*Sample practices* for middle level schools. Conduct workshops for parents; provide short, clear summaries of important information on parenting; and organize opportunities for parents to exchange ideas on topics of young adolescent development including health, nutrition, discipline, guidance, peer pressure, preventing drug abuse, and planning for the future. Provide information in useful forms on children's transitions to the middle grades and to high school, attendance policies, and other topics that are

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important for young adolescents' success in school. Offer parent education and family support programs. Design activities that teachers use at the start of each school year or periodically to ask parents to share insights about their children's strengths, talents, interests, needs, and goals.

*Challenges.* One challenge for successful Type 1 activities is to *get information to those who cannot come to meetings and workshops at the school building.* This may be done with videos, tape recordings, summaries, newsletters, cable broadcasts, phone calls, and other print and non-print communications. Another Type 1 challenge is to *design procedures that enable all families to share information about their children with teachers, counselors, and others.*

*Expected results.* If information flows to and from families about young adolescent development, parents should increase their confidence about parenting, students should be more aware of parents' continuing guidance, and teachers should better understand their students' families. Specifically, if practices are targeted to help families send their children to school on time, then student attendance should improve.

## **Type 2—Communicating**

Communicate with families about school programs and student progress with school-to-home and home-to-school contacts such as notices, memos, conferences, report cards, newsletters, phone and computerized messages, open houses, and other innovative communications.

*Sample practices* for middle level schools. Provide clear information on each teacher's criteria for report card grades, how to interpret interim reports, and, as necessary, how to work with students to improve grades. Conduct conferences for parents with teams of teachers, or conduct parent-student-teacher conferences to ensure that students take personal responsibility for learning. Organize class parents, block parents, or telephone trees for more effective communications. Set up the equivalent of a welcome wagon for education for families who transfer to the school during the school year. Improve school newsletters to include student work and recognitions, parent columns, important calendars, and parent response forms.

*Challenges.* One challenge for successful Type 2 activities is to *make communications clear and understandable for all families,* including parents who have less formal education or who do not read English well, so that all families can process and respond to the information they receive. Other Type 2 challenges are to *know which families are and are not receiving the communications* in order to work to reach all families, *develop effective 2-way channels of communication* so that families can easily contact and

respond to educators, and *make sure that young adolescent students understand and participate* in all school-family-community partnerships.

*Expected results.* If communications are clear and useful and 2-way channels are easily accessed, home-school interactions should increase: more families should understand the school's programs, follow their children's progress, and attend parent-teacher conferences. Specifically, if computerized phone lines are used to communicate information about homework, more families should know more about their children's daily assignments. If newsletters include respond and reply forms more families should offer ideas, questions, and comments about school programs and activities.

## **Type 3—Volunteering**

Improve recruitment, training, and schedules to involve parents and others as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

*Sample practices* for middle level schools. Collect information on family members' talents, occupations, interests, and availability to serve as volunteers to enrich students' subject classes; improve career explorations; serve as language translators; conduct attendance monitoring and phone calls; work on "parent patrols" for safety; organize and improve activities such as clothing and uniform exchanges, school stores, fairs, and many other activities. Create opportunities for mentors, coaches, tutors, and leaders of after-school programs to ensure that middle grades students have important and safe activities that expand their skills and talents. Establish a Family Center at the school where parents may obtain information, conduct volunteer work for the school, or meet with other parents (Johnson, 1996).

*Challenges.* Challenges for successful Type 3 activities are to *recruit volunteers widely so that all feel welcome, make hours flexible for parents and other volunteers who work during the school day, provide needed training, and enable volunteers to contribute productively* to the school, classroom curricula, and after-school programs at the school and in the community. Volunteers will be better integrated in a school program if there is a coordinator who matches volunteers' times and skills with the needs of teachers, administrators, and students. Another Type 3 challenge is to *change the definition of "volunteer" to mean any one who supports school goals or students' learning at any time and in any place.* A related challenge is to *aid young adolescents in understanding how volunteers help their school, and to volunteer themselves to help their school, family, and community.*

*Expected results.* If schedules and locations are varied, more parents, family members, and others in the community should become volunteers that support the school and students as mem-

bers of audiences. More families should feel comfortable and familiar with the school and staff, more students will talk and interact with varied adults, and more teachers should be aware of and use parents' and other community members' talents and resources to improve school programs and activities. Specifically, if volunteers conduct a "hall patrol" or are active in other locations, student behavior problems should decrease due to a better student-adult ratio. If volunteers serve as tutors, students should improve their skills in that subject; if volunteers discuss careers, students should be more aware of their options for the future.

#### **Type 4—Learning at home**

Involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home that are coordinated with students' classwork and that contribute to success in school, including interactive homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions about courses and programs.

*Sample practices* for middle level schools. Provide information to students and to parents about the skills needed to pass each course and each teacher's homework policies. Implement activities that help families encourage, praise, guide, and monitor their children's work using interactive homework, student-teacher-family contracts, long-term projects, summer home learning packets, student-led conferences with parents at home about their writing, goal setting activities, or other interactive strategies that keep students and families talking about schoolwork at home. (See for example *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)* by Epstein, Salinas, & Jackson, 1995.)

*Challenges.* One challenge for successful Type 4 activities is to *implement a regular schedule of interactive work* that requires students to take responsibility for discussing important things they are learning, interviewing family members, recording reactions, and sharing their work and ideas. Another Type 4 challenge is to *create procedures and activities that involve families regularly and systematically with students on short-term and long-term goal setting* for attendance, achievement, behavior, talent development, and future plans.

*Expected results.* If Type 4 activities are well designed and implemented, student homework completion, report card grades, and test scores in specific subjects should improve; more families should know what their children are learning in class and how to monitor, support, and discuss their schoolwork. Students and teachers should be more aware of family interest in students' work.

#### **Type 5—Decision making**

Include families in developing school vision and mission statements, and other policies and school decisions as participants on

school improvement teams, committees, PTA, PTO or other parent organizations, Title I school and district councils, and advocacy groups.

*Sample practices* for middle level schools. Organize and maintain an active parent association; and include family representatives on all committees for school improvement such as curriculum, safety, supplies and equipment, partnerships, and career development. Train parents and teachers in leadership, decision-making, and collaboration. Identify and prepare information desired by families about school policies, course offerings, student placements and groups, special services, tests and assessments, and annual results for students of their experiences and evaluations. Include family representatives along with teachers, administrators, students, and community as members of the Action Team for School, Family, and Community Partnerships.

*Challenges.* One challenge for successful Type 5 activities is to *include in leadership roles parent representatives from all of the race and ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, and geographic communities* that are present in the middle level school. A related challenge is to *help parent leaders serve as true representatives* to obtain information from and provide information to all parents about decisions that are made. Another Type 5 challenge is to *include middle grades student representatives in decision-making groups* and leadership positions. An ongoing challenge is to *help parent and teacher members of committees to trust, respect, and listen to each other* as they work toward common goals for school improvement.

*Expected results.* If Type 5 activities are well implemented, more families should have input to decisions that affect the quality of their children's education, students should increase their awareness that families have a say in school policies; and teachers should increase their understanding of family perspectives on policies and programs for improving the school.

#### **Type 6—Collaborating with community**

Coordinate the work and resources of community businesses, agencies, cultural, civic, and religious organizations, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Enable students, staff, and families to contribute their services to the community.

*Sample practices* for middle level schools. Inform students and families about the existence of programs and resources in their community such as after-school recreation, tutorial programs, health services, cultural events, service opportunities, and summer programs. Design processes that increase equity of access for students and families to community resources and programs. Collaborate with community businesses, groups, and agencies in

ways that strengthen the other types of involvement such as conducting parent education workshops for families at community or business locations (Type 1); communicating about school events via local radio, TV, churches, clinics, supermarkets, and laundromats (Type 2); soliciting volunteers from businesses and the community and organizing activities such as "gold card" discount programs with local merchants (Type 3); enriching student learning with artists, scientists, writers, mathematicians, and others whose careers link to the school curriculum (Type 4); and including community members on decision making councils and committees (Type 5).

**Challenges.** One challenge for successful Type 6 activities is to solve the problems associated with community/school collaborations such as "turf" problems of funding and leadership for cooperative activities. Another Type 6 challenge is to recognize and link students' valuable learning experiences in the community to the school curricula (such as lessons for nonschool skills and talents, club and volunteer work). A major challenge is to inform and involve the family in community related activities that affect their children.

**Expected results.** Well implemented Type 6 activities should increase the knowledge that families, students, and schools have about resources and programs in their community that could help them reach important goals and increase the equity of access to those opportunities. Coordinated community services should help more students and their families solve problems that arise in early adolescence before they become too serious. Type 6 activities also should support and measurably enrich school curricula and extra curricula programs.

The six types of involvement create a comprehensive program of partnerships, but the implementation challenges for each type must be met in order for programs to be effective. The results expected are directly linked to the design and content of the activities. Not every practice to involve families will result in higher student test scores. Rather, practices for each type of involvement can be selected to help students, families, and teachers reach specific goals or results. The summary above offers a few of hundreds of suggestions that can help middle level schools build good partnerships. Details for middle level schools about the framework of six types of involvement, practices, challenges, and results are provided in Epstein (1995); Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon (1996); Epstein and Connors (1995); Palanki, Burch, and Davies (1995); Rutherford (1995); and Sanders (1996).

### **Linking Partnerships to Other Recommended Middle Level Characteristics**

The twelve characteristics of responsive middle levels schools

in *This We Believe* are interrelated: *Educators who want to work with young adolescents* contribute to a *shared vision* that stipulates *high expectations for all*. The school program ensures high support with an *adult advocate for every student* and *partnerships with all students, families and communities*. Academically, *the curriculum for each subject is challenging, integrative, and exploratory*. Teachers use *varied instructional approaches, assessments, and evaluations within a flexible instructional organization*. Students are offered *good guidance and programs that promote their health and safety*. These elements combine to promote all students' learning in a *climate* that is inviting, challenging, and joyful.

Each element also can be linked to all others. It is particularly important for middle level educators to understand how school-family-community partnerships are linked to the other recommended elements so that parent involvement is not something extra, separate, or different from the "real work" of a school. Consider the following family and community connections to other recommendations in *This We Believe*:

#### **Educators committed to young adolescents.**

To understand young adolescents, educators need to understand their students' families—their cultures, hopes, and dreams. In a good partnership program, families are helped to understand young adolescents, middle level schools, peer pressure, and other topics of importance; and educators are helped to understand students' families. Indeed, middle level educators serve as role models for students by the way they talk about, talk with, and work with students' families. Many young adolescents are trying to balance their love for their family, need for guidance, and need for greater independence. Middle level educators who understand students' families can help students see that these seemingly contradictory pressures can coexist.

#### **A shared vision.**

Along with educators and students, families and community members must contribute to the shared vision of a responsive middle level school. Structures, processes, and specific practices are needed that enable parents and community members to provide input to a new vision or mission statement and to periodic revisions of these documents. Vision and mission statements should be presented and discussed each year as new families and students enter or transfer to the middle level school.

#### **High expectations for all.**

National and local surveys of middle grades students and their families indicate that they have very high expectations for success in school and in life. Fully 98% of a national sample of eighth grade students plan to graduate from high school; and 82% plan at least

some post secondary schooling, with 70% aiming to complete college (Epstein & Lee, 1995). Responsive middle level schools must incorporate students' and families' high aspirations into the school's high expectations for all. This means helping students take the courses they need to meet their goals, and assisting students when they need extra help by coaching classes, offering extra elective courses and summer classes, and using other responsive practices.

#### **An adult advocate for every student.**

School-based advocates and teacher advisors need to know each student's family. In some schools, students have the same advisor/advocate every year. This makes it possible for the advisor and students' families to get to know each other well. The advocate can serve as a key contact for the family should questions or concerns arise, facilitating two-way channels of communication before problems become too serious to solve.

#### **A positive school climate.**

A safe, welcoming, stimulating, and caring environment describes a school for students, educators, families, and the community. In a school with good partnerships, family and community members are more likely to volunteer to help ensure the safety of the playground, hallways, and lunchroom; to share their talents in classroom discussions; and lead or coach programs after school to create a true school community.

#### **Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory.**

Families and communities need to know about all of the courses, special programs, and services that are offered to increase student learning in the middle grades. Good information about the curriculum helps families know that their children's schools are hard at work and helps them discuss important academic topics with their young adolescents. Families also need good information about how their students are progressing in each subject, how to help students set and meet learning goals, and how to work with students to solve major problems that threaten course or grade level failure. Some middle level schools create student educational plans based on conferences with students and parents (Lloyd, 1996). If schools are serious about student learning, school-family-community partnerships must include information and involvement on the curriculum.

#### **Varied teaching and learning approaches.**

Families need to know more about the varied instructional approaches that middle grades teachers use in all subjects, including group activities, problem solving strategies, prewriting strategies, students as historians, and other challenging innovations to promote learning. Many new approaches are unfamiliar to families so they may

not understand the varied ways that students learn different subjects. Some instructional approaches can be designed to involve parents as does the *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork* (TIPS) interactive homework process that asks students to share, show, and demonstrate not only what they are learning in class but how they are learning math, science, and language arts in the middle grades.

#### **Assessments and evaluations that promote learning.**

Families and community members need to know about the major tests, new or traditional assessments, report card criteria, and other standards that schools use to determine children's progress and paths. In Maryland, for example, many schools conduct evening meetings for parents to learn about and try items on new performance-based assessments. Students and families also can help set learning goals and strategies for reaching goals. They can rate progress in parent-teacher-student conferences, on student self-report cards, and family-report cards. Project Write in Massachusetts asked students to share their writing portfolios with a parent and obtain reactions and suggestions. Middle grades educator Ross Burkhardt extended this family review by asking students to reflect on their families' reactions and write about their next steps for improving their writing. Students and families also should have opportunities to rate the quality of school programs each year. There are many ways to include students and families in important assessments and evaluations that make those measures more meaningful.

#### **Flexible organizational structures.**

Families need to understand "interdisciplinary teams" and "houses," schedules, electives or exploratories, and other arrangements that define middle level school organizations (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Every middle level school should have annual group meetings and individual meetings of parents, teachers, and advisors to ensure that families understand how classes are organized and have input to the decisions that affect their children's experiences and education.

#### **Programs and policies that foster health and safety.**

Family responsibilities for their children's health and safety out of school link directly to what happens in school. Students, families, and community members must help develop and review safety policies, health policies, dress codes, lunch menus, facilities and equipment, and other policies and conditions that concern children's health and safety. If schools refer students for special services, families must be part of those decisions.



### Comprehensive guidance and support services.

Families need to know about formal and informal guidance programs at the school. This includes knowing the names, phone numbers, e-mail, or voice-mail of their children's teachers, counselors, advocates, or administrators in order to reach them with questions about their children's life or work at school. In some middle level schools, guidance counselors are members of interdisciplinary teams and meet with teachers, parents, and students on a regular schedule and in other meetings as needed.

School-family-community partnerships must link with all of the elements of effective middle level schools to ensure that families will remain important, positive influences in their young adolescents' education as well as in their daily lives.

### Call to Action: The National Network of Partnership-2000 Schools.

Most middle level educators want to build strong school-family-community partnerships, but most have not reached this goal. Indeed, developing good connections among homes, schools, and communities is an ongoing process that takes time, organization, and effort. Based on research and the work of many educators, parents, and students, I have initiated a program to help all elementary, middle, and high schools build positive, permanent programs of partnerships with families and communities.

Schools, districts, and state departments of education are invited to join *the National Network of Partnership-2000 Schools* at Johns Hopkins University to obtain assistance in improving school-family-community connections by the year 2000. There are no membership fees to join the National Network, but states, districts, and schools must meet a few requirements. Each Partnership-2000 School agrees to strengthen its program by using an *action team approach and by addressing the six major types of involvement*. Each school tailors its plans and practices for the six types of involvement to the needs and interests of its students, parents, and teachers. Each school starts with an inventory of present practices, develops a three-year outline, and annual action plans. District and state leaders are helped to organize their leadership activities to assist increasing numbers of schools to conduct these activities.

The National Network of Partnership-2000 Schools is not an "extra" program but is part of every school improvement plan. To obtain an invitation and membership forms for schools, districts, or states, write to: Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, Director, National Network of Partnership-2000 Schools, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships & CRESPAR, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218. Or contact Karen Clark Salinas: tel: 410-516-8818 fax: 410-516-8890.

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## National Patterns of School and Family Connections in the Middle Grades

JOYCE L. EPSTEIN  
SEYONG LEE

Research on school, family, and community partnerships in the middle grades has been given a boost by a national study of eighth graders—the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (Ingels et al., 1990). In this chapter, we describe the schools, families, and students in the NELS:88 base year to introduce researchers and educators to the richness of the data; to cast the data in terms of a theoretical model for understanding partnerships of schools, families, and communities; and to provide the background needed for empirical analyses on the effects of family and school connections in the middle grades. Researchers will use the NELS:88 surveys for many years to study issues of education and should consider whether and how these data can be used to explore and explain processes and effects of family involvement, school and family connections, and community participation.

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The NELS:88 data include items that represent the components of the theoretical perspective of overlapping spheres of influence to study school, family, community, and peer group connections (Epstein, 1987a, 1988). Pictorially, this social-organizational model can be shown as spheres of influence that can, by design, be pushed together to overlap or pulled apart, based on forces that operate in each environment. The model identifies an *external structure* of movable spheres and an *internal structure* of interpersonal exchanges and interactions of the members in the influential contexts. The external structure of the model shows that the extent of overlap is affected by forces of *behavior*—to account for the background characteristics, philosophies, and practices of each environment—and *time*—to account for changes in the ages and grade levels of students, and the influence of historic or periodic conditions. The external model recognizes that there are some practices that schools and families conduct separately and others that are conducted jointly, in partnership. The NELS:88 data can be used to identify and characterize the school, family, and community contexts in the middle grades. The surveys of principals, parents, and students include information on the background characteristics, attitudes and behaviors, and perspectives on and experiences with the major types of involvement.

The internal structure of the model depicts the interrelationships of the participants in the family, school, and community contexts who work in partnership. It represents *institutional* connections that involve all families, educators, and students (such as a back-to-school night to which all are invited, or attendance or report card policies that apply to all students) and *individual* connections that involve one parent, teacher, and student (such as a parent-teacher conference about an individual student's grades or behavior). The internal structure identifies the *central role of the child* as the focal point for the interactions of school, family, and community in partnerships. NELS:88 data include reports from principals, parents, and students about their interactions with each other.

Thus, the NELS:88 base-year data describe the nation's middle grades schools, eighth-grade students, and their families with information that can be used to represent the components of the theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

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### Questions for Research

The survey data encourage the development of measurement models to study the processes of partnership and the effects on students, families, and the schools. Researchers using NELS:88 will explore how to best use the data. For example: What variables should be included in well-specified measurement models to represent the forces and processes in the model of overlapping spheres to study the effects of school and family partnerships? What methods of analyses should be used to address selected questions?

The external structure of the theory of overlapping spheres model raises questions that can be addressed with NELS:88 data. For example: What practices—how many and what type—fall within the overlapping sections of the spheres of influence where school and family responsibilities for children intersect? How should these practices change across the grades or from one level of schooling to the next in order to benefit students? Other questions are raised by the internal structure of the model. For example: How do specific practices of partnership affect the interpersonal contacts, attitudes, and behaviors of parents with educators? parents with other parents? parents with children? What practices promote productive relationships between schools and all families, and between teachers and parents about individual children at each grade level? How do these interactions affect youngsters' motivation to learn and their successful development?

### The Importance of Developmental Patterns

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence identifies *time* as a force that affects the nature and extent of practices of partnership; that is, the age or grade levels of students, the life stage of families, and the experiences of educators are assumed to affect how, when, and why educators, families, and students communicate and interact. NELS:88 base year is the first in a series of surveys in a longitudinal study that follows eighth graders from the middle grades in 1988 to their high schools in Grades 10 and 12 in 1990 and 1992, and periodically thereafter. The surveys also follow a dropout sample from Grade 8 to Grades 10 to 12, and parents from Grades 8 to 12. Thus, the base-year data establish the foundation for understanding students' school experiences across the grades and the continuity or change of partnerships of schools, families, and communities.

Research shows that practices of partnership decline dramatically from the elementary to middle grades, even though families may need more information and guidance from the schools in order to monitor and assist their early adolescents in the middle grades (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein & Herrick, 1991; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Useem, 1991, 1992). Involvement declines further in high schools, although the school organization is more complex, and life-course decisions are made by and with students that affect them and their families (Bauch, 1988; Brian, 1994; Clark, 1983; Connors & Epstein, 1994; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Keith, Reimers, Fehrmann, Pottebaum, & Aubey, 1986). Most previous studies of family involvement in the middle and high school grades were based on state, local, or regional samples, or national surveys with scant coverage of the complexities of home and school relations. The NELS:88 base-year and follow-up surveys provide a new source of information about the involvement of families in the middle and high school grades with large, national samples of schools, students, and families and improved coverage of practices of partnerships.

### Data

The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) includes information from a national sample of more than 1,000 public and private secular and religious schools in the United States that contain Grade 8. Surveys were administered in the spring of the school year to obtain information from principals about their middle grades schools (Hoachlander, 1991), and from more than 24,000 eighth-grade students on their attitudes and experiences in school, along with short achievement tests in four subjects (Haffner, Ingels, Schneider, Stevenson, & Owings, 1990). Surveys also were administered to two teachers for each student and to a total of more than 20,000 parents (Horn & West, 1992). The surveys of parents and students include questions on how families are involved at school and at home.

Because NELS:88 did not include much information on middle grades school reform, the Hopkins Enhancement Survey (HES) of NELS:88 Middle Grades Practices (Epstein, McPartland, & MacIver,

1991) obtained additional information from the principals on school organization, guidance and advisory periods, rewards and evaluations, curriculum and instruction, interdisciplinary teams of teachers, transitions and articulation activities, involvement of parents, and other recommended middle grades reforms. Of the original 1,036 schools in the NELS:88 spring sample, 1,025 still contained Grade 8 in fall 1988 when the HES was conducted. Information was obtained by mail on self-administered questionnaires (822 schools) and by telephone on shorter follow-up interviews (189 schools) for a completion rate of 99% of the eligible schools (Ingels, 1989). HES data are available from NCEES for use by researchers in conjunction with the NELS:88 school surveys.

#### Types of Involvement

School and family partnerships include practices that are *initiated by parents* and *initiated by schools*, that occur *at school* or *at home*, and that demonstrate six major types of involvement (Epstein, 1992). The types of involvement that create a comprehensive program of partnerships include: Type 1—basic obligations of families for parenting and establishing home conditions that support learning; Type 2—basic obligations of schools to communicate with families about school programs and student progress; Type 3—volunteers and audiences at school; Type 4—learning activities at home, including interactive homework to inform families about curricula and school decisions, and to motivate student learning; Type 5—parent representation and participation in school decision making and governance, including parent organizations, school councils, and other committees; and Type 6—collaboration and exchanges with community organizations to increase family and student access to community resources and services, and participation in the community. Schools with comprehensive programs assist families to become informed and involved in these ways. (For discussion and examples of the types of involvement see Epstein, 1987b, 1992; Epstein & Connors, 1994a, 1994b.)

The NELS:88 and HES data include items that should be useful for studying how the major types of involvement affect student achievements, behaviors, and attitudes in the middle grades. Based on previous studies, we expect, for example, that the different types of school and family connections influence various outcomes for students, parents, and school practice and that activities that in-

volve all families will have greater impact on students and on families than activities that include only selected (often self-selected) families and students (Brandt, 1989; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1991, in press-a, in press-b; Muller, 1993).

To proceed with analyses of the influence of family background variables on patterns of involvement or the effects of family involvement, it is necessary for researchers to know something about the samples of students, families, and schools in NELS:88. Also, educators, policy leaders, and the public should have a picture of the nation's schools, their eighth graders, and their families. This chapter presents descriptive summaries of the data from the three main reporters in the NELS:88 and HES surveys on the involvement of families in their children's education. The summary statistics reported differ slightly from the NELS:88 code book due to recordings and selection decisions about the samples for later analyses of the schools, families, and students. The data include what *parents* report they experience directly as contacts from the schools and their own involvement with their children; what *principals* believe their schools are doing to involve families and the general participation levels of their families; and what *students* report as ties between school and home, and their achievements, attitudes, and behaviors that may be affected by their families' connections with education. The next sections report each of these perspectives with attention to the six types of involvement.

#### Data From Parents

The data from parents in the NELS:88 surveys include the characteristics, perspectives, and experiences of families of eighth graders in the United States. Who are they? What do they think of their children's schools? How are they involved in their children's education in the middle grades? In this chapter, *parent* refers to the adult who has the main responsibility at home for the student and the most contact with the school. This individual—parent, stepparent, guardian, or other relative—was asked to respond to the NELS:88 survey.

#### The Families of Eighth Graders

Popular reports often portray families in the United States as broken, dysfunctional, and uncaring, but this is not the case for

most students in the NELS:88 national sample of eighth graders in public, private, and Catholic and other religious schools. Eighth graders in the United States in this national sample have families whose survey responses, on average, indicate caring and responsive attitudes and behaviors. Although there are important exceptions of students and families with serious problems, the average student is a member of a family that appears to be working at least modestly well, perhaps as well as families ever worked.

The families of the nation's eighth graders are variously structured. About 78% of the respondents in the survey of parents have a spouse or partner at home; about 20% are single parents (mainly mothers) with no other adult present; about 2% are other relatives or adults (see also Zill, in press, for analyses of these data).

The parents of students in the NELS:88 sample are educated, with most having more than a high school education. About 14% of the survey respondents did not complete high school. The rest completed high school or obtained a GED (26%), went further with some training or some college (41%), or finished a 4-year college program or more (19%). The parents' education is, however, lower than their expectations for their children, as 58.3% expect their teens to complete 4 years of college or more. Families of middle grades students in the United States value education and have high hopes for their children.

The families of students in NELS:88 are working to support themselves and their children. About 69% of the mothers or female guardians responding to the survey work full time (51%) or part time (17%), and 90% of the fathers or male guardians work full time (87%) or part time (3%). Most parents are therefore busy during the school day. The family work schedules have implications for the number of reasonable demands schools can make for parents to meet or participate at the school building on weekdays. Almost one third of the mothers do not work outside the home, however, and about 10% of fathers are unemployed. These facts also have implications for the potential involvement of volunteers who have various talents and skills that could help schools and students.

#### Parents' Reports About Their Middle Grades Schools

Parents were asked for their opinions about the schools that their children attend. Families generally support their children's middle

grades schools. About 90% of the families agree or agree strongly that the schools place a high priority on learning. Although this item suggests a too-easily convinced public, other items permit a deeper look into families' opinions of their schools. For example, fewer say that their own child is challenged at school (78%) or is working hard (74%). Combining three survey items shows that only about one fourth of the parents *strongly agree* that their middle schools are of high quality *and* are challenging their child *and* are preparing their child well for high school. Thus, the data from parents show no ceiling effect for their evaluations of their schools and considerable room to improve the school programs and their children's successes. Families also indicate that there is room to improve school communications and connections with families.

#### The Involvement of Families in the Middle Grades

Using the data from parents, we address two questions: How do families report the schools' practices to involve them in their children's education? And how do families report their *own* practices to become or remain involved at school or at home? We combine these responses to identify patterns of *partnership* that result when schools and families contact each other, work separately, or avoid each other in the middle grades.

#### Parents' Reports of How Often the School Contacts Them

Parents were asked how often the school contacts them about different types of involvement, including whether the school gathers information from parents (Type 1); provides information to parents about students' programs, performance, and behavior (Type 2); recruits parent volunteers (Type 3); contacts families about students' options for high school courses and programs (Type 4); and asks for help with fund-raising (Type 5). There are no items representing Type 6 contacts from the school. The responses reveal a serious lack of contact from the schools to most families.

*Type 1: Parenting and Child Rearing.* School contacts to involve families in workshops about early adolescent development or other topics (typical Type 1 activities) were not included in the NELS:88 survey of parents, but another aspect of Type 1 was represented on

gathering information from and about the family. About 60% of the families report that the school never contacts them for information about the student or family for school records, and only about 5% report three or more such contacts.

*Type 2: Communications About School Programs and Student Progress.* Two thirds (65%) of the parents report that the school never contacts them about their child's academic program. Nearly half say that they are never contacted about their child's academic performance (45%), and many more have no contacts from the school about student behavior (69%). About 25% of the families report three or more contacts about their child's academic performance, and about 10% were contacted three or more times about their child's behavior. About one fourth (23%) were contacted about both performance and behavior.

The latter contacts may have been about problems that schools wanted families to know about and help solve. Although virtually all students receive report cards, some families were not counting these routine communications as school contacts about performance. Conceivably, some did not receive the report cards, but, more likely, parents are reporting the personal contacts they receive from the school about their own child's academic and behavioral problems.

*Type 3: Volunteers at School or in Class.* Most parents (70%) say they are never asked to volunteer at the school.

*Type 4: School Contacts About Learning or Curriculum.* School contacts about learning or curriculum were limited to survey questions concerning contacts by the school about high school courses and programs. About 60% of families report no contacts from the school about their child's curricular options or plans for high school.

*Type 5: Decision Making, Governance, Committees.* Most families (59%) are never invited to participate in fund-raising.

*Type 6: Collaborations With Community.* Community collaboration was not represented in questions about whether or how schools contacted parents about programs or services in the community (but see parents' reports of their own and their students' involvement in the community in the following section).

*What the Contacts From School May Mean.* Overall, contacts from schools to parents of eighth graders are selective (only for some parents) and infrequent. Most contacts from schools identify problems, and few are designed for continuous, positive communications or interactions with all families.

Presently, no contacts may be viewed by parents as no problems—a good thing. In some schools, however, programs of partnership have been designed that include many types of communications from school to home about student programs, performance, and accomplishments. These schools may reach more families with more positive contacts. (For further analyses of the data from parents on the variation and results of school contacts, see Epstein & Jacobsen, 1994; Schneider & Coleman, 1993.)

#### *Parents' Reports of How Often They Contact the School*

Parents were asked how often they contacted the school or became involved with their eighth grader at home.

*Type 1: Parenting and Child Rearing.* One aspect of parenting concerns family rules and supervision at home. Most families, however structured, report that they are guiding their early adolescents. Most have rules for their eighth graders about homework (92%), chores (90%), and maintaining grades (73%). Most families also place limits on TV viewing (84%). The general limits may help explain why fewer families (42%) have specific rules of how many hours of TV children may watch.

These simple percentages hide the complexities of parenting early adolescents. For example, some families may set no rules or few rules for students who have high academic performance and good behavior because these students may not need formal rules to guide their behavior. Other families may set no rules or few rules because they do not know how to control their early adolescents' behavior. Also, not all rules are good rules, as some families may set unreasonable or inappropriate guidelines.

Families are more likely to set rules about matters that families traditionally control and feel comfortable about, such as chores, and less likely to set rules about items about which they have little information, such as how to maintain or improve report card grades. The data on family rules suggest that one fourth or more of



the nation's eighth graders may not be held to high standards by their families about their report card grades and achievements in school. This may occur in part because of inadequate information for parents from the schools about how to frame and monitor academically oriented rules in the middle grades. Questions like these pose challenges for researchers who want to use NELS:88 to understand parenting skills and results in early adolescence.

On a survey item corresponding to reports of whether the schools contact them for information, about 60% of the families report they never contact the school to give information about the student or family for school records.

*Type 2: Communications About School Programs and Student Progress.* Most parents of middle grades students never contact their children's schools about children's performance (48%), the academic programs (65%), or children's behavior (71%).

*Type 3: Volunteers at School or in Class.* Most parents (80%) never serve as volunteers at the school.

*Type 4: School Contacts About Learning and Curriculum.* One aspect of parent involvement in learning activities at home is represented in questions about parents' discussions with their own children about education. Most families report that they talk "regularly" about middle school with their children (80%); fewer talk regularly about plans for high school (47%) or about the future (38%). The families who rarely or never talk with their children about school (20%) are most at risk of losing touch with their children and the middle grades schools.

Parents' surveys included questions about homework, a Type 4 activity that connects students and families on learning activities at home. Most parents (91%) believe the homework that their children get is valuable, but more than half (56.2%) never, seldom, or infrequently (once or twice a month) help with homework. This is due in part to homework policies and designs that ask middle grades students to do their work on their own and do not request or require conversations or interactions with parents.

In other studies, we found that most early adolescents say that they are willing to interact with their family members (e.g., demonstrate skills, share ideas, interview families) if homework was

designed to encourage these interactions (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Epstein, Herrick, & Coates, in press; Epstein, Jackson, & Salinas, 1994). Such practices still are rare in the middle grades.

*Type 5: Decision Making, Governance, Committees.* About one third of the parents belong to or attend meetings of a parent organization in middle grades schools. Combining their reports on these items shows that almost half (46.4%) neither belong to nor attend or take part in parent organizations or activities. Most families (80%) say that they never participate in fund-raising.

The surveys asked whether parents have "adequate say" in school policy and whether parents "do their part" to support the school. About 63% of the parents agree that they have adequate say in school policy, but only 8% agree strongly with the statement. Slightly more say that parents work together to support their schools. These figures reflect the complex mix of more and less successful programs to involve families in school decision making. Although most families want parents' voices and views represented in school decisions, most families do not get personally involved in these activities.

*Type 6: Collaboration and Exchange With Community Organizations.* The NELS:88 surveys include items to measure family and student participation in community activities, although these do not necessarily link to the schools. Most of the parents (83%) participate in some community or cultural activities, and 36% take part in four or more community activities. According to the parents, their children are even more involved: 92% participate in at least one community or cultural activity outside of school, and about 45% of the students take part in four or more activities in their communities.

#### *Parents' Involvement in the School Community*

In the middle grades, peers become increasingly important, but parents continue their influence (Epstein, 1983; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Some families in middle grades schools are connected with each other and create social networks of students, their friends, and their families. These interactions represent the connections of family, school, community, and peer group contexts—the four spheres of influence in the full theoretical model (Epstein, 1988). These connections help to produce "social capital" (Coleman,