
Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform

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The vision of higher standards to be achieved by every student is the most ambitious challenge American public education has ever faced. For the first time in our history, the nation has adopted policies that promise all students—rich and poor, no matter where they live, the language of their family, or how long it takes them to learn—a quality education.

We know how to create a quality educational environment for all children, teachers, and parents. Participants at a 1997 national conference on advancing family and parental involvement in school reform agreed the following are required:

- Families, schools, and communities working together for children.
- Accountability measures that hold everyone responsible for improving student achievement.
- Strategies that increase the capacities of educators, families, and students to teach and learn to high standards.

In schools that try to embody these characteristics, neither the schools nor parents working alone can help children make noticeable progress. Quality education for all comes about through informed, focused, and collaborative efforts by educators, students, and parents who hold high expectations for themselves.

Unfortunately, such schools exist in only a few places. As a result, parents who can afford to are seriously considering opting out of traditional public schools because they can't sacrifice their children to such slow change. About 44% of parents responding to the 1997 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll approved of letting parents choose a private school at public expense. Three years earlier, only 24% approved of the idea.

Even the most ardent believers in raising standards for schools and students worry about how long it is taking to move to a public school system committed to the success of every child. The slow pace of change allows critics of public education to press for more radical changes that could undermine support of public education even further.

The greatest failures of all

The children of the poor are most affected by the failure of reforms to generate the improvement they promised. According to the Education Trust (1996), high-poverty schools have more unqualified teachers, offer fewer college prep courses, lack instructional resources, and have lower achievement scores. When

students, no matter their color or family income level, have access to rigorous math and science courses, they score higher on such tests as the SAT and ACT.

Reports show a consistent gap between the performance of White students and that of African American and Hispanic students. However, they do not report in detail on the differences in opportunities that students in low-resource schools experience every day. The impression left is that poor children just can't do the work. In truth, the opportunities to do the work generally are not available.

Early interventions with failing students are critical, but our concerns are much broader and deeper. Assuring academic success begins with restructuring the basic experiences of students in classrooms. Reducing the failure of reform efforts to lack of money or improper teacher assignments diverts attention from the overall need to change the learning environment significantly.

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In some communities, a few parents serve on the task forces and committees organized to plan changes. In some places they are at the table when important decisions about staffing and resources are made. They may be invited to come to schools to hear about what standards mean or learn about new kinds of assessments.

Yet, in most communities parents generally are neither involved nor well informed. Because they are not included in significant planning, parents are left to concern themselves with peripheral issues such as worrying about the use of calculators or the time spent in noisy group work. Without chances to engage in more thoughtful conversations, parents have limited knowledge about standards, for example, or how critical thinking helps students learn basic skills. As a result, many parents are unsure of, even alienated from, what is happening under the label of school reform.

Despite national and state flurries of attention to greater parent involvement as part of the reform movement, families are most often considered adjuncts to the intellectual work of the school. Parents need to listen, school people seem to say, rather than be listened to. Schools are more interested in teaching parenting skills than in learning the insights parents have about their children.

A recent Public Agenda (1993) survey found

- 60% of Americans believed parents and the community should have more say in basic decisions within schools,
- only 25% of teachers approved of greater parental inclusion in decisions, and
- less than 15% of administrators thought it was a good idea.

However, studies show that parental involvement is crucial to the success of reforms. That is why the typical kinds of parent involvement need restructuring, too, so that when schools and parents do have opportunities to come together, the conversations and decisions will be meaningful and important. They should be talking about visions and school improvement as well as about PTA dues and field trips.

The parent factor in student achievement

It is common sense that parents' interest in and support of their children's learning at home results in higher achievement at school. The research shows when parents have many different kinds of opportunities to be involved in the school, their children go further in school and the schools they attend get better results.

In a review of the research, Henderson and Berla (1994) found that the children who are furthest behind make the greatest gains in achievement when their parents are part of school life. When parents understand the purposes and expected outcomes of standards-based reforms, they will be even more able to support at home what teachers and administrators are committed to at school.

Henderson and Berla (1994) found these benefits for students when schools support families' engagement in their children's learning at home and at school:

- Higher grades and test scores.
- Better attendance and more homework done.
- Fewer placements in special education.
- More positive attitudes and behavior.
- Higher graduation rates.
- Greater enrollment in postsecondary education.

The benefits extend to families, too. Parents develop more confidence in the school. The teachers of their children have higher opinions of them as parents and higher expectations of their children. As a result, parents develop more confidence, not only in helping their children learn, but also in themselves as parents. Often, the involvement encourages parents to seek more education.

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There are three primary ways parents contribute to moving schools toward quality standards and higher student achievement. These are pushing the system, helping design local school improvement, and taking part in the parent involvement opportunities created by the reforms.

Pushing the system

Parents need to press for higher standards and a fair, effective system of accountability. They must insist on high-quality public schools and press their local school to adopt school reform. If traditional schools are failing, they should create

alternative public schools. Where parents push the system, improvements result.

- In Kentucky, 20,000 parents gathered at local meetings to create a vision that resulted in the Kentucky Education Reform Act, one of the most comprehensive in the country.
- In an El Paso elementary school, where 90% of the students come from homes where Spanish is spoken, a community organization set up accountability sessions at the school. After 2 years, 70% of students now pass the state reading test.
- At the almost all African American Slowe School in Washington, D.C., parents now sit on all school improvement committees, and student test scores are 20 to 30 points above the national averages on standardized tests.
- In Brooklyn, activist parents chose a new principal who supported creating alternatives to the large, institutional schools where their children were not doing well academically. The school now is a campus of four small alternative schools, each run by a teacher-director and a steering committee of parents and teachers. Student test scores have climbed steadily.

Parents should monitor reform results and ask the hard questions.

Helping design local school improvement

Parents should participate in school improvement committees to design and implement reforms. They should monitor results and ask the hard questions. They should check student work to make sure it reflects high standards and high performance. They should insist on report cards designed so parents can see how their students are progressing. This kind of involvement shows results:

- In Louisville, parents and teachers revamped the school's Title I program, bringing in Reading Recovery to the primary grades and insisting that all children learn to read by the end of third grade. Test scores are up 50% in 4 years.
- Norwood Park School in Chicago identified a 57% mobility rate as a barrier and held community discussions to find ways to keep families in the school. In response, the school added an all-day kindergarten program and built strong relationships with families. Mobility went down to 8% in 3 years. Achievement scores are up almost 50%.
- At Ysleta Elementary School in El Paso, the school standards team of teachers, the principal, support staff, and parents wrote scoring guides so that students, teachers, and parents alike could recognize high- and low-quality student work. Students use the scoring guides to rate their work and explain it to each other and to their parents.

- In a Kentucky school, parents worked with teachers to design a new report card that lists the state's learning goals for each subject so parents can understand their children's scores.

Taking part in the parent involvement opportunities created by the reforms

Parents should participate in school governance councils that set policy, develop new programs, and decide how to address low student achievement. They should encourage other parents to become actively engaged in the school. They can help obtain resources to improve the school. And they should attend staff development sessions. These actions produce results:

- At a Los Angeles school, members of the school governance council, half of whom are parents, created a 200-day, year-round academic program and reduced class size to 20 students for each teacher in grades 1–3. The council also designed a family center, a one-stop shop for social services, and a career ladder program for parents.
- In a Boston elementary school, more than 25% of children have significant disabilities requiring supplemental and supportive services. Parents created a family center and a parent outreach program. They offer workshops about standards-based education and how children's programs can be modified to enable them to meet the expected standards. They also offer language instruction, organize ways for parents to help out in classrooms, and provide opportunities for networking.
- At a high school in rural Tennessee, parents rallied to save their school after the county decided not to renovate the 50-year-old building. The school is now an agricultural service center where students offer services such as equipment repair and cattle weighing. Local family farming businesses provide opportunities for students to learn math, science, social studies, and writing skills.
- In New York City, many new, small schools have been organized around the city and offer help to other parents, teachers, and students interested in forming smaller schools.
- In Texas, more than 600 teachers and parents have attended conferences on school reforms.

For school reforms to bring about success for all students, efforts such as those described above must multiply by the thousands. Whenever reform efforts reached a peak in the past, researcher Richard Elmore points out, those committed to change usually were gathered up and concentrated in one place. The isolation of these reforms meant that their innovation withered away. As some of the examples cited above demonstrate, parents often need outside help to organize their attempts to get reforms that have staying power and significantly change the learning environment for their children.

We do not underestimate the challenge of building respect between educators and parents so they can work together on needed reforms. However, we are concerned that time is short. We must demonstrate that higher standards and other reforms can take hold in public education programs serving all children, including those from low-income families and those with significant disabilities. Critics of public education have launched well-funded efforts to turn parents' disillusionment with schools into a reason for abandoning public education altogether. Policymakers and taxpayers who see little progress may withdraw their support for public education.

The public school reform movement cannot go much further without the kind of parent involvement and support called for in this report. Our message about transforming public schools is urgent. It must be done, done right, and done quickly.

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What ALL Parents Should Know and Be Able to Do About School Reform

- Participate in creating a vision for the school that sets high expectations for all.
- Take part in developing a system to report on student progress and participate in holding the schools accountable for the results.
- Be involved in monitoring and analyzing data on student achievement.
- Be involved in decisions that affect their children's opportunities to learn, such as how resources are used, what the learning objectives are, and what instructional strategies ought to be used to accommodate individual differences.
- Know what needs to change in teaching and learning to ensure their children learn well.
- Know what their children should be learning and know it well enough to ask good questions.
- Accept responsibility for providing support at home that will help their children learn to high expectations.
- Understand their children's rights to receive a high-quality education and their own rights to be involved—and be vigilant about exercising those rights.
- Know how to find and use outside help when their children are not receiving the kind of education that will enable them to meet high standards.

References

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