



A Great Education Starts at Home

Increasing Parent Involvement in Education

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Introduction

If there's one thing that just about everyone involved in education agrees on, it's that when parents are actively and constructively involved in their children's education it can make a very big difference in how well students do in school. Parents (or grandparents or guardians) are not only their children's first teachers, they are the only teachers kids have throughout their entire childhood. Meanwhile schoolteachers must contend with large classes and tight budgets, meaning they simply cannot give every child the kind of individualized attention that would be ideal. Research tells us that schools that have a lot of parent involvement are frequently more successful than those that don't. These are just some of the reasons why it's so important that parents or guardians play a major role in supporting their children's education.

Unfortunately, not enough parents are meaningfully involved in our community, and our children are suffering as a result.

Low parent involvement can be caused by a number of things, including:

- Poor communication between teachers and parents about what their children are studying and how well they are doing.
- Households in which parents are working multiple jobs to make ends meet, or in which other obstacles or problems make it hard for parents to be actively involved.
- Parents who are not aware of the most important things they can do, from preschool through high school, to help their children succeed in school.
- Parents who feel intimidated by or unwelcome at the schools.

Today's conversation is about understanding the obstacles to parent involvement in our community and finding strategies and ideas that will increase parent involvement and help students succeed.

To help focus our discussion in the most productive way possible, let's assume that some parents are already very involved in their children's education and therefore do not need special attention, while others have so many personal problems that they will probably never be as involved in their children's education as we would like.

Let's also assume that most parents do not fall into either of these categories, meaning there's a large middle group of parents who are not as involved as they could or should be but who might become more involved with the right kind of information, opportunities, and support. Today's conversation will focus primarily on this middle group of parents and what we can do to increase their involvement.

With this as our starting point, the question is: What can we do in our schools and community to inspire and help more parents to become more involved in their children's education?

To help you and your neighbors think and talk about this important topic, this guide describes three different approaches to increasing and improving parent involvement. Which approach, or combination of approaches, is the best fit for your community and promises to have the greatest impact?

As we consider our options, we should keep in mind that we cannot do everything at once and will have to set priorities—better to do a few things well than to do many things poorly. What should our priorities be as we work to improve parent involvement in our local schools?

Approach A: Have high expectations of parents and educate them about the most important ways they can help their children succeed in school

Years ago, when many of today's parents were growing up, the critical role that parents could play in helping children succeed in school was not as well understood as it is today. As a result, many of today's parents were not raised by strongly involved parents and simply do not know all the things they can and should be doing to help their kids succeed in school.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Strongly encourage parents to meet with teachers, in person or by phone, at the beginning of the school year to review materials sent to them about what their children are expected to learn in every course.
- Provide parents with simple checklists throughout the year with information about the most important ways they can help their children succeed in school.
- Make sure there is good communication between teachers and parents throughout the school year (and not just at the end) about how well students are doing.
- Provide adult-education opportunities to help parents learn skills that will assist them in helping their children, such as computer skills, adult literacy, and homework help tutorials.

Those who like this approach say:

“Parents do not magically know what they can do to support their children’s education. The schools and community should do a much better job of providing parents with information about how they can help their children succeed.”

But others say:

“Providing information and training is not enough. We’ve got to break down the barriers between many schools and parents.”

Approach B: Break down the barriers between schools and parents

For a variety of reasons having to do with history, language, culture, and group relations, many parents in our community may not feel connected to the schools and even the larger community in which they live. They may be intimidated by talking to teachers, assume they're not welcome, or have negative memories of their own school experience, and this can be a major obstacle to their becoming more involved in their children's education.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Make sure the schools are welcoming and helpful to all parents, with convenient parking, clear signs showing where things are, and friendly, well-trained staff.
- Translate school information into the languages that parents may speak at home with their children, and schedule meetings at times convenient for residents with different kinds of work schedules.
- Make special efforts to reach uninvolved parents through home visits by teachers, parent-to-parent support groups, or other innovative strategies.
- Hold community-wide celebrations and cultural festivals at the schools and provide family health services and fitness classes on school grounds, so that the schools become centers of community life.

Those who like this approach say:

"Many parents in our community are disconnected from the schools, and we need to do more to make them feel welcome and connected if we want them to be more involved."

But others say:

"The schools are already busy just trying to educate kids. Should they really be spending time and resources on these sorts of efforts?"

Approach C: Leave parent involvement to parents so that the schools can concentrate on teaching

The schools should not be spending energy and resources on getting parents involved, which is something parents should be doing anyway. And they certainly shouldn't be using low parent involvement as an excuse for low student achievement.

Instead, the schools should focus on teaching students successfully, whether parents are involved or not. This means concentrating on things like teacher quality and curriculum. And it means providing support that compensates for the fact that some parents are not able or willing to be as involved in their children's education as we'd like.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Direct energy and resources that would have gone toward parent outreach to improving teacher training and developing a more effective curriculum.
- Provide more services at school for those kids who are not getting their needs met at home, such as nutritious meals at the beginning and end of the day (and not just at lunch), medical checkups, and social services.
- Create tutoring and mentoring programs through community volunteers or student peer groups to make up for uninvolved parents, so that all kids have the extra help, encouragement, and role models they need.
- Provide safe, healthy, and productive places for kids to spend their free time before school starts and after school lets out.

Those who like this approach say:

“Schools should focus on their primary mission of teaching at school rather than trying to get parents to do things they ought to be doing anyway.”

But others say:

“Not only is parent involvement too important to ignore, the more we increase it the less we'll need to spend on expensive programs to compensate for parents who are missing.”

The Choices in Brief

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Have high expectations of parents and educate them about the most important ways they can help their children succeed in school

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A Note on Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Guides

Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations, discussion groups, and classrooms and by journalists, researchers, policy makers, community leaders, and individuals looking to better understand and discuss solutions to a variety of public and community issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons, and trade-offs. The different perspectives are drawn both from how the public thinks about an issue as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates. Users of the guides should be encouraged to put additional ideas on the table or consider combining elements from different choices in unique ways. They are designed as a starting point for constructive dialogue and problem-solving.

Using this guide in a community conversation, discussion group, or classroom setting

After discussing the choices, it can be helpful to first summarize the conversation and then bridge to action-oriented deliberations, as follows:

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today? This is a brainstorming phase of the discussion.
2. Among the action ideas we've discussed, how should we prioritize them?
3. How should we follow up on today's conversation? Are there individual steps we can make? Are there things we can do collectively?

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision-making by leaders is well-informed by people's values, ideas, and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities, and empower citizens.

Want to Learn More?

Want to find out more about Public Agenda's distinct approach to improving public life? Interested in connecting with other citizens to address critical issues? If so, you can check out our online community and sign up to find out about activities that bring people together to strengthen their communities. Email us at publicengagement@publicagenda.org. You can also keep in touch by becoming a fan on Facebook or by following us on Twitter @PublicAgenda.

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