

Redefining Parent Involvement: Helping Our Children Succeed

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On the face of it, increasing parent involvement seems to be a worthy goal for today's schools. It is one of our country's eight National Education Goals – a set of public policy objectives backed by Presidents Bush and Clinton, the governors of 50 states, and all manner of business and education groups, parents, teachers, and policy makers. And, for many years, research has shown that schools with high parent involvement have better performing students, lower drug and alcohol usage and safer kids. But what does parent involvement really mean and how can it help our children succeed in school and in life?

There is no doubt that today's parents are involved. The complexities of life often demand non-stop shuffling of children between school, sports activities, after-school programs, tutoring, specialized lessons, etc. Some parents volunteer in the classroom, others participate in sports or arts programs, PTA, or school fundraising activities. These are the more traditional activities we normally associate with parent involvement in schools. But there is another form of parent involvement that is much more important to our children. Both parents and teachers overwhelmingly agree that the main job parents play in their child's learning concerns what parents do at home.

Public Agenda, a non-profit based research organization, (www.publicagenda.org) has been surveying public attitudes toward education for many years. Using focus groups of parents, teachers, and teenagers as well as interviews with education experts, the research has given us some interesting insights into parent involvement. When teachers rate parents in terms of their involvement with their children's education, 66% give them a fair to poor rating. And parents agree. When parents rate other parents on their involvement with their children's education, 70% of them say that parents need to be more involved and 82% agree that "too many parents expect the school to do their job for them."

When teachers are asked to choose the most important actions parents can take at home with their children, the top two are, 1) teaching good work habits, like how to take responsibility and apply oneself; and 2) teaching children to be respectful. The top complaints that teachers

have of parents are those who, 1) fail to set limits and create structure at home; 2) fail to control how much time their kids spend with TV, computer and video games; and 3) refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance. Teachers agree there are practical classroom consequences when a student's home lacks structure and accountability.

According to the research on what really helps our children succeed in school and in life, the term "parent involvement" needs some redefinition. As essential as traditional volunteering is to schools, it is even more imperative that we also view parent involvement as what parents do at home to make a difference for their kids. This may seem like common sense to some, but when educators and parents both agree that today's parents need to be more involved at home, it demands that school communities take steps to help. Your school's commitment to encouraging parent involvement at home is realized through your ParentNet program. ParentNet meetings provide a way for parents to come together to learn from one another and to get the advice, reassurance, and moral support they need to help their kids succeed. It is not a coincidence that common topics at ParentNet meetings include how to set limits and structure at home; how to control TV, computer, and video usage; and how to hold kids accountable for behavior and academic performance – the same topics important to teachers!

How do you rate yourself when it comes to parent involvement? If you'd like to focus your efforts on what most helps your child succeed, come to the next ParentNet meeting and start talking to other parents. When you share your experiences and parenting strategies with others, you empower your entire school community – and your children are the greatest beneficiaries!