

RESEARCH BRIEFS

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Personal Responsibility, Parental Involvement and Success in School

The Importance of Student Responsibility

There is an extensive body of research showing that students who assume responsibility for their own learning are more motivated, more self-reliant and more effective learners. Unfortunately, we often brush these facts aside when we discuss strategies to improve education. In fact, the United States is one of the few countries in which teachers and school administrators are singled out when students fail to achieve. Many acknowledge the importance of parental involvement and personal responsibility and effort as prominent factors affecting a student's success or failure in school. However, the nation largely ignores these factors in discussions about educational reform.

In our efforts to improve public education, we often turn first to the institution of public education itself and suggest all sorts of changes. Over the past few decades reform proposals have included some of the following: longer school days and school years; smaller class sizes; site-based decision-making; smaller schools; decentralization; mayoral takeover of large districts; leaner school and district bureaucracies; integrated instruction; tracking; charter schools; vouchers; increased accountability; magnet schools; alternative schools; standards-based education; higher standards; performance assessments; project-based learning; direct instruction; better professional development for teachers; improved teacher preparation programs; alternative routes to certification; merit pay; student test-based teacher evaluations; eliminating teacher tenure; creating new teacher evaluation systems; reforming teachers' unions; test-based school accountability; closing "failing" schools; and having low-performing schools taken over by the state or by private companies.

In few if any of these approaches do we see a systematic effort to integrate parental or community support to assist children with their education.

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The Importance of Parental Involvement

When students are motivated and take responsibility for their education, the source of that motivation is almost always the child's family/parent(s). Anne Henderson, of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, is recognized as one of the foremost experts on the effects of parent involvement on student success in school. In April, 2010, she testified before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and made the following observations:

The evidence is clear—schools cannot close the achievement gap without partnering with families. Over 40 years of research has demonstrated that engaging families in their children's education improves student achievement, attendance, and behavior, and increases graduation rates. Children spend 70 percent of their waking hours outside of school, and how they spend that time is critical to their success in school. Modest investments in increasing families' knowledge and skills to support learning can leverage our larger investment in teacher quality and school improvement. Despite this strong evidence, there is a lack of capacity at the state, district, and school level for engaging families, and federal and state policies offer few incentives to remedy the situation.

Teachers have repeatedly identified parent involvement as one of the most important ways to improve education, yet they also list parent engagement as the area where they feel least prepared and least satisfied with their own performance. Instead, schools often commit "random acts of parent involvement"—a back-to-school night or a flyer home on parent teacher conferences. Rather than focusing on scaling up innovative, research-based practices that engage families, districts and states tend to direct their resources toward monitoring compliance with the law.¹

In a 1996 publication that is still relevant today, Henderson nicely summarized what is known about the importance and value of parent involvement in the education of their children.² Significant points are included below.

- If low-income parents are involved in their child's preschool program,

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students at age 19 are 40 percent more likely to graduate from high school, 35 percent more likely to be employed, 55 percent less likely to be on welfare, and 40 percent less likely to have been arrested.

- The most effective parent involvement programs are guided by these ideas: all parents have strengths and know they are important; all parents can contribute to their children's education and the school; all parents can learn how to help their children in school; all parents have useful ideas and insights about their children; parents should be consulted in all decisions about how to involve parents; and all parents really do care deeply about their children.
- Families whose children do well in school often have common characteristics, they: establish a daily routine; monitor their children's out-of school activities; model the value of learning, self-discipline, and hard work; express high expectations for their child's success; encourage learning and progress in school; stay in touch with their child's teachers; read, write, and have frequent conversations; and use community resources like libraries, recreation centers and after-school programs.
- When parents are involved at school, children's' attitudes toward school improve: kids who do well in school feel they have some control over their life; they feel that if they work hard, they will learn and do well, and they believe that other people will recognize and reward them (they know they are somebody).

Common sense tips for parents

There are hundreds of websites devoted to helping parents become more involved in the education of their children. Many are hosted by schools; others are supported by child and parent advocacy organizations. Examples of some of the more common recommendations follow.

- Create a positive attitude toward learning. Get to know your child's teachers, and work with them.
- Celebrate the successes of your child. Don't focus on the failures.

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- Attend parent-teacher conferences; visit your child's school; if possible, volunteer to help.
- Establish high (yet reasonable) expectations for your child. Remind your child that success in school is mostly due to hard work and that success is not a matter of luck or "being born smart."
- Discuss what happens in class and in school. Know what your child is learning.
- Read aloud to your children when they are young. Listen to them read. Encourage them to read as they get older. Discuss what you read. Take your children to the library.
- See that your children do their homework. Set aside a special place for homework (not in front of the television set) and make sure homework is done on a regular basis; get involved in your child's homework. Assist your child, but don't do the homework.
- Help your children pursue interesting activities outside of school.
- For older students, limit employment during the school year. Research shows that when students work more than about 15 hours each week, their grades begin to suffer.
- Limit television viewing. Research shows that U.S. children watch more television than children in nearly all other countries. Research shows that students who watch a lot of television don't do as well in school.
- See to it that your child starts each day with a good breakfast.
- Make sure that your child arrives at school on time and consistently attends school.

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Notes

¹ Executive Summary of Statement by Anne T. Henderson, Senior Consultant Community Organizing and Engagement, Annenberg Institute for School Reform Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, April 22, 2010. Available online:

<http://www.ncpie.org/pubs/AnneHendersonTestimonyExecutiveSummaryApril2010.pdf>.

Other sources on the value of parent involvement include the following:

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>,

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/products/spotlight-parental-involvement.html>, and

http://www.k12.hi.us/~konawahs/research_on_parent_involvement.htm

² See http://sa067.k12.sd.us/Documents/Parent_Involvement.htm.

Also see What Research Says about Parent Involvement in Children's Education in Relation to Academic Achievement. Available online:

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Final_Parent_Involvement_Fact_Sheet_14732_7.pdf