



Although schools, families, and communities vary greatly, they all care about helping students succeed to their fullest potential in school and in life.

—Joyce Epstein
Director

Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

School Is Increasingly Viewed as a Family and Community Affair

Collaboration among schools, parents, and communities is one of the keys to student success and, ultimately, school safety, but like so many healthy habits it can be hard to maintain. The most recent reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001*, addresses the unique opportunity for parents to work in partnership with schools to promote the social, emotional, and academic growth of their children. As the education system has been required to report more information about the quality of teachers and school practices, parents have access to more facts and flexibility in choosing the best education for their children. With that knowledge, though, comes responsibility.

NCLB emphasizes shared accountability for children's education. Under the statute, each school that receives Title I funds must develop (with parent input) a written parent involvement policy that is then distributed to all parents and shared with the local community. By involving parents, schools are better able to address the full range of family and student issues that impact learning.

Barriers to Parent Involvement and Possible Solutions

Barriers to collaboration include poor school policies, outdated practices, lack of resources, and a host of personal factors. Some common barriers and possible solutions are listed below. These tips are from the *Best Ideas for Parent Involvement in Education* created by the Boulder Valley Schools Parent-Teacher Association in Boulder, Colo.

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Not enough time	Be flexible and creative when scheduling meetings and events.
Not understanding curriculum	Schedule informational sessions to discuss the school's curriculum.
Not feeling valued	Engage parents who seem withdrawn or uncomfortable with a personal welcome.
Not knowing how to contribute	Seek out parents through questionnaires or interviews and give them options.
Language	Provide printed materials and translators as necessary for all languages spoken by families at the school.
Lack of child care	Sponsor child care at the school for siblings while parents attend meetings and other activities.
Not feeling welcome	Provide training to staff about the importance of parent involvement and strengthening skills for positive interaction.
Parents in need	Offer information about resources for relevant health and social services.
Snobbery and exclusion	Actively seek involvement from parents who represent the entire school community.

Elements of an Effective School-Family Partnership

Joyce Epstein and colleagues at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins created the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) in 1996 to provide research-based programming and guidance on school, family, and community partnerships. Their research has identified the following eight essential elements of an effective partnership program.

1. Strong leadership—Encourage the superintendent and principals to provide support for the partnership and act as program champions.
2. Good teamwork—Develop school action teams representing teachers, parents, administrators, and community partners to lead the program.
3. Written plans for action—Develop a detailed annual plan.
4. Well-implemented activities—Execute all activities of the plan thoroughly.
5. Thorough evaluation—Evaluate all program activities to recognize when changes are needed.
6. Adequate funding—Secure necessary funding for all program activities.
7. Support from colleagues and families—Promote community and family support of the partnership.
8. Network connections—Support other schools and districts by sharing best practices.

Strategies to Increase Parent And Community Involvement

The Caring School Community program, an OSDFS promising program, recommends the following school strategies to bring families into the school and connect students with the greater community.

- Conduct a needs assessment using surveys, interviews, orientation, meetings, phone calls, or other forums to ask parents what they would like to see happen at the school.
- Send home multiple invitations to and announcements about school events.
- Offer translated materials for families with limited English proficiency.

- Initiate a personal outreach system by asking parents to invite other parents to upcoming events.
- Establish a parents room or center that has a welcoming environment and serves as a resource center.
- Prepare a family newsletter to send home with students (or publish online) every month.
- Provide on-site translation services for non-English speaking families at school meetings or events.
- When possible provide food or snacks as part of activities.
- Invite individual parents to play specific roles and become active in planning and organizing activities at the school.


Research Backs Positive Family Involvement

Decades of research demonstrate a strong link between parent involvement and positive student achievement. The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools at SEDL (formerly Southwest Educational Development Laboratory) offers a series of research reviews compiling findings on family involvement. These reviews indicate that positive parent involvement influences better academic achievement, better attendance, improved social skills, and high graduation rates across all income levels and backgrounds. In fact, even if the involvement is not ideal, it benefits students to see their

families become involved in and value education.

The latest review, published in June 2008, describes findings from studies that delve further into the complexities of school-family partnerships. A few emerging trends identified by these studies include creating a welcoming environment, identifying misconceptions among stakeholders, and establishing structures that foster family involvement.

While many schools have enjoyed strong parent and community collaboration for years, many struggle with the conflicting demands on time, energy, and psyche that keep parents from being more involved. Looking at and adapting to the context of the school community is one fundamental part of creating a strong partnership environment.

A key concept is that students benefit when at least one adult believes in them, encourages them, and expects them to succeed. That adult can be a parent, a teacher, or an active community member. 

For National Network of Partnership Schools materials, visit: <http://www.partnershipschools.org>.

For Caring School Community materials, visit <http://www.devstu.org/csc>.

For resources from the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, visit the Web site at <http://www.sedl.org/connections>.



The term *parent* is used to include any legal guardian, such as a grandparent or stepparent, with whom a child lives.

Interview:

Joyce Epstein Wants Effective School Partnerships for All

Joyce Epstein, Ph.D., is director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. She also serves as director of the National Network of Partnership Schools and is a research professor of sociology, both at Johns Hopkins. She has researched school partnerships and their impact on student achievement for more than 25 years.

Q1: What benefits do school partnerships offer to schools and teachers?

Education systems are very goal-oriented in terms of academic and behavioral outcomes. Schools are besieged with the ultimate outcomes of test scores and graduation rates. Family and community partnership programs that are carefully designed and implemented will help schools to improve intermediate outcomes (such as positive school climate and strong attendance) that contribute to the ultimate goals. And, some involvement activities have direct effects on student learning, achievement, and other outcomes. In addition, teachers are more satisfied and classes more productive when families work with them.

When schools, families, and communities work well together, students see that many adults value education and genuinely want to help them succeed in school and beyond.

Q2: What impact has the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* had on school partnerships?

My colleagues and I are pleased that the *No Child Left Behind Act* emphasizes family and community involvement. It requires significant responsibility on the part of school districts (local education agencies) to help schools do this work. For example, local education agencies that receive more than \$500,000 in Title I funds must use at least 1 percent of those

funds for parental involvement activities. Further, 95 percent of those funds must be distributed to schools for school-based activities. However, there is flexibility for schools so that they can choose the activities and programs that best serve their students.

NCLB tells districts and schools to do the work of building partnerships. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) guides districts and schools in how to create successful and sustainable partnership programs.

Q3: What does the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) offer to school districts?

The network invites schools, districts, state departments of education, and organizations that work with districts and schools to become members and to receive useful materials and ongoing guidance. The backbone of our approach is a model that calls for district leaders to promote partnerships, school-based action teams, and use a framework of six types of parent and community involvement. This framework presents a variety of opportunities so that all parents get a chance to become involved in their children's education. For example, volunteering at the school is a great way to involve some adults, but it won't work for all of them so it is necessary to promote alternative methods. These types of involvement are described in NNPS printed materials and online.

NNPS encourages district-wide membership to create a culture that explicitly values good partnership. With this approach, leadership remains in place even when leaders of districts and schools change. In addition, it takes a district-wide approach to ensure that families continue to receive the information they need as their children move from one school to the next.



Joyce Epstein, Ph.D., is director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships.

New members in NNPS attend an initial training where they learn about the process and how to develop a one-year action plan. Each member district and school receives a copy of *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, which provides them with step-by-step guidelines to set and meet partnership goals. The new edition (published in fall 2008) contains a compact disc with some workshop materials translated into Spanish.

NNPS combines tested structures and processes for organizing any program with flexibility so that districts and schools identify the goals and practices that will meet the needs and interests of their students and families. District leaders and school teams learn how to focus their partnership activities on school improvement goals.

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NNPS collects data each year from all members and creates an annual report on program development, practices, and results. These annual reports are distributed to active NNPS members to help them assess their progress and learn how their activities compare to other schools' partnership activities.

Q4: Do schools need to use all six types of involvement?

Yes, it is important to note that the six types of involvement are used in conjunction with one another. It is not a hierarchy or a "pick and choose" menu. The system is designed this way to reach all parents (and many community members) because using only one approach will guarantee some families are left out.

Q5: What are examples of successful partnership efforts?

Each year NNPS publishes detailed summaries of promising partnership practices. These reports (arranged by topics, such as reading and literacy, math, and behavior) describe activities that schools are using to meet goals in those areas. Visitors to our Web site can read each report in full or search for activities by type of involvement, school level, or site location.

For instance, *Promising Partnership Practices 2007* includes a community

tors, tutors, and role models. Mentors participate in field trips, tutor students, and speak about topics like college preparation, career planning, and leadership at the school's monthly family nights. The program has led to increased trust and confidence on the part of students and more involvement on the part of parents.

There are many, many examples of creative and inclusive activities that create a sense of community and assist students through school. NNPS encourages schools, districts, states, and organizations to share their successes (as well as difficulties) to help promote partnership building.

Q6: Do NNPS members report improved safety or fewer problems with substance abuse among students as a result of partnership programs?

Many NNPS members set goals to increase school safety and health-related behaviors. Schools are provided the framework and structural requirements, plus flexibility to identify the goals they want to meet. Reaching those goals is up to the schools.

Our research shows that student behavior at school is positively influenced by focused, consistent family involve-


Q7: NNPS conducts district leadership institutes. What happens at these events?

District personnel come to an intensive two-day training to learn what is involved in serving as a leader for family partnership programs. They gather the knowledge and confidence necessary to lead their schools in establishing action teams and developing annual action plans based on the schools' goals. These institutes are small gatherings. We host a larger conference each fall that is broader in scope and gives participants a chance to connect with other districts and schools that are managing partnership programs well.

Q8: What do you see on the horizon for school partnerships?

I see more school districts realizing the importance of putting a focused, organized partnership program into place. It makes a world of difference when schools give parents real options to become involved. Just wishing for, or even demanding, participation will not guarantee success. Effective partnership programs require structure and established processes to be effective and sustainable.

I see an increase in evaluation so that schools can measure their progress and further establish partnerships as a basic component of a successful school.

District leadership is necessary and an emerging area for growth. Many districts currently employ a facilitator to provide the leadership necessary to build strong partnership programs. I hope to see more of these funded positions and continued connections and development through the use of research and NNPS conferences and trainings. 

For more information about the research on school, family, and community partnerships or the National Network of Partnership Schools, visit the Web site:

<http://www.partnershipschools.org>.

Effective partnership programs require structure and established processes to be effective and sustainable.

partnership program at Compton Middle School in Compton, Calif. The school experienced low levels of parent and community involvement before partnering with a faith-based program called Side by Side to create a school program called Community Partner. Set into place by the school's action team for partnerships, the program recruits parents and adults from the nearby community to serve as men-

ment. Specifically, analyses have shown that schools that used more activities to help parents understand the schools' expectations for student behavior and schools that used family and community volunteers to monitor student behavior reported lower numbers of students being sent to the principal and receiving detention or in-school suspension.

Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grants Cover a Lot of Ground



Since 1999, the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Justice have collaborated on the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative. Local education agencies or a consortium of local education agencies are eligible to apply for federal funds to support a variety of activities, curricula, programs, and services. To receive funding, school districts are required to partner with local law enforcement, the local public mental health authority, and juvenile justice agencies in developing a comprehensive, integrated plan to prevent violence and promote healthy childhood development.

Elements of Safe Schools/Healthy Students programs include:

1. Safe school environments and violence prevention activities;
2. Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug prevention activities;
3. Student behavioral, social, and emotional supports;
4. Mental health services; and
5. Early childhood social and emotional learning programs.

The 2007 Safe Schools/Healthy Students grants represent 27 grantees from 17 states and total more than \$37 million. The following programs illustrate SS/HS efforts that have been undertaken around the country in recent years:

Communications Plan Answers Challenges of Rapid Growth

Round Rock, Texas

Rapid growth in the Round Rock community compounded problems, such as underage drinking, truancy, and school violence. The Round Rock SS/HS initiative developed a communications plan and identified parent involvement as a top priority to address these concerns. As a result, parent centers were established on every school campus. Paid parent support specialists were hired to run the centers and connect parents with information, services, classes, and volunteer opportunities. Public service announcements were developed encouraging parents to volunteer at their children's schools. An anti-bullying campaign and community-wide social marketing campaign about underage drinking were launched. The strategic communications plan succeeded in making the initiative and its efforts widely known in the community.

Social Marketing to Help Make Schools Safer

Canton, Ohio

A long-held rivalry between the two high schools in Canton contributed to mistrust and division among the community. Through a partnership with a local university, Canton students and the Canton SS/HS initiative implemented a social marketing campaign to change the way the community views the two high schools and the students who attend them. Six public service announcements were produced using the student-created tagline "Dodge the Stereotypes." As a result of the social marketing campaign, public perception of the two schools no longer rests on outdated stereotypes. Further, the active engagement of students in the campaign helped create more positive, safer school cultures.

Parent Involvement Conference

Mount Vernon, N.Y.

To bring diverse members of the community together, the Mount Vernon SS/HS initiative organized a parent involvement conference to showcase collaboration and its positive impact. More than 200 community members, including parents, teachers, community agencies, businesses, and local government officials, who had never worked together to support parental involvement, participated in the conference. The conference yielded many positive results when, for example, new community partnerships were established. For instance, the forum led to increased awareness of the Mount Vernon Early Childhood Network, a group dedicated to improving services for families and young children.



A comprehensive community-wide and school-wide approach promotes healthy child development and reduces school violence and drug use. The safety and well-being of the nation's children can be enhanced through the work of partnerships that bring together schools, families, and community organizations and that offer a broad-based, preventive approach to violence and drug use. The Safe Schools/Healthy Students model of collaboration from the federal level encourages communities to invest in collaborative prevention efforts. Although the SS/HS sites used different strategies, all of them brought together diverse stakeholders from school and community to solve problems, share resources, and share responsibility.

News from OSDFS

OSDFS Announces New National Programs Director

Norris Dickard has joined the OSDFS as director, National Programs. Prior to joining OSDFS, he was a fellow and director of the Urban Markets Initiative at the Brookings Institution. His past work experience also includes: director of public policy at the Benton Foundation, principal at the Lewin Group, and administrator at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Grantees Find Innovative Ways to Include Parents and Community Members

The OSDFS Grants to Reduce Alcohol Abuse are awarded to local education agencies to develop or implement innovative and effective prevention programs. Among the grantees from recent years are many that credit an emphasis on parent and community involvement as part of their success. Below is a sampling of outreach strategies a few of them have used.

Boulder Valley School District Boulder, Colo.

The Parent Engagement Network (PEN) developed as a grass-roots effort among parents in the Boulder Valley School District, home to more than 28,000 students, to engage the community and prevent high-risk behavior among youths. Having established a partnership with the school district and the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance, PEN continues to provide an active core of outreach, education, and engagement opportunities that draws in thousands of community members each year.

Popular among PEN activities is the series of Community Conversations held monthly during the school year. Previous topics include effective parenting skills, resiliency, and talking with kids about risky behavior. In addition to providing best practices and research-based information, the sessions allow time for networking and discussion among participants.

East Aurora School District #131 Aurora, Ill.

"The key is to use existing resources. Look at what is right in front of you," says Yvonne Pena who champions a three-prong approach to alcohol abuse prevention in the western suburbs of Chicago. The school district, serving about 13,500 students, partnered with the city of Aurora to implement the LifeSkills Training program, the Strengthening Families program, and to offer individual counseling to students to strengthen their self-confidence and increase healthy decision-making.

Recognized as an integral part of the project's success are the training and use of bilingual parent liaisons at each school in the district. These parents received training to help facilitate small group workshops, increase Latino family involvement, and encourage fathers to be involved in their children's education. The liaisons helped to organize and promote community service projects for the students and guest speakers for the adults.

The district sponsored frequent public presentations on topics like parent-child communication, alcohol and drug abuse prevention, and ways to support student success (areas of interest identified by the parents). The project culminated in a community town hall meeting to raise awareness about underage drinking and build capacity to continue the work beyond the grant's end.

Giving parents resources and then encouraging them to take ownership for their part in the process have worked well for the district.

Tulare County Office of Education Visalia, Calif.

The CHOICES office at the Tulare County Office of Education began implementing the Reconnecting Youth (RY) program in 2002, covering 36 high schools in school districts that serve 90,000 students from culturally and geographically diverse populations.

The RY program focuses on four personal development skills: self-esteem enhancement, decision-making, personal control, and interpersonal communication. Including parents and immediate family members is an important factor in addressing the whole child. Recognizing that a significant percentage of the parents in Tulare county do not speak English and feel more comfortable in smaller settings, classes and events are kept small, 12 students per class, to encourage family participation.

A highlight for many of the semester-long classes is an RY parent night. The students organize and prepare dinner for these events and typically give presentations on their accomplishments and future goals. Students are often recognized during these events by their RY teacher, peers, and program staff for their accomplishments in academic performance, attendance, and participation in school activities. Because the parent nights are organized by their children, the parents are more likely to attend.

A bilingual staff member works closely with the RY teachers, students, school staff, and parents, serving as a liaison between the school, the family, and the community. This relationship extends beyond the end of class participation, as students are encouraged to remain active in service learning opportunities throughout their remaining high school years.

OSDFS Relocates Program Offices

The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools recently relocated a few blocks west of the U.S. Department of Education Headquarters to the following address:

OSDFS
Potomac Center Plaza (PCP)
550 12th St., S.W., 10th Floor
Washington, DC 20202-6450
(202) 245-7896

All OSDFS e-mail addresses remain the same, but phone numbers and room numbers changed. Please refer to the Web site at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/contacts.html>.

Research Findings

“Family and Community Involvement in Schools: Results From the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006”

Shannon Michael, Patricia Dittus, and Joyce Epstein

Journal of School Health, October 2007

Review of survey results on family and community involvement in school health programs found that:

- More than half of districts and schools communicated information to families about school health program components; and
- Teachers in 55.5 percent of required health education classes gave students homework or projects that involved family members.

Analysis was performed on data from the *School Health Policies and Programs Study* conducted in 2006 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com>

“A Case Study of the Partnership Schools Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Model”

Joyce L. Epstein

The Elementary School Journal,

November 2005

An increase in the number of families and community partners involved in students' education at school and at home had a significant impact on academic performance. Key findings from a three-year study of an elementary school using the Partnership Schools Comprehensive School Reform model indicate that the model helped the school to:

- Improve the percentage of students who attained proficiency in math, reading, and writing compared to schools not using the model; and
- Close its gap in test scores with the district as a whole, despite more affluent schools that had higher test scores in the base year.

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu>

“High School Outreach and Family Involvement”

Beth S. Simon

Social Psychology of Education, June 2004

Analysis of individual-level reports from 11,000 parents of U.S. high school students looked at perceptions of school outreach and of their own involvement in their children's education. Findings revealed that, regardless of students' background and achievement, high schools' outreach positively and significantly predicted parents' involvement in a range of parenting, volunteering, and learning-at-home activities. Family involvement contributed to positive results for students, including higher achievement, better attendance, more course credits earned, and better preparation for class.
<http://www.springerlink.com>

Resources

Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

U.S. Department of Education

This center provides information and resources to help faith-based and community organizations navigate the application process for federal grants. While there are no special grant programs dedicated solely to faith-based or community organizations, the center describes the grant programs open to them and updates information on grant announcements, workshops, and partnership ideas.

Check the center's materials at:

<http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/list/fbci/index.html>.

Partnership for Hispanic Family Learning: White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans

White House Initiative and U.S. Department of Education

A national network of public and private organizations that provides Hispanic families with resources and tools to help prepare their children for academic success. The initiative disseminates educational information in the form of a weekly e-newsletter on new publications, funding opportunities, upcoming events, news, and key organizations and programs.

Visit the site at <http://www.yic.gov>.

School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action

Epstein, J.L., Sanders, M.G., Simon, B.S., Salinas, K.C., Janshohn, N.R., & Van Voorhis, F.L., 2002

This handbook is a step-by-step guide for state, district, and school leaders to organize and implement positive and permanent programs for school, family, and community collaboration.

One copy is provided to each school or organization that joins the National Network of Partnership Schools (<http://www.partnershipschools.org>). Additional copies may be purchased from <http://www.corwinpress.com>.

The Family-School Partnership Lab

Vanderbilt University

The lab is a research unit dedicated to the scientific investigation of relationships among families, schools, and children. The researchers at Vanderbilt developed and continue to test a model that describes the process at work in parental involvement in their children's education. They also present findings about the development and evaluation of interventions aimed at increasing parental involvement.

View the lab's research findings at:

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/Peabody/family-school>.



University of Colorado at Boulder
Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence
Campus Box 483
Boulder, CO 80309
(303) 492-1032
(303) 443-3297 FAX
E-mail: informationcnl@thechallenge.org

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Questions and Comments

I enjoyed the articles on truancy and suggestions for reaching out to parents. Sometimes it seems like an uphill battle with certain students but my school takes a real interest in making sure the kids make it to class. We try to connect with the parents by phone or e-mail right away if one of our students is absent without an excuse.

—Christine L., New York

•••

It is amazing how easy it is for kids to miss school and what a difference just a phone call can make. As a teacher, I know it's not always easy to get parents on the phone but as a parent I want to know if my son is skipping even one class! Thanks for writing about the problems with truancy.

—Morgan B., Tennessee

I would like to see issues of legal significance [such as] cell phone abuse, special education litigation, etc.

—Anonymous Web comment

•••

Continue with the great work. I share your periodical with our EOP [emergency operations planning] committee.

—Anonymous Web comment

•••

I was concerned when talking about school violence—especially the Amish incident and Virginia tech (and several other shootings)—the issue of gender was not discussed. [In] both incidents the person attacked women. Not addressing this is a deep concern.

—Anonymous Web comment

Send questions, comments, or suggestions to *The Challenge* via e-mail at informationcnl@thechallenge.org.

To ensure the articles in the newsletter meet your needs, the writing staff needs your feedback. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey found on *The Challenge* Web site—it's confidential and takes only a couple of minutes to complete.

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