

1987, 1988) or establish social ties or social relationships that may influence parenting approaches and involvement at school or in the community, as well as parents' behaviors and students' attitudes, behaviors, and achievements.

About 35% of the parents in the NELS:88 sample are "well connected," knowing four or five of the parents of their children's five best friends. About 14% are isolated or unconnected, knowing none of their children's friends' families. The rest fall in between. It may be that parents who are well connected work together at school as volunteers, on committees, in meetings, and in fund-raising and develop a sense of community through school activities. Children in these families may experience stronger family control, parenting that is more similar to that of their friends, and parents who are more knowledgeable about school because of their activities and interactions at school and with other families. Conversely, children whose families are unconnected with other students' families may receive weaker support from their families for school-related behaviors and perhaps less encouragement to join other activities in the community. (See Muller, 1994, for analyses of these relationships and effects.)

What Parents' Contacting the School and Involvement at Home May Mean

Overall, families contact their children's schools infrequently. Few families make contact with the school more than once during the year. The most frequent contacts—three or more times—are about children's academic performance by 17% of the families. Other studies also show that parents care more about their own children's success and how they can understand and help their children at home than about contacting the school frequently to volunteer, attend workshops or meetings, or participate in decision making (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1986).

The NELS:88 data from parents and from students indicate that parents talk to their middle grades children more than they contact or come to their schools, and far more than the schools contact them. The responses contribute to the stance that students play key roles in school and family partnerships in their conversations with their families and in other connections that they help make between home and school (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Epstein, in press-a; Montandon & Perrenoud, 1987).

Table 4.1 Parents' Reports of Partnership, Separate Initiatives, or Isolation From Their Children's Middle Grades Schools (N=22,028)

	Percentage of Parents Who Report:		
	Academic Program	Academic Performance	Volunteers
Partnership	21.5	39.1	15.8
School Initiation	13.9	15.9	13.7
Parent Initiation	13.3	13.3	3.4
Isolation	51.3	31.6	67.1

Partnership Variables

When parents' reports of contacts from and to the school are considered together, the data indicate that some family-school connections are stronger than others. To learn more about these patterns, we created variables of partnership to identify the mutual, independent, or neglected connections of schools and families. The relationships range from *partnership to isolation*, as schools and families contact each other, work separately, or ignore each other. For example, contacts about students' *academic program* show evidence of:

Partnership: 21.5% of the families reported that both the school and the family contacted each other about the student's academic program.

School initiation: 13.9% of the parents reported the school contacted them, but they did not contact the school about the student's academic program.

Parent initiation: 13.3% of the parents reported that the family contacted the school, but the school did not contact them about the student's academic program.

Isolation: 51.3% of the parents reported no contact by the school or by the family about the student's academic program.

Communications about academic programs differ from the patterns of school and family communications about students' academic performance and volunteering in middle grades, as shown in Table 4.1. The table shows that most partnerships between schools and families are reported about students' *academic performance* (39%), and the fewest partnerships are formed for *volunteers* in middle grades schools (16%). Correspondingly, the least isolation occurs on the topic of

communications about their students' *academic performance* in eighth grade, although about one third (32%) of the parents report that neither they nor the schools contact each other about students' performance. By contrast, the most isolation (or lack of communications) is noted by 67% of the parents, who are not contacted by the school and who do not contact the school about becoming volunteers. Patterns of partnership and isolation for topics of student behavior and fund-raising are similar to those shown for academic program and volunteering, respectively.

Overall, the categories of *isolation* and *parent initiation* reflect a lack of school policies and practices to encourage family involvement. Depending on the type of involvement, from one half to more than two thirds of the families of eighth graders are relatively isolated from the school about their children's school programs and progress. These indicators do not tell a simple tale, however. As noted above, a lack of partnership on student behavior may be a good thing, as contacts usually refer to problems. Contacts about behavior and academic performance may imply more serious problems and risks of failure than contacts about academic performance alone.

Overall, middle grades schools are not effectively reaching out to families to organize or guide family involvement in school or at home. Left on their own, few parents of middle grades students make contact with their children's schools. They wait for information that, as shown above, does not always come from the schools. Many families gather what information they can from their children. Most go uninformed.

Summary and Discussion: Data From Parents

Despite parents' overall general satisfaction with the schools and their efforts to continue to supervise their middle grades children at home, the data in NELS:88 reveal some troubling patterns of risk; isolation; and separation of family, school, and students. A sizable portion of families and students—from one third to two thirds or more, depending on the measure—are isolated or unconnected with their schools and uninformed about their students' work, progress, program, or how to assist them.

Although most families say that they discuss school with their children at home, most lack information from the schools about

classwork, homework, and curriculum content. Thus, the frequency and quality of their discussions are questionable. Most families are unlikely to have the information they need to motivate their children to work hard in school, challenge their children's thinking, or help their children meet their potential as students in the middle grades.

Many families have limited time together at home, particularly if both parents or single parents work outside the home, or if there are many children in school at different grade levels. To make the best use of their time together, families need good information from the schools and from their children about school if they are to continue to be effective and knowledgeable partners in their children's education through the middle grades and beyond.

Data From Principals

Data from principals in the NELS:88 and HES surveys include the characteristics of their schools and communities, and their views of the nature and extent of practices of partnership at the school level in the middle grades in U.S. schools containing Grade 8. Where are the nation's schools that serve eighth graders? What are they like? How do they involve families, and how do principals assess the present levels of involvement of families on the major types of partnership?

The Schools in the NELS:88 Sample

The schools in NELS:88 base-year survey were selected as a national probability sample of public and private secular and religious eighth-grade schools in 1988. The 1,035 middle grades schools include 609 public schools (58.8%), 187 Catholic schools (18%), 201 other religious schools (19.4%), and 38 private schools (3.7%). One fourth are urban schools, more than one third each are suburban and rural schools. More schools are located in the South and North Central regions of the nation than in the Northeast or West. Interestingly, more public schools are in rural locations and in the South. Catholic schools are more often in urban or suburban communities and in the Northeast, whereas the other religious schools are more often in the West and Midwest, and in urban

locations. More private, secular schools are located in urban areas and in the South.

The schools include numerous grade organizations, including the familiar K-8, 6-8, 7-8, 7-9, 7-12, and K-12 schools that serve eighth graders. As found in other studies (Epstein & MacIver, 1990), there are about 30 grade spans that include Grade 8. Middle grades schools are diverse organizations in many ways, including grade span. K-8 schools are more often Catholic or other religious schools, rural, and not Southern. More 6-8 and 7-8 middle schools are public, suburban, and Southern. More 7-12 schools are public, rural, and Midwestern.

The schools range widely in size. Almost half of the schools (46.1%) have eighth-grade enrollments of 35 or fewer students. About 20% of the schools are more than four times that size, with more than 145 students enrolled the eighth grade. The largest schools serve more than 1,500 students. About one third of the schools have 10 or fewer teachers, and about 10% have 40 or more teachers.

Most schools for eighth graders (67.5%) are organized with departmentalized programs in which students have different teachers for each subject. The others have semidepartmentalized programs (23.1%) with a few different teachers for major subjects or self-contained classes (9.4%) with one teacher for all major subjects. Most self-contained classes for eighth graders are in K-8 or K-12 schools where grade enrollments are small, sometimes with only one class of eighth graders and one teacher per grade level.

Principals' Reports of the Students and Families in Their Schools

The nation's middle grades schools serve students with highly diverse family backgrounds and structures. About half of the schools have 10% or fewer students on free lunch; almost one quarter of the schools have from 10% to 35% on free lunch; and the others have more poor students. There are more schools serving economically disadvantaged students in rural areas, with mixed distributions of poor and wealthy schools in urban areas. Students from professional or managerial families range from 0% to 100%. Most schools (54%) serve mixed populations, with 15% or more professional families. There are dramatically more students on free lunch and many fewer professional and managerial families in public schools than in private or religious schools.

In more than one third of the middle grades schools there are no students from minority groups; about 17% of the schools are attended by more than 40% minority students. Students from racial or cultural minority groups more often attend middle grades schools in urban areas, in the South and West, and in public schools. There are more single parents in urban, public, and Northeastern schools, and in schools serving poor and minority students.

The students in middle grades schools in the United States vary greatly in ability. About 20% of the principals report that most of their entering students are considerably or somewhat below national norms in academic ability. About 44% report that most of their students are above the national norm in ability when they enter the school. Compared to principals in public schools, many more principals of private and Catholic and other religious schools report that their students are above national norms in academic skills and abilities when they enter the middle grades. Correspondingly, more students of urban, public, and Southern schools are in remedial reading, remedial math, and special education. More students in suburban schools are in gifted and talented programs. These distinctions are least often made by principals in schools in the Midwest, where there may be fewer programs within schools for special students (or more separate schools for special education), policies that reject labeling, or other reasons that principals do not report students in these groups (such as greater homogeneity of student populations).

Middle grades schools in the United States differ greatly in the students and families they serve. The public schools on average serve more economically and educationally disadvantaged students and families than schools in other sectors. It will be important to take this into account in studies that compare public and religious or private secular schools and their students, families, or patterns of involvement.

The differences discussed in this section are important for statistical analyses because they show that middle grades schools in this nation are not randomly distributed by sector, region, or urbanization, and that these features are correlated. Similarly, schools are not randomly organized by grade span, size, race and ethnicity, economic background, initial abilities, and other characteristics of the students or families, all of which factors are correlated. Thus, when researchers use NELS:88 and the follow-up surveys they must statistically account

for the independent effects of many factors in order to determine which families become involved at school or at home; how they are involved; and the results of their involvement for students, families, or the schools.

These variables have implications for practices of school and family partnerships. Earlier studies have shown, for example, that it is easier for teachers in self-contained classes to make contacts with a few families than for teachers in departmentalized programs to do so (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). These difficulties do not preclude good programs of partnership, but do raise "red flags" that need attention in the design, staffing, and budgeting of such programs.

Principals' Views of Their Schools

The middle grades schools in the nation overall are relatively stable and conventional places. Most principals in this national sample of middle grades schools report that their students attend school regularly. About 80% of the schools report more than 92% average attendance, and more than 65% of them have at least 95% average attendance. Some middle grades schools, however, have serious attendance and behavior problems. Up to one fourth report moderate or serious problems with student absence and lateness. About 15% report high rates of mobility from the start to the end of the school year. Fewer than 10% of the principals report moderate or serious problems with class cutting; fights; or delinquent behavior such as thefts, vandalism, alcohol use, drug use, or verbal abuse of teachers. Fewer than 2% report problems with weapons or physical abuse of teachers. These numbers are, however, more serious than they first appear, because the top 10% of troubled schools are larger and serve more than 10% of the nation's early adolescents.

The reports from principals suggest that attention to attendance and behavior problems must be targeted to specific schools. For example, specific practices of family involvement and strategic use of volunteers may assist schools to improve student attendance and behavior. Initial analyses of school data from NELS and HES surveys show sizable and persistent effects of partnership activities on student attendance in the middle grades (Epstein & Lee, 1993).

School Climate and Parent Involvement

Most principals in the NELS school sample (over 90%) report that their school climate is generally positive, with relatively few conflicts between teachers and administrators, good discipline, structured classroom environments, and teachers' encouragement of students to do their best. Other items in the surveys suggest underlying problems, however. More than one third of the principals, for example, report that most of their students do not place a high priority on learning and one fifth report that most of their teachers do not have high morale. About one fifth of the principals say their teachers have somewhat negative attitudes about students and about one half report that their teachers find it at least somewhat difficult to motivate students.

The survey response categories in NELS:88 are imprecise, suggesting a range from *few* to *many* problems, but the patterns are provocative and will require creative analyses of NELS data to understand the implications of school climate factors for school, family, and community connections, and for student learning and other outcomes. For example, more than other teachers and administrators, those who frequently inform and involve families may get more help from families in motivating students to keep a high priority on schoolwork and learning. Earlier studies show the teachers who involve families in learning activities at home give parents higher ratings on follow through and helpfulness than teachers who do not communicate with and involve families (Becker & Epstein, 1982). If students hear the same messages at home and at school about learning, they may become more self-motivated to attend school and to work hard. Teachers may have fewer problems motivating these students. Teachers' morale also may be boosted if parents recognize and appreciate the teachers' efforts to create partnerships with families. Earlier studies show teachers get higher ratings from parents and from their principals if they work to inform and involve families (Epstein, 1985; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987).

Principals' Reports of Family Involvement

The data from principals about how their schools involve parents and how many parents are involved come from the Hopkins Enhancement Survey (HES) of NELS:88 (Epstein et al., 1991). The data on the six major types of involvement include a small number

of representative survey items. According to the principals, middle grades schools in the United States vary greatly in even the most basic practices to involve families and in the level of participation by families.

Type 1: Assisting Families With Parenting, Child Rearing, and Establishing Home Conditions for Learning

Type 1 involvement is represented by principals' reports of the percentage of parents who attend workshops and encourage learning at home, and school practices to provide parents with contacts from counselors and opportunities to visit their child's future high school.

Most principals (82.6%) report that fewer than 10% of their families attend workshops to obtain information on school programs, early adolescent development, or other topics to assist in child rearing and improving home conditions for learning. In part, this is because some schools (17%) do not offer any workshops. There is less participation in workshops in rural schools (perhaps because of the greater distance from home to school in rural areas) and less attendance in large schools, public schools, Southern schools, and schools with more minority students.

Low attendance at workshops is a national and international pattern in schools at all educational levels. Some schools, however, attract more parents to workshops than do others. The correlates of higher attendance provide clues about qualities and processes needed to improve attendance. For example, in the NELS:88 sample, there is more participation in workshops in Catholic schools and K-8 schools where parents of middle grades students may also have younger children and where they may have attended some workshops in the early grades. Feelings of attachment to the school and familiarity with the school may help attract parents to workshops. Personal communications about workshops also may increase participation.

There also is more participation of parents in workshops in schools that offer more extracurricular activities for students and in schools where even low-achieving students (the lowest one third) have opportunities to participate in activities and receive school awards and recognition. These correlates suggest that more "parity" schools involve students and their families in many ways. Patterns like these illustrate why analyses must statistically

control for the characteristics of families and students and other qualities of the schools in order to understand how families are involved in their children's education.

The NELS and HES surveys do not include information on the topics or quality of the workshops, nor on whether the workshops are scheduled to enable working parents to attend, nor if transportation and child care are available so that parents far from the school or with small children can attend. These features affect attendance at workshops, but require more detailed survey questions than those available in NELS:88.

Type 1 practices of partnership are reflected in home conditions that support students' learning. The NELS:88 school data do not include information on whether middle grades schools provide guidance to parents about this. More than half (57%) of the principals in the HES report that at least half of their families encourage and support learning at home. From the principals' views, this is more true of families in urban and in private schools. The others (43% of the principals) believe that at least half of their families do *not* establish home conditions that support middle grades students' learning. This is particularly true in rural, Southern, and public schools, and in schools serving poor and minority families.

Counselors' Contact With Families. Other items in the HES surveys of principals suggest that most middle grades schools in the United States do not provide parents with much information that will guide them in their interactions with their children at home. For example, there is high variation in whether middle grades school counselors communicate with children's families in ways that could assist parents in establishing positive home conditions for learning. About 80% of the principals report that their counselors spend 10% or less of their time talking with families. Counselors are only one possible contact or source of information for parents about the schools and early adolescence, but counselors may be underutilized in helping middle grades families know what to do to encourage learning at home in age-appropriate ways.

Making the Transition to High School. Middle grades schools vary in how families are helped to make the transition to high school with their early adolescents. Principals reported whether parents

visit the high school that their children will attend while the students are still in the middle grades (48.3%) or in the fall after entry to high school (46%). About one third (35%) of the families have no scheduled opportunity to visit their children's high schools either at the end of the middle grades or when the children enter high school in the fall. The percentages add to more than 100% because about one fourth of the schools have orientations for parents both before and after their children enter high school.

Opportunities for parents to visit their children's future high schools are more common in more economically advantaged communities with more professional families and in schools with middle grades students with higher achievement levels. Visits to high school also are more common in middle grades schools that have established other practices of partnership with families, such as providing more types of information to parents on students' report cards. School-family connections about transitions are important because families who understand their children's "next" school should be better prepared to help their children adjust if there are problems, talk more knowledgeably with them about their new experiences, and continue to support their children as they move through the grades.

Type 2: Communications With Families About School Programs and Children's Progress

Parent-Teacher Conferences. Almost half of the principals report that 50% or fewer parents attend parent-teacher conferences. Although some schools (53%) have high participation at conferences with more than three fourths of their families attending, many other schools have very low rates of attendance at these basic meetings with teachers. Presently, there is higher participation in parent-teacher conferences in small schools, in schools with high-ability students and professional families, and in schools where teachers have self-contained classes. In an earlier study of elementary schools, we estimated that at least one third of all families do not have a conference each year with their children's teachers (Epstein, 1986). The HFS survey shows that this number is higher in the middle grades. Face-to-face meetings between parents and teachers at the start of each school year could help to establish positive relation-

ships so that other forms of communication (such as phone calls or notes) could be used through the school year without requiring many meetings at the school.

Information About Test Scores. Most principals (75%) say that they report standardized test scores to parents. This practice is more common in Catholic than in public or other private schools, more common in the South, and more common in schools serving more professional families. More reporting of test scores occurs in schools that have more parent-teacher conferences, suggesting that student tests are one topic of the teachers' meetings with parents or that these are schools that give many kinds of information to parents in various forms.

At least as important as sending test scores home is whether schools explain the scores in words and forms that parents can understand, discuss, and act on with their children. Interestingly, as noted above, almost half the parents say they had no contacts from the school about their children's academic performance. The discrepancy between principals' reports that they give families information on test scores and parents' reports that they receive no contacts from the school is due in part to differently worded survey items, but it also suggests that communications that are sent by schools are not necessarily understood or used by parents.

Information on Report Cards. Schools vary in the kinds of information they give to parents about their children on report cards. Most schools give an average of four items of information about each subject: achievement grades (99%), conduct (70%), attendance (65%), and handwritten (55%) or computer-generated (25%) comments. Some also give effort grades (49%), progress grades (33%), grade point averages (20%), or other information (8.4%). These percentages do not indicate how much of the information is understood by families or how families, students, and teachers work together to help students improve grades that are considered too low.

Type 3: Volunteers at School

Most middle grades principals (71.4%) report that 10% or fewer parents volunteer at their schools. More than half report fewer than 5% volunteering. Volunteers tend to disappear in the middle grades.

Some educators believe that students do not want their parents to come to the middle grades schools, but this is not true in programs that use volunteers productively (Epstein & Dauber, 1995).

Greater percentages of parents volunteer in suburban middle grades schools, small schools, and those with self-contained classes than in other locations. There are proportionally more volunteers in schools with more professional families and with students who enter with higher academic ability. These patterns suggest that there is greater outreach to these families or more initiation by these families to continue volunteering in the middle grades. The data confirm reports from parents that most middle schools do not actively or effectively recruit them as volunteers.

Type 4: Activities at Home That Support School Curricula and Student Learning

Only about 25% of the principals report that most of their parents regularly receive information on how to help at home. These communications are more frequent in Catholic and private schools, schools with more professional families, and schools in the Northeast and West. Rural schools inform parents about children's work and learning less often than do other schools. Most middle grades principals (75%) report that fewer than half of their parents receive information regularly from teachers on how to help children at home on specific skills or homework.

Other data suggest that there may be consequences of this lack of information to families. For example, more than 85% of the principals report that fewer than half of the parents regularly monitor homework or assist their children with needed skills. If middle grades schools want more families to monitor or discuss homework with their children, teachers will have to increase the amount and kind of clear information that goes to the home.

Type 5: Families in School Decision-Making Roles

More than half of the principals report that 20% or fewer middle grades parents join the PTA or other parent organizations and even fewer participate regularly in these organizations' meetings or events. These estimates are lower than those given by the parents, in part because of inflated self-reports by some parents and in part because

the principals may be considering the level of participation by all parents, including those who are not represented in the NELS:88 surveys. More parents are members of these associations in suburban and private schools, in schools with more professional families, and where students have higher achievement levels when they enter the middle grades. A sizable number of middle grades schools in the United States (about 15%) have no parent organizations.

In some schools, dues are required that prevent some families from joining the parent organization. In others, the "regulars" who join and participate in the PTA or other organizations may directly or indirectly dissuade some families from joining or becoming active. These factors are among the "red flags" that need attention in order to improve the participation of all families in parent organizations, committees, councils, or other decision-making groups.

Type 6: Community Collaborations and Connections With Schools, Families, and Students

This type of involvement is not directly measured on the NELS:88 or HES surveys of principals. There are, however, some indirect measures of community connections in the schools. For example, some volunteers come from community or business groups, linking Type 3 activities with Type 6. As reported above, middle grades schools have very few parent or community volunteers.

Also, principals reported another school practice that affects the involvement of families and the community. More than three fourths of the schools (79%) require visitors to sign in at the main office. This policy is more prevalent in public than in other schools and more characteristic of large schools, those in the South, and those with many students in one-parent homes. A sense of community is established if families feel welcome when they arrive at school, and this may be affected by rules about visiting and how those rules are enforced.

Summary of Principals' Reports of the Involvement of Parents

The principals' assessments indicate that few middle grades schools in the nation have comprehensive programs of parent involvement. Most schools have some involvement activities, but do not reach all families, as shown in Table 4.2. In most schools, very few parents

Table 4.2 Principals' Reports of Families Involved in Different Types of Partnership in the Middle Grades (N = 1,035)

Type	Percentage of Principals Who Report:		
	A Few Parents (0%-10%)	Some Parents (20%-50%)	Most Parents (75%+)
1. Regularly attend workshops about school programs, early adolescence, and so on	82.6	16.0	1.4
2. Attend parent-teacher conferences each year with all academic subject teachers	12.7	33.2	54.1
3. Volunteer time to help in classrooms or school	71.4	24.8	3.8
4. Receive information frequently from academic subject teachers on how to help child at home on specific skills or homework	31.5	42.1	26.4
5. Join PTA or other parent organization	41.4	41.4	17.2

NOTES: Response categories are 0%, 5%, 10%, 20%, 35%, 50%, 75%+. Type 6 activities were not reported in this form.

come to school for workshops or to volunteer. The only prevalent practice is attending parent-teacher conferences (more than half the schools reach 75% or more families), but even for this common activity nearly half the principals say that fewer than 50% of their parents participate.

Data From Students

The data from students document the diversity of early adolescents in Grade 8 in the nation's schools. This section summarizes data that address these questions: Who are the students in Grade 8 in the United States? Where do they go to school? What do they say about themselves, their families, and their goals? How do they see the connections between their schools and families?

Of the 24,600 students in the NELS:88 base-year sample, 88% are in public schools ($n = 21,638$); 7.6% are in Catholic schools ($n = 1,867$), 2.9% are in other religious schools ($n = 716$); and 1.5%

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attend other private schools ($n = 379$). The percentage of schools in each sector differs greatly from the percentage of students served in each sector because public schools tend to be larger than the others. For example, 59% of the schools in the sample are public schools, but they serve 88% of the eighth graders; 18% of the schools are Catholic schools, serving just 7.6% of the students.

There are about equal numbers of males and females in the NELS:88 base-year sample of students. They include 72% white, 13% African American, 10% Hispanic American, 3.5% Asian American, and 1.3% American Indian youngsters. About 3.2% of the students report using only non-English languages at home. One fifth of the students live in the Northeast and West, one fourth in the North Central region, and more than one third live in the South.

Students' Reports About Their Families

The students' reports add to the information from parents, summarized above, about the diversity of families of eighth graders. About 20% and 30% of the students report that their mothers and fathers, respectively, are in professional occupations. The other students' parents or guardians vary across the full range of occupations from service work (24% mothers; 5% fathers) to farmers (0.3% mothers; 2% fathers). Students' reports of mothers' and fathers' employment reveal different patterns from parents' reports. This bears study for those who are going to use NELS:88 surveys. For example, many more students (18%) say their mothers are homemakers than the parents themselves report (under 5%). Other questions for students about parents' employment include homemaker in the "employed" category. The differences are due in part to differently worded questions and in part to other factors, such as the characteristics of the parents who responded to the surveys and students' possible miscategorizations of mother's employment, volunteer work, and other activities. The discrepancies point out the importance for NELS:88 users to choose variables carefully from among the many that are available on closely related topics in the student, parent, and school surveys.

According to students, their fathers and male guardians tended to finish more schooling (at least junior college or 14 years of school) than their mothers (average of 12-13 years of school). Fathers' education also varied more, with more fathers than mothers

dropping out of high school, and many more completing postgraduate college programs.

Students' Achievements in School

Most eighth graders report that they are in a middle or average group in math (53%). More than one third (38%) say that they are in a high math group, and only 9.2% report that they are in a low math group. Nearly 15% believe that there is no ability grouping in their school. The percentages are similar for the other academic subjects, although fewer (25%) say that they are in high or advanced science and social studies classes. These reports are consistent with earlier surveys of principals that revealed less homogeneous ability grouping in science and social studies than in math (Epstein & MacIver, 1990). About 22% of the eighth graders in NELS:88 say they are in the top groups in all subjects (math, English, science, and social studies), and 13% say they are in the low groups in all subjects. The rest have mixed assignments or are grouped heterogeneously in all academic subjects. These figures suggest that relatively few students in this sample have labeled themselves as "low" students. Nevertheless, by their own reports, about 20% of the students experienced serious failure in school by repeating at least one grade level by Grade 8, although only about 7% repeated at least one middle grade (5-8). About 2% skipped a grade, and about 13% are enrolled in programs for gifted and talented students.

The data from students and parents raise some questions about whether the NELS:88 base-year sample fully represents the most unsuccessful students in the middle grades in the United States. The surveys exclude students who were chronically absent or truant from school, because these students were not in school on the day of the survey or on the day of the make-up survey. Also excluded from the random sample are students with severe disabilities and students with severely limited English proficiency who could not understand the survey. Also missing are students who for all practical purposes already dropped out or were "pushed out" of eighth grade due to attendance, behavior, attitude, academic, or personal problems. These exclusions mean that the base-year sample may underrepresent low-ability students who tend to be absent from school more often than other students, and low-ability non-English-speaking students who tend to have the highest and earliest dropout

rates of all students. These exclusions and other nonresponse patterns also affect the sample of parents, who were surveyed only if their children were in the student sample.

Despite these possible problems, the NELS:88 base-year sample of students is the best available national data. It shows that, overall, eighth graders in the United States are not a bad lot. Only about 7% report that they smoke cigarettes. Most (91%) report that they never cut classes, although more (37%) are sometimes late to school (i.e., at least once in the past 4 weeks). There are some slackers, however, including 23% who say they usually or often come to class without a pencil or paper and about 20% who usually or often do not complete their homework on time.

Although most students say that they do their homework, most are assigned or do relatively little—an average of about 1 hour of homework per week in math and less in science, English, social studies and other subjects, for a total of about 5 hours of homework a week. The range is great, however, from 0 to 21 hours per week, with 10% of the students reporting that they do 10 or more hours of homework across subjects. Part of this variation reflects the students' initiative, part reflects the variation in parents' continuing attention to homework completion in the middle grades, and a large part of the variation in hours students spend on homework reflects teachers' patterns of assigning homework.

In addition to homework, most students spend 1 to 2 hours a week reading on their own, with 21% giving no time to outside reading, and 10% spending 4 or more hours reading for pleasure.

Most students report that they come to school ready to work. About half, however, say that they are bored in school half or more of the time. Other analyses with the NELS:88 data show that most students are not challenged very much or very well by the curricula they are offered or the instruction they experience (Epstein & MacIver, 1992). This also confirms parents' dissatisfaction with the level of challenge to their children.

Based on these indicators of commitment to schoolwork, it is not surprising that the students' grades vary widely, with 32% reporting that they receive mostly As in English, 38% mostly Bs, 23% mostly Cs, and 7% mostly Ds or Fs. The figures are not very different for the other subjects, though there are slightly more Ds and Fs in math and science (i.e., 9% to 12%).

About one third of the students (34%) score at or beyond the highest reading proficiency level on the reading achievement test administered as part of the NELS:88 survey, with 13% at the lowest reading proficiency level. In math, 19% are at the highest proficiency level and 18% are at the lowest level.

Students are at serious risk of failing in or dropping from the middle grades or high school if they score in the bottom 10% to 25% on report card grades and achievement test scores; have high absence, frequent lateness, or low homework completion; are unprepared for class; or report other poor attitudes and behaviors in school.

Students' Attitudes and Aspirations

There are important variations in students' attitudes toward school and teachers. About one third report that they do not receive much praise from their teachers, nor do they feel their teachers listen to what they have to say. About 22% feel "put down" in class. The reports from students may help to explain why some principals reported (see above) that some students in their schools did not place a high priority on learning and that some teachers find it hard to motivate some students to learn.

As in most surveys, these eighth graders have very high aspirations, on average. Most believe they will go on to attend some college (13%), finish college (43%), or go beyond college (23%). They say they will finish high school, with 82% "very sure" and 16% "probably sure" about this. Very few eighth graders (under 2%) *plan* to drop out before high school graduation.

They report that their parents have even higher aspirations for them. About 75% of the students report that their parents want them to graduate from college or go beyond. This is higher than the 60% of parents in the NELS:88 survey who report this goal for their children (see above). Students may be overstating or misunderstanding their parents' expectations, or they may be reporting the goals of the parents (mostly fathers) who did not fill in the NELS:88 questionnaires. In any case, the students want and expect to obtain more formal education than their parents obtained.

There are signs that the students will have difficulty reaching the goals they and their families set. For example, only about 52% of

the eighth graders expect to enroll in a college prep or special high school program. Thus, despite high aspirations, there are serious discrepancies between students' and families' educational goals and the students' immediate plans to enroll in a high school program that will help them reach their goals.

There are questions raised by these responses: How do or how should middle grades schools and high schools work together and work with students and parents to enroll students in high school programs that will prepare them to apply to and succeed in college? What information do students and families need *and when do they need it* to fully understand the options and requirements in the middle grades and in high schools that are prerequisites for college admission? Middle and high schools have responsibilities to make programs, student options, and the consequences of choices understandable to all families and all students. The NELS:88 base-year and follow-up surveys will make it possible for researchers to follow the paths of students from the middle grades to postsecondary school placements in college, other training, or work, and to study the effects of the involvement of families on the choices and programs the students selected. The patterns in the NELS:88 data that show discrepant goals and plans also raise questions for research or for interventions and evaluations of programs to help students and their families make better choices to meet their aspirations.

The students in NELS:88 range widely in the families they return to each day; in their abilities, interests, aspirations, attitudes, and behaviors; and in the middle grades schools they attend and the courses they take. (See also Haffner et al., 1990, for an overview of the base-year data from students and Epstein & Maclver, 1992, for other descriptions and analyses of the curriculum and instruction in middle grades schools.)

Students' Reports of Parents' Involvement

The NELS:88 surveys of eighth graders included representative items on the six types of school and family connections. In most of their reports, students reinforced the conclusions drawn from data from parents and principals. Most eighth graders respond that their parents are minimally involved, with most communication between parent and child at home.

Type 1: Parenting and Child Rearing and a Supportive Environment at Home

Family Rules. Most early adolescents recognize and report that their families continue to supervise and guide them at home. Although there are exceptions—families who never require chores (7.4%) or never set curfews (11.3%)—most students report that their families set guidelines about chores, schoolwork, and time to stay out with friends. About 68% of the students report that their parents *often* require chores. There is more variability in student reports of curfews and limits on TV than about chores. According to students, about 43% of their families often limit the time they may stay out with friends, but only 14% of the families often limit TV (compare with parents' reports, above, on TV rules and limits). Students indicate that parents vary widely in their regulations for chores, homework, TV, and curfews, ranging from 0.5% of eighth graders who have no rules for any of these behaviors to 5.8% whose parents highly control all four categories.

Few controls at this age level may mean that few rules are needed or that parents are appropriately helping their children move toward coregulation of their behavior. Or, few controls may indicate laissez-faire parenting, which may shortchange early adolescents on the guidance they need in the middle grades. When most students say that their parents do not limit TV, for example, it may be because most parents have set rules and the students are following them (or that the students are ignoring them). These are interesting questions that may be pursued with NELS:88 and the follow-up surveys with more complete measurement models. (See S. Lee, 1994, for analyses of data from students that explore the antecedents and consequences from Grade 8 to 10 of family involvement on each of the six types discussed here.) But these also are questions that may need new and more focused studies of TV rules, limits, habits, and consequences in adolescence and for other age groups.

Reports from students and parents on family regulations differ because parents were asked whether they set any rules and students were asked about the frequency of the enforcement of parents' rules. Thus, more parents say they set rules for chores (90%) than students report they are often required to do them, and more parents report rules for TV (84%) than students say they experience frequent limits (14%). These discrepancies may reflect some stu-

dents' overstatements of their independence from their family, but are more likely to indicate how one or two differently worded items may clarify some things and confuse other things about complex parenting behaviors and parent-child relationships. One or two items in a general survey are not enough to fully understand important topics of adolescent development, schooling, and family involvement. Focused and detailed studies will be needed to delve more deeply into the provocative issues that are raised by patterns of responses in large, national sample surveys like NELS:88.

Type 2: Communications With the School

According to the students, some of their parents are contacted by their middle grades schools about problems with attendance, grades, and behavior. About 12% say their parents "received a warning" about poor student attendance; 22%, about misbehavior; and 37%, about poor grades.

About one third of the students report that their parents did not talk to a teacher or counselor by phone or in person that school year. This figure confirms information from parents in NELS:88 (see above) and conforms with earlier surveys indicating that more than one third of the parents of elementary students did not have a conference with a teacher during the school year (Epstein, 1986).

Type 3: Attend School Events or Volunteer

Most students (63%) report that their families attended some events in which they participated at the school, although about one third say their families never came to an event at school that year. Most students (70%) report their parents did not visit their classes.

Type 4: Learning Activities at Home and Homework

Homework. Just under half of the students (44.5%) say that their parents often check whether they have done their homework. Of the rest, about 10% say their families never check, and the others (45.5%) report that their families rarely or sometimes check homework. Without guidance from the school about how and when to check that homework is done or how to discuss this work at home,

school night, meeting about their future high school, or other meeting. More students do not know whether their parents attended meetings in school or talked to their teachers (11%) than do not know whether their parents visited their classrooms or attended an event at school (3% to 5%). Students may pay more attention to family visits that occur when the students are present (in class or at an event) than to meetings or conversations that parents and teachers have without the students.

Type 6: Collaboration, Exchanges With Community Organizations, and Participation in the Community

Eighth graders participate in many ways at school and in the community. Students in NELS:88 report that they are members and officers of 21 organizations, groups, or clubs at their school (Braddock, 1992). The greatest proportions of students are in varsity (44%) and intramural (40%) sports, band (22%), chorus (23%), dance (25%), or one of several subject clubs (over 20%). Most of these activities include opportunities for connecting with the broader community.

Similarly, many eighth graders are involved in community organizations, clubs, and activities. The most prominent activities are nonschool team sports (35%), religious youth groups (31%), and summer programs (18%). Fewer participate in scouts or neighborhood or hobby clubs, but many say they are in other (unnamed) community activities (40%).

The numbers exceed 100% because some students participate in several activities at school and in the community. A small percentage are nonparticipants. Because of distance, transportation, costs, and other factors, not all students have access to extracurricular school or community activities. These activities establish natural, positive connections for families to share the students' accomplishments, performances, awards, demonstrations, and to discuss their interests and ideas.

Summary: Data From Students

Combining the students' reports across the various types of involvement, about 19% say that their parents are actively involved in various types of *partnership* activities with their schools, whereas about 27% report that their parents operate in relative *isolation* from their schools, involved in few or no communications or

most families do not regularly initiate procedures to check, follow-up, or discuss homework with their children in the middle grades (as reported by parents, above) and most students do not expect them to do so.

Discussions About School, Courses, Classwork, and the Future. Students reported the number of times since the beginning of the school year that they talked with either or both parents about courses, school programs, activities or events, and topics studied in class. According to the students, just more than one third (38.9%) talked with a parent more than twice about their courses or programs; just more than half discussed activities or events (56.9%) or classwork (52%). About 27% discussed all three topics—courses, events, classwork—three or more times with their parents; and only a few (2.2%) never talked together about any of these topics.

Although most students know their families' expectations, students infrequently talk with their families about their future programs and plans. About half of the students (52%) reported that they talked with their mother three or more times about planning their high school programs; about one third talked about this often with their father. Most discussed their plans at least once, but 10% did not do so at all.

Behind these estimates of one or more conversations are questions of whether students understand that their teachers want them to discuss school, decisions, and activities at home and whether students and families have enough information from the schools to make their discussions meaningful.

Evidence from other studies help to explain why some middle grades students do not often discuss school with their families. For example, about half of the students in one middle grades school believed that their teachers did not want them to talk about school at home (Epstein et al., in press). Without explicit and frequent directions from their teachers to share ideas or progress at home, some students will not raise topics about school or homework in conversations at home.

Type 5: Participation in Decision Making, Committees, and Governance

About half of the students (55.9%) report that their parents attend a school meeting. This may refer to a PTA meeting, back-to-

activities. The rest (54%) report that their parents are involved with their schools in limited ways, mainly at home. Thus, even on basic indicators—attend meetings, phone teachers, visit classes, or attend events—more than three fourths of the eighth graders in the United States report that their families are far from experiencing or exercising strong partnerships with their middle grades schools. These estimates based on student data correspond closely with the conclusions drawn from the data from parents in Table 4.1 and are in concert with the patterns of data from principals in Table 4.2.

Summary and Discussion

It is important for researchers who want to use NELS:88 data and related surveys such as the Hopkins Enhancement Survey (HES) of NELS:88 schools to have a profile of the participants. It also is important for the public to have a good picture of the nation's schools, students, and families in the middle grades. These samples are sometimes prejudged by the characteristics of the most troubled subsamples of schools, students, or families. Although it is important not to minimize the problems that exist for some middle grades schools, some early adolescents, and some families, it also is important to understand the broad context in which these problems are set.

The three sections of this chapter address the following questions: Who are the families in the NELS:88 base-year survey, and how are they involved in middle grades schools and in their children's education? Which schools are in NELS:88 base year, and what are they doing in partnerships with families? Who are the students in NELS:88, and what do they say about family, school, and community partnerships? The descriptive data yield two topics for summary and discussion: *comparisons and contrasts* in NELS:88 on school and family connections, and *controls and extensions* of NELS:88 that are needed to study the nature and effects of school, family, and community partnerships.

Comparisons and Contrasts: Patterns of School, Family, and Community Connections in the Middle Grades

The NELS:88 data present a national picture of families, students, and schools that overall evokes neither Norman Rockwell nor

Oliver Twist. Rather, the data reveal a mix of strengths and weaknesses in the connections of schools, families, and students in the middle grades.

Most families in the NELS:88 base-year sample are functioning, but struggling. Most parents are trying to monitor and guide their early adolescents, but they receive relatively little assistance from middle grades schools about how to do this. A portion of the families (up to one fourth) are relatively isolated from their children's middle grades schools and may have a hard time understanding, supporting, and guiding their children as students. Despite general satisfaction with their middle grades schools, many families believe the schools could challenge their children more and prepare them better for high school, and most receive little information or direct guidance from the schools to enable them to stay involved in their children's education.

Most middle grades schools are operating conventionally with few major conflicts, but the principals indicate that teachers have difficulty motivating many students and that teachers and students often have difficulty relating to each other. Few principals report that their middle grades schools conduct comprehensive programs to involve all families in the education of early adolescents. Most schools have some practices, but do not reach all families. Most do not systematically organize their involvement activities around student development or learning.

Most students recognize their families' efforts to guide them at home, but report few deep connections between home and school. Many middle grades students are bored in school and many are not assisted to take steps that will help them meet their long-term goals.

The major results are confirmed across reporters; that is, students, parents, and principals in NELS:88 surveys agree that most families are poorly informed and weakly involved in their children's education in the middle grades. There are important correspondences by at least two of the groups of reporters on items that represent the six major types of involvement:

- In their reports about sample Type 1 activities, about 90% of the students and parents agree that families set some rules for early adolescents. Parents and students recognize that families are trying to maintain influence in their children's lives at home in the middle grades.

- In reports of Type 2 examples, parents and principals report that only about one half of the parents attend parent-teacher conferences at the school.
- On Type 3 sample items, all respondents agree that, presently, few parents are volunteers in the middle grades. The schools do not call for volunteers, and families do not offer their services.
- On Type 4 activities, parents and students report that more than half of the families monitor homework. The principals reveal, however, that most parents do not receive much information or guidance from middle grades schools on how to help at home in specific ways. Thus, few parents are well informed about how to interact with their early adolescents on homework. This is important because other studies indicate that parents at the elementary and middle levels are most interested in knowing how to help their own child each year at home (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1986). A majority of families and students say they talk about school at home, but fewer talk frequently about plans for high school, and fewer still discuss the future. Only about one fourth of the students and parents indicate that they talk together frequently about all of the basic sample topics in the survey items.
- On Type 5 items, about one half of the principals say that fewer than 20% of the parents participate in PTA or parent association meetings. This perception is substantiated by one half of the parents reporting that they do not belong to these associations, and about one half of the students thinking their families attend meetings at school. Overall, more than one half of the families of middle grades students are not involved in school decisions, even on the most ordinary Type 5 activities such as joining the PTA or attending meetings.
- Reports on Type 6 sample items suggest that in contrast to a general lack of involvement at school, large numbers of parents and students report being involved in community activities. These reports either overstate connections in the community (e.g., if parents ever participate in one activity) or indicate a real contrast in where parents invest their time and attention. These questions need to be followed in focused studies that include more pointed questions about community participation than are available in NELS:88. On another measure of community, about one third of the families are well connected to the families of their children's school friends. Analyses are needed to determine whether this is a good estimate of family interconnections, whether it is sufficient to be linked with one or two (not five) families of children's friends, whether parents may be tied to families of children's friends made outside of school, and the implications of these ties. These issues, too, will require detailed data on children, friends, and family ties.

The national patterns in the NELS:88 data from students, parents, and principals are in accord with local and regional studies that suggest that about 20% of families remain active and knowledgeable partners with their children's schools, and that many more (up to 70% to 75%) could be. Most middle grades schools in the nation give little information to families, and most families give little assistance about school to their children in the middle grades. Without adequate communications from the school, many families may not fully understand their early adolescent's potential or options in school, or may be accepting too little from the schools and from their children. Importantly, studies with these and other data confirm that when middle grades schools create programs to encourage partnerships, give information to families, and guide their interactions, more families participate in the schools and with their children and guide or discuss homework (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Jacobson, 1994).

Despite the agreed-on weakness in partnerships, the three groups of reporters in NELS:88 also agree that there is a base of communication on which to build better partnerships in middle grades schools. Parents and children are trying to communicate at home; schools communicate with some families, and although this is often about students' problems, these communications are a base on which to build more positive linkages; and students are aware of their families efforts and share their families' and schools' goals for education and high aspirations. All of these factors are important for understanding the potential for more welcoming programs and more informative exchanges and interactions of schools, families, and communities to assist more students to succeed in school.

Controls and Extensions: Using NELS:88 to Study School, Family, and Community Partnerships and Their Effects

One goal of this chapter is to describe NELS:88 and HES so that researchers will be attracted to the data. The NELS:88 surveys provide true longitudinal data that enable researchers to ask many questions about school, family, and community connections. The students are followed from Grade 8 through high school and beyond, with information about their schools and teachers in each survey, and with information from families in Grades 8 and 12.

The surveys reveal vast and intriguing variation in schools, families, and students in the middle grades on factors that may influence involvement or that may affect outcomes for students, families, and for school practice. With an understanding of the basic features of the samples, fuller and better analyses of these data can be conducted that account for the important variables that have been noted in each section in this chapter. The descriptive data identify many characteristics of middle grades schools, students, and families that must be considered in studies that aim to explain the following: Which families become involved in their children's education? How do family background characteristics influence different types of involvement? How do school, family, and community connections influence student learning and development?

For example, the descriptive analyses in this chapter suggest that school, family, and community partnerships vary in schools by sector, size, urbanization, grade organization, and population of families and students. Involvement may be explained by parental education, aspirations for children, and other family background variables as well as family experiences with partnerships. Family involvement may be influenced by the characteristics of the middle grades students themselves, including their attitudes toward school, ability levels, goals, and other experiences in school. These variables must be considered as statistical controls, as mediating variables, and in other ways (e.g., as interaction variables) in full measurement models.

Indeed, many of the patterns suggested by the percentages reported here will change when full statistical controls are applied to learn whether schools that serve similar students (e.g., highly educated families, or predominantly Latino families) involve families in similar ways or involve equal numbers of families. Patterns reported in this chapter will change when analyses are conducted with appropriate statistical controls to determine whether families in similar communities (e.g., urban or rural, in the West or South, in areas serving families with low income, in public schools), with similar educational backgrounds, or with children who are similarly successful in school get involved in similar or different ways. Studies may ask, for example, whether there are fewer workshops in public schools (as reported above) after statistically controlling on the size of schools, urbanization, or other theoretically linked variables. Researchers will need to control students' prior skills,

achievements, or other outcomes to fully understand whether and how family involvement in the middle grades or in high school affect present outcomes. The picture of family involvement and the results of partnerships will be redrawn more than once as researchers build on each others' work to improve their measurement models to represent the causal paths between background factors, motivational forces, and effects.

Questions about the nature and effects of family involvement (and many other topics of student development and learning across the grades) may be asked about the full sample or selected subsamples of students (e.g., students placed at risk); subsamples of families (e.g., families with low income, as explored by Tienda & Kao, 1994); changes over time in family involvement as viewed by students (e.g., S. Lee, 1994) or by families; or the influence of school level, student level, or hierarchically nested variables of students in families in schools with different characteristics and programs (Epstein & Jacobsen, 1994; Epstein & Lee, 1993; S. Lee, 1994; V. E. Lee & Croninger, 1994; Schneider & Coleman, 1993).

The variations in involvement described in this chapter show that other families in the school, and other groups in the broader community. With planning and work, all schools could do the same. Other analyses with NELS:88 and with other data are needed to determine which practices are worth the time and effort by schools, by families, and by the students themselves. As one example, data similar to NELS:88 school surveys show that schools that invest in transitional activities to inform families in the elementary grades about the middle schools their children will attend continue to conduct more activities to inform and involve families through the middle grades and have fewer students who fail in the year of that transition (Epstein & Maclver, 1990; Maclver & Epstein, 1991). Many other effects of partnership have been reported and summarized (Epstein, 1992; Epstein & Connors, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

The diversity of middle grades students' families, test scores, attitudes, behaviors, and other characteristics means that school

programs of partnership need to include some common and some different contacts with families. That is, schools need practices that provide all families with good information, useful communications, feelings of welcome at the school, a sense of community, ways to help children at home, and opportunities to participate in school decisions. In addition, schools must tailor practices to meet children's and families' special needs, interests, talents, and requirements. Studies are needed on the optimal mix of common and different practices to involve all families.

These and many other questions can be generated and studied with NELS:88 in cross-sectional studies of each grade level in the surveys; in longitudinal studies across the grades from middle to high school to postsecondary activities; in studies of all or subsamples of students, families, or schools. Indeed, data as rich as the NELS surveys prompt countless questions on the causes and consequences of student, family, and school experiences.

Limitations

Despite its richness and scope, there are limitations to the NELS:88 data. Some of these are raised in the earlier sections of the text, such as the question about the representation in the sample of the lowest-achieving or absent students and their families. There are other questions about the adequacy of coverage of topics. As with all large scale surveys, the NELS:88 data tend to be broader than they are deep, with only a few items to explore each of the many facets of school and family life that are addressed in the surveys. Though an improvement over earlier national data on school and family partnerships, the NELS:88 data do not adequately represent the six types of involvement. Thus, parents could be involved in other ways that are not measured, and schools could conduct other practices to involve families. However, the representative items in NELS:88 are strengthened by the inclusion of the same or similar items on the three surveys for parents, principals, and students and by the same or similar questions in the follow-up surveys. Even so, the slightly-to-substantially different wording across surveys of similar items raises problems for comparing the views across reporters and across survey waves.

Another limitation is the lack of detailed information from teachers about their attitudes and practices of involving families in

children's education in the middle grades. NELS base-year and follow-up surveys include two teachers per sampled student but focus mainly on academic classroom issues and ratings of the students. This is a serious limitation in the NELS surveys, because other studies have shown how important teachers' views and practices are for understanding family involvement and its impact on students, families, and teaching practice (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987).

Thus, despite their immense potential, the NELS surveys cannot be used to address all questions about family involvement in the middle and high school grades. There are reasons for researchers to explore other national surveys (such as the U.S. Department of Education's new Prospects Surveys of principals, teachers, parents, and students in the elementary, middle, and high school grades, and the future National Household Education Survey, NHES, of families) to study practices of partnership. Also, researchers need to collect other, focused data in local, state, and regional surveys or in field studies in order to assess the effects on students, families, and schools of particular practices of partnership over time and in order to explore in greater detail questions that are raised by results of analyses of NELS:88 data.

The richness and problems in longitudinal data with multiple reporters pose enormous challenges to researchers to analyze and interpret the data. This chapter contributes a base on which to build a better understanding of school, family, and community connections and their effects in the middle grades.

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Chapter 3

School and Family Partnerships in the Middle Grades

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Introduction

Early adolescence has been called the time in a child's life when parents are the most difficult! In early adolescence—the years between 10-14—youngsters experience simultaneous social, emotional, intellectual, and physical changes and challenges. Most early adolescents and their families successfully negotiate this period of development and move on to new challenges in late adolescence, high school, and young adulthood (Offer, Ostror, Howard, & Atkinson, 1988). Some youngsters, however, have serious problems that appear or increase in the middle grades, creating turmoil during these pivotal years, and preventing some students from measuring up to their full potential. As students enter adolescence, many parents begin to lose touch with their children's schools and, therefore, with their children as students. Middle grades schools need to think about how to connect and communicate with families in order to maximize support for student learning and development.

What must be done to develop and maintain family and school connections when students become early adolescents? When middle grades schools become more complex? When families become more confused about how their children are developing and about their continuing influence on their children's education? We address these questions with a brief overview of middle grades students, families, and schools; a theory and framework to help build successful partnerships; a summary of research on partnerships at this level; and a discussion of issues for educators and researchers to consider as they work to improve practice and increase knowledge about school and family partnerships in the middle grades.

The Concept of "Partnership"

What do we mean by "parent involvement" in the middle grades? We suggest that the term "school and family partnerships" better expresses the shared interests, responsibilities, investments, and overlapping influences of families and schools in children's education through adolescence. There are several reasons for this. The broader term emphasizes that the two institutions share major responsibilities for children's education and that both are needed to support children as "students." In addition to recognizing the school as equals in partnership, the broader term recognizes the importance and potential influence of all family members, not only parents.

and all family structures, not only those that include natural parents. Moreover, the term allows students to join the partnership as communicators with and for their schools and families. The term makes room, too, for community groups, individuals, agencies, and organizations to work with schools and families and to invest in the education of children whose futures affect the quality of life of the community.

When some say "parent involvement" they mean things that some parents do on their own by their own invention. The "know-how" may be social-class-based or experience-based, relying on parents' skills to locate information they want and need. Other terms are sometimes used to describe the connections of families and schools. The term "home/school relations" sounds informal and conversational, rather than planned and comprehensive. By contrast, "partnership" expresses a formal alliance and contractual agreement to work actively toward shared goals and to share the profits or benefits of mutual investments.

School and family partnerships recognize that leadership is needed from schools to help all families obtain useful information that is not available from other sources. In the middle grades, school-generated information may be the only equitable way to enable all families to become more knowledgeable about their early adolescents and their schools. Partnerships also recognize that in order to design more effective and responsive practices, schools need to obtain information from families about their children, their goals, and the connections they want with their middle grades schools.

Much like partners in business, partners in education must work hard to clarify their mutual interests in the children they share. All of the parties in a partnership must work to develop trust, organize their responsibilities, and appreciate each others' investments and contributions. Strong partnerships develop over time, as partners exchange information and work together to assess their strengths and needs, set goals, plan projects, implement practices, evaluate results, celebrate successes, and revise activities to assist their children to succeed in school. These interactions should result in better school, family, and community programs and practices.

There are no shortcuts to the process of developing partnerships and improving programs. Experience shows that three to five years are needed to build strong partnerships in schools with all families, and even more time is needed to assure a lasting structure of successful practices to involve families (Comer, 1980; Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

Although one should not get sidetracked by semantics, the words we choose are important if they influence the understanding of responsibilities and the design and conduct of interactions. The terms "parent involvement" and "home-school relations" should be considered shorthand for the broader, more inclusive concept of school, family, and community partnerships.

Theoretical Model—Overlapping Spheres of Influence

Overlapping spheres of influence. The term “partnership” is represented in a theoretical model of “overlapping spheres of influence” (Epstein, 1987a). The spheres of influence on children’s learning and development include the family and the school, or, in full form, four spheres of influence of the family, school, community, and peer group (Epstein, 1988a). The spheres can, by design, be pushed together to overlap to create an area for partnership activities or pulled apart to separate the family and school based on forces that operate in each environment. The **external model** of the spheres of influence shows that the extent of overlap is affected by the forces of (a) time—to account for changes in the ages and grade levels of students and the influence of historic changes, and (b) behavior—to account for the backgrounds, philosophies, and practices in each environment. The external model recognizes pictorially that there are some practices that schools and families (and the other spheres) conduct separately and others jointly, and that those that overlap are potentially important influences on students.

The **internal model** of the spheres of influence recognizes the complex and essential interpersonal relations and influence patterns that occur between and among individuals at home and at school (and also, more fully, in the community and peer groups) in practices that concern students’ education and development. There are two levels of interpersonal relations—one at the institutional level of schools and families, as when schools invite all families to events or send the same communications to all families, and the other at the individual level, as when a parent, teacher, and student meet in conference to discuss an individual student’s progress or problem, or when a teacher telephones or writes to a parent for an individual communication. These levels of interpersonal relations also can intersect as when teachers give the whole class interactive homework assignments but only some students conduct the exchanges with a parent.

The central role of the student. Students are at the center of the model of overlapping spheres of influence for school and family partnerships. The model assumes that student learning, development, and success, broadly defined, are the main reasons for home and school partnerships. Productive connections of schools and families, and pertinent individual interactions of parents, teachers, and students are conducted in order to help students increase their academic skills, self-esteem, positive attitudes toward learning, independence, other achievements, accomplishments, and other desired behaviors that are characteristic of successful students.

Students are not passive in their educational growth and change, but are the main actors in their own success in school. School and family partnerships do not “produce” successful students. Rather, the partnership activities that include teachers, parents, and students engage and guide students so that they produce their own success.

As they mature, children face many competing demands and options for their time in school and out. Most middle grades students choose to invest their time, energy, and identity in those activities that motivate and reward them, increase their self-esteem, increase their social status among peers, and provide challenges and opportunities for success. When schools and families work in partnership, students hear that school is important from parents and teachers, and see that influential people in both environments are investing time and resources to work together to help them become successful students. The students' own work is legitimized by this process of mutual support.

The central role of the student in school and family partnerships occurs across the grades but is especially important beginning in the middle grades when students become even more instrumental in helping to conduct and interpret school communications with their families. Also, with the more complex curriculum in the middle grades, students must work harder to convert support from their schools and families into individual achievements. Programs of school and family connections in the middle grades will fail unless the early adolescents understand, accept, and participate in the partnerships designed to assist them to be more successful in school.

The full model of overlapping spheres of influence recognizes the interlocking histories of institutions that motivate, socialize, and educate children and the changing interactions and accumulating skills of the educators, family members, and students. These are the bases for implementing and for studying connections that benefit students, families, and schools in the middle grades.

Middle Grades Schools, Students, and Families

The model of overlapping spheres of influence highlights the importance of time as one of the forces that influence partnership practices. That is, the extent of overlap and the practices of partnership change from year to year, as students move from one teacher to the next who use different practices to inform and involve families, and from one level of schooling to the next, such as from the elementary to the middle grades, or from middle grades to high school. The different levels of schooling have different histories of partnerships with families. For example, preschool and elementary schools have been working at developing partnerships longer and more seriously than middle grades schools up to now. In other words, school and family partnerships are developmental, accounting for and responsive to the changes that occur in the characteristics of the middle grades students, families, and schools.

The children are changing. In early adolescence—the years between 10-14—youngsters experience simultaneous social, emotional, physical, and intellectual changes and challenges. The rate of student development varies widely, across and within grades, making it difficult to identify an “average” early adolescent. Early adolescents need opportunities to develop their independence and to take more

responsibility for themselves, even as they continue to need adults to guide and support them. They deepen their relationships with peers as they seek the comfort of conformity in their age group, but at the same time, they increase their self-confidence as they identify their unique talents and skills. Even as peers become more important influences for each other, adults—parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, and others—continue to be important influences. They need to be available and supportive as knowledgeable partners about education.

Middle grades students are often the main source of information for parents about their schools. Because of their increasing maturity and new relationships with their families and teachers, students play important roles—more powerful than in the earlier grades—in three-way partnerships.

School and family partnerships need to help parents understand early adolescent development, peer relations, and middle grades schools, and help children understand that their school recognizes the continuing importance and influence of their families in their lives.

The families are changing. Compared to parents of elementary school children, the parents of middle grades youngsters are, themselves, older. They may live further from the middle grades school; be busy with younger children in the elementary grades; or working full-time and balancing their careers with family responsibilities.

Parents of early adolescents often wonder what happened to the young child they thought they knew. They may be confused about their early adolescents' development and worried about the problems that teens face today. Parents may be unsure of how they can foster student independence and still take a role in guiding their youngsters in important behaviors and decisions about school and about other aspects of life.

School and family partnerships in the middle grades need to be designed and implemented so that they fit the needs and realities of family life, working parents, varied family structures, and other factors that affect families. The connections need to help families understand their sons and daughters who also are middle grades students.

The schools are changing. Middle grades schools are differently organized and staffed from most elementary schools. They are usually larger, fully departmentalized, with more teachers certified for the secondary grades, educated as subject-matter experts, and unprepared to work with families. The schools vary in grade span, staffing, middle grades practices such as interdisciplinary teams or advisory programs, and other aspects of instruction. They offer students more complex and demanding subjects than in the younger grades. The content of the curriculum—expanded from the time that parents went to school—becomes more difficult for parents to understand, keep track of, or talk about easily with their children. Counselors and other school administrators work with students on attendance, behavior, health, course choices, academic program and track placements, career planning, college

preparation, and other issues that also concern families. Often, however, the families are not informed about these topics nor about how to reinforce or extend the school programs to benefit their children.

School and family partnerships need to be organized to make the best use of the various adults who have important roles in middle grades schools, assist teachers to understand their students' families and how to mobilize family support to assist student learning, and alert families to the programs and practices that are new in the middle grades.

Summary of Research on Effective Partnerships in the Middle Grades

A major message of many early and some continuing studies of family environments and influence is simply that families are important for children's learning, development, and school success across the grades, including the middle grades. This line of research suggests that students at all grade levels do better in their academic work as well as have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors, if they happen to have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved. The influence on students is stronger if family support is continuous and consistent.

Most studies do not differentiate between schools and teachers that use practices to help all families participate in their children's education, and those that leave parents on their own to become involved. Without a formal program to provide information, parents are left to draw from their own resources and information, but some families have access to more resources than others. More recent research examines the impact on families, students, and teaching practice of specific school and classroom practices to inform and involve all families equally. The main question in these studies is: If family support is important for students, how can all schools maximize the number of families who are informed and involved in their children's education across the grades? (For full reviews and references of research on school and family connections at all levels see Epstein, 1992; and at the middle level see Rutherford, Billig, & Kettering, 1994).

Overview of selected results from research on partnerships at the middle level. Research is accumulating that shows that middle grades schools can take leadership in developing and implementing practices of partnership that enable more parents to become and remain involved in their children's education. Here we highlight a few of the general results from studies of middle grades families and teacher practices of involvement. The broad conclusions are synthesized from more than one study from the research of Bauch (1988), Benson (1991), Dauber & Epstein (1993), Dolan & Caroselli (1982), Dornbusch & Ritter (1988), Epstein (1986), Epstein & Dauber (1991), Epstein, Herrick, and Coates (in press), Epstein & Herrick (1991),

Epstein & Lee (1992), Johns & Panofsky (1987), Leitch & Tangri (1988), Marockie & Jones (1987), Stevenson & Baker (1987), Useem (1992), and Youniss & Smollar (1989). Although a few of these studies focus on middle or high school organizations, they include samples of parents or students from the middle grades (grades 5-9) in useful ways.

From these references we draw the following conclusions that support the systematic development by middle grades schools of comprehensive and equitable programs to inform and involve all families in the education of their early adolescents.

- Schools' practices of partnership with families decline with each grade level and decrease dramatically at the point of transition to the middle grades. Coincidentally, with each year in school, more families report that they are unable to understand the schools or assist their children. This pattern changes when middle schools add practices to inform and involve families.
- Most parents do not participate at the school building as volunteers or in decision-making or leadership roles. Many do not have the time, working full or part-time during the school day. Many do not want to; others do not know that they are welcome. In many middle grades schools, there are no procedures for recruiting, training, and scheduling volunteers or for including parents on committees or decision making teams. Many middle grades schools have no parent organization to develop leadership or to promote family participation.
- By contrast, most parents, including up to 90% in the middle grades, want to know how to help their own children at home in order to help their children succeed at school. Studies confirm that families need and want more information and guidance from the schools to monitor and support the education of their early adolescents. Presently, only some families—indeed, relatively few—have information about the schools, courses, choices, grading procedures, and many other topics that change at the middle level. Research on the implementation and effects of practices for the middle level show that parents of early adolescents, including those in inner city schools, want to assist and interact with their children about school subjects, schoolwork, and homework in helpful ways. They want to do so during the school year and during the summer, but they are given little guidance by the schools.
- Families of middle grades students have many questions about the schools that go unanswered. They also have many suggestions to offer about improving school programs, events, and partnerships that go unheard by the school. Few schools have two-way communications processes and practices that allow an easy flow of information to and from schools and families.

- Families have high hopes for their middle grades children, with large percentages expecting their children to attend and complete college. Many lack information that would help translate their values and goals into behaviors to guide their children toward college or other post-secondary education.
- Even as peers become increasingly important in early adolescence, families remain important to students.
- Social, academic, and personal problems of students that begin to increase in early adolescence require attention from all who share interest and investments in children. The efforts of schools, families, and communities to prevent problems from occurring or to treat problems that occur have not been well-organized to date. Each institution usually works separately with children, often without knowledge of or communication with the other. The disorganized delivery of services to teens and families has contributed to the unacceptable statistics on school failure, retentions in grade, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and other problems that prevent students from reaching their potential. Services must be more successfully integrated in new programs of school, community and family partnerships.

Overall, evidence is accumulating from local, regional, and national studies that indicates that when middle grades schools take steps to involve all families, more parents appreciate the assistance, become successful partners, and more students benefit in achievements, attitudes, and behaviors.

Framework and Application of Six Types of Involvement

In applying the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, we ask: *What practices fall within the area of overlap as shared responsibilities of schools and families? and How can schools think about, organize, and implement practices to create a comprehensive program of partnership with families and with the community?*

Results from many studies lead to the formulation of a framework of six major types of involvement that describes a comprehensive program of school and family partnerships in the middle grades (Epstein, 1987b, 1992). Many practices can be selected by schools to operationalize each type of involvement (Brandt, 1989; Epstein, 1987b, 1991; Davies, Burch & Johnson, 1992). The practices must be "tailored" in the middle grades to respond to the changing characteristics and needs of students, school organization and families discussed above (Epstein & Connors, 1992). Each type of involvement in the framework includes practices that are likely to lead to different outcomes or results for students, for parents, for teaching practice, and for school climate. The connection of each type of involvement with particular practices and specific outcomes corrects the simplistic assumption that any involve-

ment of parents will quickly or dramatically increase student achievement. Studies are beginning to show that different important outcomes for students, parents, and for teaching practice will result from the varied types of involvement.

In this section we outline the six major types of involvement and give a few examples of practices that continue across the grades and other practices that may be particularly important for accommodating the characteristics and needs of early adolescents, their families, and their schools. We note some of the challenges of implementation and the kinds of results (or outcomes) that have been found or that can be expected from each type of involvement in the middle grades.

Type 1

Basic obligations of families refer to schools providing information that families need about adolescent's health and safety, supervision, nutrition, discipline and guidance, and other parenting skills and child-rearing approaches. Middle grades schools also need to provide families with information about building positive home conditions that support learning at each grade level. Some schools help parents with their basic obligations through workshops at the school or in other locations, and in other forms of parent education, training, and information sharing.

Families continue to teach their early adolescents many attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, customs, and skills that are unique to and valued by the family, apart from the school curriculum. Schools are enriched by understanding the backgrounds and cultures of the families of their students. This two-way exchange—information to help families understand child and adolescent development and information to help schools understand family life and students' needs, interests, and talents—is at the heart of Type 1 activities.

In the middle grades, Type 1 practices may help families understand early and later adolescence, support early adolescent health and mental health, and prevent key problems in adolescent development. Families may want information (and may want to give the school information) on how to meet early adolescents' simultaneous needs for increased independence and continued guidance from families; on understanding the importance of peers and the risks of peer pressure; and on other topics. Families may want more information about setting appropriate family rules, providing decision-making opportunities to early adolescents, and changing discipline practices to support student development. With good information from and to their child's middle-grades school, families can continue to promote home conditions to help students balance their studying, homework, part-time jobs, and home chores.

Other Type 1 practices that have been implemented by middle grades schools include courses for parents in adult education, GED, and English language; home visits; parent rooms for workshops for parents on difficult topics to discuss at home such as teen sexuality and drug abuse; workshops for parents and teens to attend

together; and sessions for parents to talk with each other about child development and parenting.

Challenges. One challenge of successful Type 1 activities is to get information to all families who want it and who need it, and not just to the few who can attend workshops at the school. This may be done with videos, tape recordings, summaries, newsletters, cable broadcasts, and other ways. Another challenge is to arrange and maintain the channels for two-way communication that allow important information from families to come to the schools.

Outcomes. These activities should help reach goals and produce results to increase families' understanding of their early adolescents, students' awareness of the continuing role that parents play in their education, and educators' understanding of their students' families.

Type 2

Basic obligations of schools refer to communications from schools to families about school programs and students' progress. This includes notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, report cards, conferences, open-house nights or other visiting opportunities, and other more innovative communications. This also includes information to help families to choose or change schools, if such policies are used in a district. Middle grades schools vary the forms, frequency, and content of communications and greatly affect whether and how families receive information and whether the information sent home can be understood by all families.

In the middle grades, Type 2 communications also help families help students select curricula, courses, special programs, and other activities each year.

Families need information at important transition points from elementary to middle grades and from middle to high school. Useful orientations at these times recognize that families make transitions with their children, and that if they are informed, can help students adjust to their new schools.

At entry to the middle grades, some structures and procedures change that families need to know about. For example, report cards often change in form and in content. Information explaining report card grading systems and interim reports should help families monitor how their adolescents are doing in school and how to help students improve their grades from one marking period to the next. Conferences may be reconfigured in the middle grades as parent/student/teacher conferences to assure that students understand the connection between their teachers' and parents' communications and their own control over their motivation and learning. Conferences in the middle grades also must allow connections of families with many teachers of different subjects or with teams of teachers if the school organizes its work in these ways.

Other topics that begin to be important to middle grades families include how they can help students plan for college and work; begin financial savings for education and training; learn of scholarships, loans, and grants; and plan for the tests students need to take to step toward their futures.

Other Type 2 practices that have been implemented by middle grades schools include giving families advance notice about special schedules, costs, and other requirements; conferences at home with parents who have no transportation to get to the school, or providing transportation by school bus or parent-taxi-car-pools so that they can come; providing native-language translations of written or verbal communications; using local cable TV for a homework hotline, and other communications. To improve contacts, some schools have organized class parents, block parents, telephone trees, or the equivalent of a "welcome wagon" for education to provide a contact person and information to families who transfer to a middle grades school any time during the school year. (For other examples see Chrispeels, Bourta & Daugherty, 1988).

Challenges. One challenge of successful Type 2 activities is to make communications clear and understandable for all families, including parents who have less formal education, so that all can respond to the information they receive. Other challenges are to know which families are and are not receiving the communications in order to include those who are harder to reach in each school; to extend two-way channels so that families can initiate and respond to communications; and to help middle grades students become good partners by delivering communications home and discussing schoolwork and school decisions with their families.

Outcomes. These activities should help reach goals and produce results to increase families' and teachers' interactions; increase families' understanding and use of their school and classrooms programs and their children's progress; increase families' attendance at meetings, conferences, and events; and improve students' decisions about their schoolwork and courses with input from home. With targeted communications via tape recordings, video cassettes, summaries, newsletters, telephone answering machines or computerized messages, and other print and nonprint forms to middle grades families, student attendance, lateness, behavior, and other outcomes may improve.

Type 3

Involvement at school refers to parent and other volunteers at the middle-grades school or in classrooms, and to families who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events. In addition to Type 2 communications that inform families about opportunities and events, schools increase the number of families and community members who come to the school building by varying schedules so that more are able to participate as volunteers and as audiences at different times of the

day and evening, weekends, summer, or holidays.

In the middle grades, volunteers can be put to better use if there is a coordinator who matches volunteers' times and skills with the needs of teachers, administrators, and students. Programs that tap parents' and community members' talents, occupations, and interests can enrich students' subject classes and improve career explorations. Mentoring, coaching, and tutoring activities may be particularly helpful as students' skills, interests, and talents become increasingly diverse in the middle grades. Some parents may want to volunteer to work with other parents of middle grades students, perform language translations, monitor attendance, and other activities.

Other Type 3 practices that middle grades schools have implemented include volunteers working in a parent room or parent center; volunteers making cassette tapes for students to read along when their science or social studies books are at a reading level that is beyond their current reading skills; and curriculum-linked volunteers who integrate art activities into social studies classes. (See for example, Epstein & Salinas, *TIPS Volunteers in Social Studies and Art*, 1991.)

Challenges. One challenge of successful Type 3 activities is to recruit volunteers widely, make hours flexible for parents and other volunteers who work during the school day, and to enable volunteers to contribute productively to the school and to the curriculum. Volunteers are more likely to be productive if their tasks are clear and their training is focused. As one veteran of a volunteer program said of how to increase productive volunteers, "Ask people to do something specific and keep asking!" When volunteers are organized to productively contribute to the middle grades program (as when parents enrich or extend a curricular goal), teachers of different subjects are more likely to think about how to include volunteers in their work.

Another challenge of Type 3 involvement is to change the definition of "volunteer" to mean any one, any time, any place who supports school goals or students' learning. This opens up possibilities for more parents and others in the community to be volunteers in middle grades schools, or at home, or in other locations in the community. A related challenge is to help early adolescents understand that it is o.k. for a parent to be involved in ways that help middle grades school, students, or other families.

Outcomes. These activities should help reach goals and produce results to increase the contributions made by many families to support school programs; increase families' comfort and familiarity with the school and staff; vary students' communications with adults; increase teachers' readiness to involve families in other ways at home and at school; and improve teachers' awareness of parents' and other community members' abilities to contribute substantively to the school. Other outcomes may include fewer discipline problems due to lower ratios of students to adults, stronger school offerings and more student awareness of opportunities in life due to varied programs offered by volunteers with diverse talents, work, and interests.

Type 4

Involvement in learning activities at home refers to requests and guidance from middle grades teachers for parents to monitor, assist, and interact with their own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with students' classwork or that contribute to success in school. It also includes parent-initiated, student-initiated, and teacher-directed discussions and interactions about homework or school subjects. Type 4 practices assist families to become more knowledgeable partners about the teachers' curricula and instructional methods; the academic and other skills required to pass each grade, the work their children are doing in class; how to support, monitor, discuss, and help with homework; and how to help students practice and study for tests.

In middle grades schools, information on the skills needed to pass each course and how families can help at home must come from several teachers of different subjects. It must be clear that the school does not expect families to "teach" school subjects but to encourage, listen, react, praise, guide, monitor, and discuss the work the students bring home. This may be done with interactive homework, student/teacher/family "contracts," long-term projects, or other interactive strategies that keep students and families talking about schoolwork at home.

Other Type 4 practices that middle grades schools have implemented to keep schoolwork on the agenda at home include videotapes to demonstrate how to motivate early adolescent learners, videos of sample class lessons to discuss at home, pre-unit introductory activities and discussions, summer home learning packets, student demonstrations of newly mastered math skills, and others. (See, for example, Epstein, Jackson & Salinas, *TIPS Interactive Homework in the Middle Grades in Language Arts and Science*, 1992.)

Challenges. One challenge of successful Type 4 activities is to design and organize a regular schedule of interactive work that enables students to take the leadership role in discussing important and interesting things they are learning, interviewing family members, recording reactions, and sharing written work. This approach helps middle grades students understand that the school wants their families to know what they are learning in school, and wants students to talk over ideas and school decisions at home. A regular weekly or biweekly schedule of interactive homework helps keep families aware of the depth of the curriculum and their children's progress throughout the year. The interactions about homework must be the students' responsibilities, however, without requiring parents to read, write, or teach school subjects. The emphasis is on helping families interact with early adolescents in ways that also help students become more independent learners.

Another challenge is to design homework activities or projects which are responsive to the needs and time available of students and families without putting undue pressure on either. The methods to encourage interaction must not be unduly burdensome on middle grades teachers who often have many students to teach and many

families to reach. Interactive homework should enable parents to send reactions or observations back to the school, maintaining two-way communications on involvement about learning activities, as in the other types.

A general challenge is to design ways to increase the amount of useful information all families receive that will help them continue conversations with their early adolescents about the curriculum, classwork, and positive achievements.

Outcomes. It is this type of involvement that may be most likely to increase student curricular achievements. The interactions and support from family members should help students to improve their homework completion, report card grades, test scores, and other subject-specific attitudes and achievements. Students' feelings of competence may increase if they regularly lead enjoyable interactions with their families to demonstrate what they are learning. They also should be more aware that their family knows about the important part of school life—the learning activities. Teachers' recognition of the part parents play in encouraging students' classroom learning also should increase, and teachers' attention to the design and content of homework should improve. These activities should help reach goals and produce results to increase families' understanding of the school curriculum and how to help at home. More families should be able to support their children by coordinating home and community activities with things their children are learning in school.

Type 5

Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy refers to parents and others in the community in participatory roles in parent/teacher/student organizations, school advisory councils, school-site decision-making or improvement teams, Chapter 1, and other school committees. It also refers to parents as activists in independent education advocacy groups in the community. Middle grades schools strengthen parent participation in school decisions by encouraging the organization of parent groups and committees and by training parents and students in leadership and decision-making skills. Schools assist advocacy groups by providing them with information that will bolster community support for middle grades school improvement.

In addition to the continuation of active parent organizations, parent representatives on committees are important in middle grades schools on a wide array of topics that affect the quality of school programs. These include committees on curriculum, safety, supplies and equipment, family involvement, career development, and other topics for school improvement.

Other Type 5 activities that middle grades schools have implemented to involve families in school decision-making and advocacy include guidelines developed by parent groups that outline how and how much parents are told about middle grades grouping policies, course selection, placement, and appeals processes. Some prac-

tics link types of involvement as when the coordinator of volunteers or parent leaders on specific committees are appointed or elected council members of the PTA/PTO. Parent associations have run clothing exchanges, school stores, fairs, "gold card" discount programs with local merchants, and many other activities. (For other examples of school-based management structures see Comer, 1980, 1988.)

- **Challenges.** One challenge of successful Type 5 activities is to include parent leaders from all of the racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, and geographic communities that are present in the middle grades school. This is a more difficult task in middle and junior high schools that typically draw from a wider and more diverse community than elementary schools. A related challenge is to help parents who are leaders to act as true representatives of the families they serve, with good two-way communications among parents, and between the school and the parent organizations or committees. A third challenge is to include middle grades student representatives in decision-making groups and leadership positions. An ongoing challenge is to assist school committee members to listen to each other, treat each other with respect, and take each other's ideas seriously as they work toward common goals for school improvement.

Outcomes. These activities should help reach goals and produce results to increase families' input on decisions that affect the quality of education for their children, students' awareness that families and students have a say in school policies, and teachers' understanding of family perspectives on policies and programs for improving the school.

Type 6

Collaborations and exchanges with the community refer to connections by schools, families, and students with agencies, businesses, religious organizations, cultural, and other groups in the community that share responsibility for children's education and interest in their futures. This includes middle grades schools' efforts to provide or coordinate students' and families' access to community and support services such as after-school recreation, tutorial programs, health services, cultural events, and other programs.

Middle grades schools vary in how much they draw on community resources to link to and strengthen work in the other types of involvement, and how much they inform families about these programs. Community resources may be tapped, for example, to provide parent education on adolescent development, as when local mental health groups run workshops in schools (Type 1); to improve schools' communications with families, as when local radio or cable TV stations assist with public service announcements or when churches, clinics, supermarkets, and laundromats assist with important communications from school to home (Type 2); to increase the number of volunteers at the school from the community or enlist business support for

workers who are parents to volunteer or attend activities or conferences at the school (Type 3); to enhance and enrich the curriculum and other experiences of students, as when museums or business link their programs and services to school curricula for use in the schools or in the community sites (Type 4); and to extend participation on school committees to business and community representatives (Type 5). Thus, in addition to Type 6 being identifiable as a discrete connection to assist families and schools, community resources also can strengthen the other types of involvement (Epstein and Scott-Jones, in press).

As students enter adolescence their boundaries for exploration and education extend beyond home and school to the neighborhood and wider community. Many students take lessons outside of school, belong to organizations in the community, work or volunteer in the community, or participate in other community activities which have the potential to support and extend school-based learning. Community programs and resources can provide important experiences for students in and out of the school building. Middle grades schools can work to get the surrounding community to open opportunities to middle grades students and can help their students obtain equal access to these opportunities.

Other Type 6 activities implemented by middle grades schools to establish viable collaborations and exchanges with the community include a) small grants for demonstration projects to improve parent/adolescent communications; b) community organizations' "educational parties" for families in the homes of middle grades students to increase parental involvement in their children's education and to empower parents with advocacy skills, or community agency fairs to introduce families to local services; c) state legislation or community-developed policies that ask or require employers to allow employees who are parents to attend conferences with their children's teachers and other activities at the schools (including middle grades schools); d) state support and coordination of education, health, recreation, job training, and other services for 13-19 year-olds including sites at middle schools (see Center for the Future of Children, 1992); e) business partnerships for improving school programs, students' career explorations and opportunities, teacher internships, mentoring or tutoring programs for direct help to youngsters, mock job interviews, and for other reasons; f) school-sponsored telephone referral systems to community services for teens and families; and g) work-site seminars for workshops for parents who cannot come to the school.

Challenges. One challenge of successful Type 6 activities is to solve the problems often associated with community/school collaborations, such as poor communications about the multiple goals of the school, "turf" problems of who is in charge of collaborative activities, and whose funds are used for what purposes. Another challenge is for middle grades schools to find ways to link students' valuable learning experiences in the community to the school curricula and to recognize students' skills and talents that are developed in their community experiences.

Outcomes. These activities should help reach goals and produce results to increase the knowledge of families, students, and schools about the resources they can tap in their community to help them reach individual and common goals. Also, good coordination of school, family, and community resources should help more students solve some of the problems that arise in early adolescence before they become too serious. Type 6 activities also should support and enrich school curricula and extra-curricular programs.

Topics of Special Importance for Practices of Partnership in the Middle Grades

The framework of six types of involvement permits the selection of many different practices of school, family, and community partnerships in the middle grades. The practices selected also will be influenced by local, state, or national guidelines for school improvement and by emerging new directions for middle grades reform.

There are many topics concerning the characteristics of early adolescents, the features of middle grades schools, and teaching practices that influence the design of practices to inform families at this level of schooling. We have selected a few to introduce some issues that may be particularly important to families. They include early adolescent development, transitions to the middle grades, and specific practices such as interdisciplinary teams, untracking, student assessments, report cards, conferences, and school/community connections. Many other topics and examples are given in the discussion about the six types of involvement on the previous pages. With each topic we raise some questions for debate and discussion that may guide the design of new practices or may suggest questions for new research.

Features of middle grades schools. Middle grades practices to involve families will vary from those in the early grades because of many factors—such as the geographic location of the school, size of school and grade levels, and other organizational features. For example, the organization of programs and some practices of partnership in small K-12, rural schools with about 50 students per grade level will differ from those in large 7-9 junior high schools with over 500 students per grade level. Partnership practices also will change across the middle grades as developmental changes take early adolescents toward adolescence and young adulthood. That is, the connections with families need to change to reflect the characteristics of sixth graders, the uniqueness of seventh graders, and the status of eighth graders, or the features of students at any grade level in a middle grades school.

Here we discuss a few features of early adolescence and middle grades schools (i.e., the transition from the elementary grades and to high school; interdisciplinary teams; tracking or untracking) that are particularly relevant to the design and content of partnerships with families. There are many other topics about middle grades

schools that may be similarly studied for how they affect school and family partnerships.

Early adolescent development. The most important aspect of middle grades schools is that they serve early adolescents. There are many characteristics of students at this age, but one worthy of attention is the simultaneous need for greater independence and continued guidance and supervision. This seeming conflict has serious implications for school and family partnerships.

As early adolescents struggle to gain or increase their independence, they may be resistant to family involvement in their middle grades schools. Recent studies indicate that young adolescents want their families involved as knowledgeable partners at home, but they may not want their peers to know that they still need their families' guidance. Students may not be sure where they fit in school and family partnerships, if neither teachers nor parents acknowledge and explain the students' roles. Data suggest that early adolescents want their families to support them in learning activities at home and accept their assistance in school, but in different roles than were common in the elementary grades (Epstein & Dauber, in press; Epstein & Herrick 1991; Montandon & Perrenoud, 1987).

Families and schools also may be initially resistant to practices of family involvement because they may see adolescents in the middle grades as bigger and older and, therefore, less in need of adult "help." There may be a tendency to reduce involvement and interaction if it is viewed as interfering with the development of student independence. The fact is, however, that students become more independent if their families and other adults remain age-appropriately informed and involved in their education (Epstein, 1983).

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- What methods are effective in reducing resistance and increasing acceptance of students, families, and teachers of new school/family partnership practices in the middle grades?
- How can middle grades students be given a central role in the design and implementation of family/school partnership practices so that they understand how such practices meet their needs for independence and for guidance?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers from various practices to inform and involve families in the middle grades? Which practices have the most benefits for families, without threatening students' development of independence or diminishing their sense of self or feelings of competence?

Transitions from elementary grades and to the high school grades. One of the defining features of the middle grades is that students usually experience two transitions—from the elementary to the middle grades school and from the middle grades to the high school. Although most schools take time to assist students with these transitions, few schools systematically include families. Yet, each time a student changes schools, the family makes the transition with the child. At each point of transition, families need good information from schools in order to communicate knowledgeably with their children during these important, exciting, but potentially stressful times. Elementary, middle, and high schools need ways to work separately and together as “feeder” and “receiver” sites to inform and involve families so that they can interact with and assist their children to make successful adjustments to new situations. This includes the orientation to the middle grades and to new settings and relationships, and the preparations for high school course work and plans for the future.

Only about 40% of the middle grades schools in the country have programs that involve the families at key transition points (Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990). In those that do, the elementary school may start the process by orienting families to the schools their children will attend, first with activities and information at the elementary school, moving on to visits with middle grades representatives at the elementary and then at the middle grades school. The middle grades school may pick up the process of transition with mailings, contacts, and other visits in the summer and into the fall after the transition is made. Similar patterns of pre-transition and post-transition information, interactions, and visits are conducted by some feeder and receiver schools as students and their families move on to high school. The activities familiarize students and families with the buildings, programs, and changes in courses, expectations, and opportunities that they will meet in their new school.

The data also indicate that middle grades schools that involve families before the transition are more likely to continue other parent involvement practices through the middle grades. Thus, family involvement at points of transition also helps families continue their involvement with the schools.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- How can families be prepared to understand the transitions their children will make and to understand the kinds of support that will be helpful to their children?
- What is the most useful schedule, form, and content of articulation activities for families and students to be scheduled while students are still in the elementary grades, after the transition to the middle grades, and before moving on to high school?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers from practices that

... .. include families in the transitions experienced by middle grades students?

Interdisciplinary teams. One of the common complaints of middle grades teachers when asked about family involvement is, "I have too many students to pay attention to their families!" Interdisciplinary teams are groups of 4 or 5 teachers of different disciplines who work together in a team or cluster and share responsibility for a common group of about 125-150 students. Teams, created to reduce student anonymity and teacher isolation, may improve family/school partnerships in the middle grades. Teachers can work together to inform families about the new forms of teachers' teams, as parents may be unfamiliar with the construct. The teachers on a team may work together to develop effective practices to involve families. One of the most common uses for team planning time is for meetings with parents and students. Conferences are often a team activity, saving parents and teachers time. Teachers who share students can share some of the other activities that require contacting families, can mobilize family support more cohesively, and can coordinate homework assignments that require students to seek family involvement in order to balance demands for family time.

Also, in addition to their contacts with teachers, students and their families on a team have more opportunities to get to know one another, support each other in learning activities, and develop a sense of community through their shared experiences at school.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- In what ways can interdisciplinary teams offer new opportunities for parents to become better informed about middle grades programs and features (e.g., courses, grading, opportunities available to their children), and about how to help their early adolescents succeed in the middle grades?
- How can interdisciplinary teams of teachers "share the load" of designing and implementing family involvement practices for their team?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers from various practices that teachers on interdisciplinary teams use to inform and involve families?

Untracking. Many middle grades schools involved in restructuring efforts are changing their practices of tracking students by ability to "untracking" students in mixed-ability classes. Families need to know about the policies and practices that schools use to group their children in various ways, and why the practices have been chosen. In a national study of middle schools that were untracking their classes, principals reported that parents could make or break their efforts to reduce or eliminate tracking, and emphasized the need to involve families early in the process of plan-

ning and implementing heterogeneous groups (Wheelock, 1992). Families may be included through informational workshops, observations in classrooms, talking with families in other schools who have experienced successful untracking, giving parents and students choices of placements in some or all heterogeneous or homogeneous classes, discussions through the year about the curriculum, grouping practices, and student progress, and other ways.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- What kinds of information, and in what forms, do parents need about tracking or untracking in order for them to understand the issues, contribute ideas and suggestions to the school, and support their children in the placements that result?
- What is the student's role in the school's placement policies? How can schools help students and their families if the decision is to move from tracked to "untracked" courses?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers from contrasting strategies to inform and involve families about grouping strategies?

Student assessment. Alternative assessment strategies are being explored in many states and districts, such as the use of portfolios (e.g., Vermont, Rhode Island), other performance-based assessments, and new standardized tests of higher level skills (e.g., Connecticut, California, Maryland). How should families be informed about new national, state, and local standards on which their children will be judged? What should families know about the changes in assessment goals, forms, and content, and about what the new assessments mean for their children's progress and work in school? As one example, "The Portfolio Project," funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, is testing the use of portfolios in eight urban and two rural middle schools, however the role of parents and other family members is not given systematic attention. New standards, tests, and other evaluations can be confusing to families. They need good information about the assessments and about their results in order to support their children as they experience new evaluations, and as they help their children work to improve skills to meet higher standards and to make plans for the future.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- What information do parents need in order to support a school's adoption of new assessment strategies? In order to support their children's participation in new types of tests?
- In what ways should families be involved in designing, implementing, or evaluating alternative assessment strategies? In helping other parents under-

stand confusing aspects of tests or other components of middle grades assessment programs?

- What are the benefits to students, parents, and schools when connections are made with families about new standards and new assessments?

Report cards. While parents generally report satisfaction with the information they receive on report cards, most parents would like more information (Olhausen & Powell, 1992). Parents are rarely asked for input into the design of reporting systems (Reid, 1984). As traditional grading systems are replaced or supplemented with the introduction of alternative assessment strategies, other methods for reporting student progress will be needed and may supplement or replace current report card forms. In the middle grades, the form and content of report cards often change from those used in the earlier grades, and the components that determine grades also change. Families are usually not informed about these changes, or about how to interpret the grades, or how to guide their early adolescents toward better performance.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- What information do parents need and want about student achievements, report cards, and progress?
- What roles can students play in developing new methods of reporting progress, making self-assessments, sharing their progress or problems with their families, and working on improving their work and behavior with their teachers and families?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers when connections are made with families about various forms and contents of report cards?

Parent/teacher/student conferences. Some suggest that all parent/teacher conferences in the middle grades should include the student (Deborah Meier, personal communication, 1992), and that all communications between school and family should also be shared with and involve the student. In other words, there should be no parent/teacher conspiracies during early adolescence when the student's skills in self-direction and self-regulation are rapidly developing. Others suggest that there are times when parents and teachers may meet to get to know one another and talk informally, even if the student is not present. Schools need to think about these questions and related practices as they build their connections with families.

In some middle grades schools that are organized with teacher teams, conferences with parents (or with parents and students) are conducted as a team activity allowing parents to meet with all teachers at one time instead of requiring four or five conferences. Also, in some middle grades schools, portfolio conferences and other

performance-based demonstrations of student achievement may replace traditional parent/teacher conferences. Other schools are devising procedures for a series of three or four conferences a year, akin to the individualized educational plan meetings that have been used in special education, but for all students (as in some Utah demonstration sites). These reformations must be explained to families so that they can participate comfortably. One challenge to educators is to design conference procedures that inform parents of their student's achievements and allow families to share their own perspectives on their child's education and development. (Also see Chrispeels, 1988; Epstein, 1988b; and Swap, 1992.) Another challenge is to create an integrated system of student assessments, including report card forms and conferences, to give parents, teachers, and students several opportunities to come together to share ideas with each other about how to help students make the greatest progress in their learning and development.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- What are the purposes of parent/teacher/student conferences?
- Are there other methods that enable teachers, students, and families to share information, concerns, and achievements?
- Can students take more active roles in conferences to reflect the student-centered philosophy of middle grades education and new assessments?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers from contrasting conferencing strategies?

School/community partnerships. Collaborations or partnerships between schools and universities, businesses, health organizations, and other institutions and associations in the community provide opportunities for schools to offer services to students that the school system alone could not afford to provide. A major challenge to middle grades schools is to structure these partnerships so that the resources from the community support the school's overall goals for programs, students, and connections with families. For example, mentoring and tutoring programs, school-based health clinics, homework clubs or after school centers, and school/business partnerships rarely include programmatic components to facilitate family involvement. There is a danger that families feel left out or, in some settings, that they are being replaced by well-intentioned but insensitive adults. Families need to be informed of their student's participation in these activities, given information so that they can support their child in the program and discuss their activities.

In research and in practice we need to discuss and study:

- What strategies should be implemented to inform and include families in school/family/community partnerships?

- What roles should families play in school-business partnerships, mentoring programs, and other activities that link their children with members of the community?
- How should schools organize and structure partnership activities so that all families and students have equal access to services and opportunities offered by school/community partnerships?
- What are the benefits to students, parents, and teachers from alternative ways of organizing community connections?

Comprehensive School and Family Partnerships

A comprehensive program of partnership includes practices from all six types of involvement that have been selected to help produce specific outcomes of importance to students, to families, and to teachers. Schools develop their programs by providing "the basics" in each of the six types, and adding at least one new practice from each type of involvement each year to reach more and more families. Another way to develop a more comprehensive program is to recognize and work on the challenges associated with each type of involvement in order to improve practices each year. Or, schools may be assisted in program development by considering the components of middle grades education that families need to understand (the transition to a new school; new rules about attendance; new approaches such as teaming, grouping, grading; and others), and by creating practices to communicate with families about these features that affect their children's success in school.

Comprehensive programs of partnership in the middle grades can be developed if committees of teachers, parents, students, and others worked together to design or select, implement, and assess practices to accomplish the goals they set together for improving school practices to involve families. A coordinator or lead teacher is needed to oversee and advise the organization and implementation of new activities, or to help solve problems that arise as new practices are tried and tested. Each year, or more frequently, progress should be shared on each of the six types of involvement; practices should be reviewed, continued or improved, dropped or added; and excellent work by teachers, families, students, or others in the community should be recognized. Over time, these investments, efforts, and collaborations should lead to more comprehensive programs of partnership to benefit middle grades students.

Conclusion

The main goals of family and school connections in the years of early adolescence are to help youngsters maintain good health, develop positive attitudes toward learning, continue to succeed in school, and set high expectations, plans, and strate-

gies for high school and for the future. More students will meet these goals if schools, families, and communities join in partnership to work to encourage and assist the children they share.

Families need the school staff to give them information about critical issues facing teens which will help families make decisions with their adolescents. Schools need information from families on their goals, values, expectations, interests, and needs to fully understand the children they serve and to help plan school programs that will engage all students. Middle grades students need to know that their families, teachers, and others at school and in the community are available to support them as students and to help them deal with the inevitable challenges of adolescence.

We have summarized a research-based theory, a framework for action, and examples of practices that may help middle grades schools move beyond rhetoric about parent involvement into productive family/school/community partnerships.

Three themes underlie the design of comprehensive programs of partnerships in the middle grades: equity, development, and quality. The following questions on each theme may help to guide the selection and implementation of practices.

Questions of equity ask: Are all families included and informed so that they can be involved with their own children at home in productive activities to boost student motivation and learning? Are programs and opportunities designed and implemented so that all families feel welcome to participate at school?

Questions of development ask: Do practices of partnership reflect the changes that occur from the elementary to the middle grades in the characteristics of students, families, and schools? Do practices of partnership also account for the diversity at each middle grade level in the characteristics and needs of students, families, and teachers?

Questions of quality ask: Are practices to involve families in their children's education well designed? Are the practices worthy of the time of teachers, parents, and students? Are evaluations conducted to determine if practices are successfully implemented and if they have the effects or results that they were selected to produce?

Middle grades schools have lagged behind preschools and elementary schools in developing comprehensive programs to involve families. In most middle grades improvement plans, "parent involvement" is on the list of important components, but is often ignored or treated casually. With the heightened awareness of the importance of the shared responsibilities of schools and families in the education and development of early adolescents, and with advances in theories, research, policies, and practices of partnership, the time is right for middle grades educators and researchers who study early adolescents and their schools to join the agenda.

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