

Families Matter: The Impact of Families on Academic Achievement

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Interest in Academic Achievement

- ▶ I have a personal and professional interest in understanding academic achievement because
 - I am the parent of three children,
 - I have served as the President of a School Board,
 - and I have spent my professional career trying to understand adolescents, including their academic achievement.
- ▶ As a parent, I want my children to succeed but as a community member, I need all of our children to succeed in school because we must have a well-educated work force if we are going to compete in the global economy.

Relevance to Policy Makers

- ▶ By now we know that we are falling behind many nations when it comes to educating our children.
- ▶ In his book, *The World is, Flat* Thomas Friedman warns us that other countries are eager to take business away from our country so we need our children to do well in school so that we can remain competitive.

Family Influences on Academic Achievement



Family Influences on Educational Attainment

- ▶ Michelle Naylor from the U.S. Department of Education Educational Resource Information Center identified seven family influences on educational attainment:
 - 1) geographic location,
 - 2) genetic inheritance,
 - 3) family background,
 - 4) socioeconomic status,
 - 5) family composition,
 - 6) parenting style, and
 - 7) parent work-related attitudes

--based on Splete and Freeman-George (1985)

Families Matter

- ▶ We know that academic achievement is influenced by facilities, curriculum, class size, school size, peer influences, media messages, and other factors.
- ▶ Families have a fundamental influence on the academic achievement of children.

Influence of Family Socioeconomic Status

- ▶ We know that the socioeconomic status of families has a small influence on academic performance, but other family factors seem to have a greater influence.
- ▶ For example, Scott Hunsaker and his colleagues from the National Research Center (NRC) on the Gifted and Talented and his colleagues conclude that academic achievement is influenced by families
 - that support education and
 - promote academic achievement.

Influence of Single Family Households

- ▶ Scott Hunsaker and his colleagues from the National Research Center (NRC) on the Gifted and Talented investigated academic achievement associated with children raised in single parent households.
- ▶ Although children from single parent families struggle academically, those who have support from extended family members do well.

Conclusions from the National Research Center (NRC)

- ▶ Academically competent students exist in all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
- ▶ The existence of poverty or single parent family situations does not coincide with a lack of interest in academic achievement.
 - Families of economically disadvantaged students need to be dealt with individually and not within the context of social stereotypes.
- ▶ The school needs to be aware that the culture of the family may not match that of the school.
 - Identification of strengths and interpretations of behaviors need to be sensitive to these cultural differences.

Policy Implications of NRC Research on Gifted & Talented

- ▶ Don't give up on students from single parent families or those who live in poverty.
- ▶ Cultivate an attitude in schools of cooperation with parents.
 - As a former school board member, it has been my experience that parents may be blamed if there are problems but rarely invited to be **partners** in education.
 - Invite extended family members to parent-teacher conferences and school related activities.
- ▶ Encourage educators to be sensitive to cultural differences.

Home Environment



Family Characteristics

- ▶ There seem to be lasting academic benefits for preschool children who come from homes with the following characteristics:
 - parenting style that is structured but flexible
 - parents hold positive attitudes toward school and learning.
- ▶ Benefits seem to include the following (from Ziegler, 1987):
 - higher school achievement rates
 - higher attendance rates
 - lower delinquency and dropout rates
 - increased high school completion and college university admission rates

Home Environment Influences on Preschool Children

- ▶ For preschoolers, academic achievement seems to be influenced by a home environment that includes
 - stimulation to learn,
 - enriching social/cultural experiences,
 - exposure to problem-solving skills, and
 - parents who read to their children.

Family Characteristics: Policy Implications

- ▶ Invest in preschool education.
 - Provide opportunities for all children to participate in a stimulating environment.
 - Provide opportunities to all children to participate in enriching social/cultural experiences.
- ▶ Work with at risk families to cultivate positive attitudes about education.
- ▶ Invest in parenting programs such as Bavolek's Nurturing Parenting Program.
 - Teach positive parenting.
 - Teach parents how to teach problem-solving skills.

Family Attitudes about School and Learning

- ▶ Research consistently suggests that family attitudes about school and learning have a significant impact on academic achievement. Children seem motivated when
 - their parents show an interest in their schooling,
 - set high expectations, and
 - offer support (Stevenson & Newman, 1986).
- ▶ Academic Attitudes and Expectations: Parent's attitudes and expectations influence children's attitudes about achievement. This has been found to be especially true for girls (Henderson, 1987; Bloom, 1981).

Policy Implications Associated with Learning Attitudes

- ▶ Schools can help promote positive attitudes about school, recognizing that
 - Parents trapped in a cycle of poverty may have had negative experiences of school that are communicated to their children.
 - Parents with limited education may not feel comfortable in schools.
- ▶ Schools need to be flexible in scheduling conferences and activities that are sensitive to those who have limited education and work in service jobs where there is limited job flexibility.

Summary

- ▶ Families matter.
- ▶ Home environment and family attitudes about learning fundamentally influences academic achievement.
- ▶ Policy implications:
 - Investment in preschool education that includes parent education, stimulating environments, and enriching experiences
 - Encourage schools to reach out to parents as partners to cultivate investment in education.