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BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS

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PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

*This **BRIEF** is one of two developed on behalf of those schools facing the necessity to improve student performance scores. It summarizes information about the impact that parent involvement can have and the multiple ways in which parents can be involved with schools. The material is organized with bullets and checklists to facilitate its use by school personnel.*

WHY PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS IMPORTANT TO SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Requirements for parent involvement in the No Child Left Behind Act (P.L.107-110, 2001, section 1118) have refocused attention on this component of school reform. The Act specifies that each school receiving Title I funds must demonstrate parent involvement by (1) having a written parent involvement policy developed jointly with and approved by parents; (2) convening an annual meeting of parents; and (3) developing with individual parents a school-parent compact that outlines actions to be taken by the school and the parents to improve their child's performance. This incorporates into policy the long-standing evidence that parent involvement can make a difference in school outcomes for children.

Research studies have indicated that:[1]

- When parents[2] are enabled to become effective partners in their child's education, performance in schools where children are failing improves dramatically.
- Schools that work well with families, where parents are involved:
  - Outperform identical programs without parent and family involvement;
  - Have improved teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents; and
  - Have more support from families and a better reputation in the community.
- The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is *not* income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:
  - Create a home environment that encourages learning;
  - Communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations for children's achievement and future careers;
  - Become involved in children's education at school and in the community.

- When parents are involved, students:
  - Achieve more, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level;
  - Have higher grades and test scores, have better attendance, and complete homework more consistently;
  - Exhibit more positive attitudes as well as decreased alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior.
- Parental involvement early in the educational process results in more powerful effects.[3]
- Benefits are not confined to the elementary years; there are significant gains at all ages and grade levels.
- Different types of parent/family involvement produce different gains:
  - When parents collaborate with the teacher, educators hold higher expectations of students and higher opinions of the parents; children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better because parents and professionals are bridging the gap between the culture at home and the learning institution.
  - When parents are involved in full partnerships (i.e., decision making), student achievement for disadvantaged children not only improves, it can reach levels that are standard for middle-class children; the children who are farthest behind make the greatest gains.

While collaboration with families is an essential component of a school reform strategy, it is *not* a substitute for high-quality education programs or comprehensive school improvement.

LEVELS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

There are six levels of parent involvement,[4] ranging from the simplest level of comfort with the school to the most complex level of parents as co-decision makers. The latter, in its fullest development, is a formulated approach to school reform.

Examples of possible activities in each of the following six levels will be outlined:

1. Preconditions for parent involvement, including
   a. Teacher attitudes and beliefs
   b. The school as a welcoming place for parents
2. Communication between school and parents
3. Partnership in student learning
4. Parent volunteers
5. The school as a resource for parents
6. Parent decision makers

A checklist is provided for each level so that the material can be used by school staff for self-study.

LEVEL 1A

Preconditions for Parent Involvement: School Staff Attitudes and Beliefs that Facilitate Parent Involvement

	OK	Could Improve
Principal, teachers, and staff understand the importance of the parents' role in the process of educating children.	☐	☐
Principals, teachers, and staff view parents as experts on their children and as equals.	☐	☐
Principal, teachers, and staff understand that parents' attitudes toward school affect their children's attitudes.	☐	☐
Principal, teachers, and staff recognize the strengths of families raising children under adverse circumstances, including parents who are in poverty,[5] incarcerated, divorced, or experiencing domestic violence.	☐	☐
Principal and teachers expect to have personal contact with parents.	☐	☐

LEVEL 1B

Preconditions for Parent Involvement: The School as a Welcoming Place for Parents

The effective school is a place where parents feel comfortable and welcomed in terms of the aspects and behaviors outlined below.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
Locked entries have a clear way for parents to gain access.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Staff are welcoming to parents:	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Security checkpoints are handled courteously without demeaning parents.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— The school secretary responds to the entrance of visitors with a smile and an acknowledgement of their presence.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— All staff acknowledge the presence of parents or other visitors.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teachers invite parents to visit their classrooms.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teachers know and use the parent's name.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Staff view parents as partners.	☐	☐	☐	☐
A school welcoming committee involving parents and school staff visits parents at the beginning of the year.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Special efforts are made to welcome parents and children new to the school (i.e., kindergartners, children transferring in).	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled at times convenient for parents to attend:	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Language translators are available for parents who are not comfortable communicating in English.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Child care is provided.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parents are invited to join their child for lunch.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school environment is:				
— Pleasant and inviting in terms of color and welcoming signs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Easy to navigate in terms of directional signs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Supportive of parents' interest in their children in terms of class or individual photos of children, art work, and school projects displayed on hallway walls.	☐	☐	☐	☐

LEVEL 2

Communication To and From Parents

The effective school keeps parents informed through regular two-way communication. Sharing of information vital to student success is facilitated by the activities outlined below.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
An early conference prior to school start or during first weeks enables parents to communicate information about their child's characteristics and their desired goals.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Contracts between the school and each parent are developed that include agreements concerning expectations for the child's progress, parental provision of a place to study, and a commitment to talk daily about school tasks, pay attention to academic progress, and compliment gains.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parents know how to reach teachers directly.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teachers encourage parents to let them know what is happening in the child's life that may affect school performance.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Principal and teachers set aside a small amount of time each day and use all possible means to communicate frequently with parents, using as appropriate:	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Letters by mail.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— E-mail.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Telephone.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Face-to-face.	☐	☐	☐	☐
A homework log gives the parent instructions for facilitating homework and incomplete school work.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Principal and teachers have established a regular schedule for positive communications to parents:	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Celebration notes on positive things that have happened.				
— Folders of completed student work are sent home weekly or monthly for parents to review and return comments.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Communications emphasize strengths and how the parents can help.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Report cards and regular progress reports are sent, or given, to parents.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Communication process is modified as needed for non-English-speaking or low-literacy parents.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conferences with every parent are held at least twice a year with follow-ups as needed, and at times when parents can attend.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Principal and teachers schedule a home visit to all children during the year, giving priority to those children and parents who are new to the school and those children where there is an immediate concern.	☐	☐	☐	☐

For low-income families and families in some cultures, offering home visits is more successful at involving parents than programs requiring parents to visit the school. However, when parents do become involved at school, their children make even greater gains.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
Children and staff collaborate on classroom newsletters that provide information about school activities, policies and schedules, an opportunity to answer questions and elicit suggestions, and information on community resources and family activities.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school provides parents with clear information on class level achievement expectations, school activities, school policies, discipline procedures, assessment tools, and school goals.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school promotes informal activities that facilitate the interaction of parents and staff.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school conducts an annual person-to-person survey of families on students' needs and families' suggestions and reactions to school programs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— A special effort is made to reach parents not normally involved.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school provides staff development on effective communication techniques.	☐	☐	☐	☐

The school's practices to inform and involve parents are stronger determinants of whether inner-city parents will be involved with their children's education than are parent education, family size, marital status, and student grade level.

When parents receive frequent and effective communication from the school, their involvement increases, their overall evaluation of educators improves, and their attitudes toward the school are more positive.

LEVEL 3

Partnership in Student Learning

The effective school views parents as partners in facilitating children's learning and enables them in various ways.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
Parents are given information and orientation/training on:				
— Required skills in all subjects at each grade.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— Homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— How to assist children with skills that they will be developing.	☐	☐	☐	☐
— How sufficient sleep, nutritious food, limited TV, discussion at meals together, and a quiet place to study can improve academic performance.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parents participate with teachers in helping children set academic goals each year.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teachers have a regular schedule of interactive homework that requires children to demonstrate to and discuss with parents what they are learning in school.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school library has preschool and elementary books that parents can borrow to read to and discuss with their young children.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Parents are much more likely to become involved when educators encourage and assist parents in helping their children with schoolwork.

When they are treated as partners and given relevant information by people with whom they are comfortable, parents put into practice the involvement strategies they already know are effective, but have been hesitant to utilize.

Parent effectiveness is enhanced when the school provides orientation/training; for example, written directions with a send-home instructional packet, workshops where parents participate in constructing and using instructional games, or training and ongoing supervision by school personnel.

LEVEL 4

Parent Volunteers

The effective school stretches its resources by encouraging parents to volunteer. Parent volunteers have traditionally been stay-at-home mothers. However, there may be other possibilities, including arrangements with FIA to define consistent part-time volunteering as a "work" activity for women moving from welfare to work.

The precondition for parent volunteers is a welcoming school.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
The school encourages participation:	◻	◻	◻	◻
— Provides clear instructions including a volunteer orientation packet.	◻	◻	◻	◻
— Creates ways to express appreciation.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents accompany classes on field trips.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents volunteer to extend the capacities of staff by:				
— Tutoring or serving as a teacher's aide in the classroom.	◻	◻	◻	◻
— Bringing their talents, skills, knowledge, experiences, or unique culture to the classroom as guest instructors.	◻	◻	◻	◻
— Monitoring in the cafeteria and on the playground during lunchtime.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents volunteer to improve the school environment or equipment.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parent teams welcome and orient new families at the beginning and during the year.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents volunteer in a telephone tree to provide all families with school-related information.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents volunteer to organize and manage resources under Level 5.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents have the use of a room as a place for volunteers.	◻	◻	◻	◻

LEVEL 5

The School as a Resource for Parents

The effective school connects to parents by serving as a resource, becoming a full service school. The full service school is a logical extension of the welcoming school and the school as part of the community.

The school provides access to resources identified by parents as important to families.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
The school is available for meetings of community groups.	◻	◻	◻	◻
The principal and teachers may link family to needed resources, especially if children are frequently absent because of illness or family issues.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Children can have breakfast at school.	◻	◻	◻	◻
The school houses a clothing exchange.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents and school staff agree on and put into effect a plan of action to contain community problems such as traffic safety, drug dealing, etc.	◻	◻	◻	◻

LEVEL 6

Parents as Decision Makers

Effective schools have access to financial resources and decisions are made by a team of administrators, teachers, and parents.

	YES		NO	
	OK	Could Improve	Could Do It	Not Possible Now
Parents participate in review of proposed school policies and curriculum as part of parent organization committees or principal-appointed advisory committees.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Parents participate on all decision making and advisory committees:	◻	◻	◻	◻
— Committees meet at times convenient for parents.	◻	◻	◻	◻
— Use of technology permits parents to participate offsite.	◻	◻	◻	◻
The school provides parents with an understandable, well publicized process for influencing decisions, raising issues or concerns, appealing decisions, and resolving problems.	◻	◻	◻	◻
Training is provided to staff and parents on shared decision making.	◻	◻	◻	◻

The more the relationship between parents and educators approaches a comprehensive, well-planned partnership, the higher the student achievement. Partnering requires give-and-take conversation, goal setting for the future, and regular follow-up interactions.

NOTES

1. This **BRIEF** is an adaptation of National Parent-Teachers Association, (1999), *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement*. Unless otherwise noted, material in the first section represents a summary from that source of "the most comprehensive survey of the research (from) a series of publications developed by Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla: *The Evidence Grows* (1981); *The Evidence Continues to Grow* (1987); and *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement* (1995). Citing more than 85 studies, these publications document the profound and comprehensive benefits for students, families, and schools, when parents and family members become participants in their children's education and their lives."

2. **Definitions**. The term "parents" includes grandparents, other relatives, foster parents, step parents, or other parenting adults who are responsible for the health and well-being of the child. The term "staff" includes principal, classroom and specialty teachers, teachers' aides, school secretary, and custodians.

3. K. Cotton & K. R. Wikelund (1989), *Parent Involvement in Education*, School Improvement Research Series, Close-Up No. 6, North West Regional Educational Laboratory.

4. The National Parent-Teacher Association report uses the framework formulated by Joyce Epstein, Johns Hopkins University, which has the following levels: Communication, Student Learning, Volunteering, Parenting, Decision Making, Collaboration with Community.

5. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1998) by Ruby K. Payne (RFT Publishing Company, 1-800-424-9484), was written by a teacher for teachers.

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