

As the old adage goes, “It takes a village to raise a child”. Yet in today’s modern society, do we truly believe this to be true? And if so, are our local school systems organized in such a way to foster a healthy relationship between educators and parents? On one account, educators often feel as if the whole village isn’t pulling their weight; that their classroom is an isolated island and the rest of society a foreign land-not interested in tapping into the potential wealth its’ inhabitants have to offer. Conversely, parents may feel shut off from the activities taking place in their child’s classroom or disconnected (for a variety of social, economic, or racial reasons) from the school culture as a whole.

Regardless of one’s role (teacher, parent, or both), research clearly shows that parental involvement plays a crucial role in the academic success of a child. If teachers are to successfully meet the rigorous standards set before them and empower their students to reach their fullest potential, they are going to need the help of the whole “village”. In the following essay, I’ll review the research that supports parental involvement and its positive impact on students; give an overview of the parental involvement mandate that exists within the No Child Left Behind Act; highlight programs that foster parental engagement in schools; and discuss possible steps that a teacher leader can take to advocate for a more effective partnership with the parents of students.

Parent school involvement is consistently associated with higher grades, fewer absences and higher high school graduation rates across grades and racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, parent school involvement may function as a mechanism through which other family resource characteristics, such as parental education, are associated with school success (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). In addition, Rogers and Theule state that parents’ educational involvement has been linked to children’s academic outcomes in a variety of ways, including higher academic achievement and more positive attitudes toward school (2009). When

educators are able to connect with parents, their work is easier and children's learning becomes more productive. Parents can help us understand the support networks and struggles that kids are experiencing at home and the history and baggage they bring with them to school every day (Zemelman & Ross, 2009)

In recent years, parental involvement in schools has become a popular topic in mainstream media and politics. Since Barak Obama has become President, he and the First Lady have urged parents on numerous occasions to get involved in their children's education. In his first few months as President, Barak Obama told a joint session of Congress, "There is no program or policy that can substitute for a mother or father who will attend those parent-teacher conferences or help with the homework or turn off the TV, put away the video games, read to their child. Responsibility for our children's education must begin at home." (2009). Comedian Bill Cosby has also gotten involved in advocating for increased parental involvement, particularly from lower income, African American parents. What (is) needed, says Cosby, is "parent power!" He elaborates: "Proper education has to begin at home.... We don't need another federal commission to study the problem. Scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and John Hope Franklin and activists such as Dorothy I. Height have already written eloquently on the subject. What we need now is parents sitting down with children, overseeing homework, sending children off to school in the morning well fed, rested, and ready to learn" (Alt, 2005). At times Cosby's remarks have been known to stir up a bit of controversy, but none the less have shed some light on the issue of parents and their involvement (or lack of) in their child's education.

Unbeknownst to many, the federal government recognizes the importance of the role a parent plays in a student's education. Parent involvement is specifically addressed by the authors of the No Child Left Behind Act, as a partnership that envisions parents with governance power

within a democratic process (Howard & Reynolds, 2010). More specifically, according to Epstein in her insightful article, *Meeting NCLB Requirements for family involvement*, all schools that receive Title I funds must develop policies on partnerships and conduct programs that involve parents in ways that support student success in school. In addition, all schools must:

- Provide professional development to educators to organize effective partnership programs
- Help parents understand state standards and assessments
- Provide materials to help parents assist their children's achievement at home.
- Communicate using formats and languages that parents (2004).

However as Howard and Reynolds note, while the provision seeks to mandate parent engagement in schools, what remains unclear under NCLB's parent involvement mandate is the extent to which parents are actually engaged in schools. One consistent critique of NCLB posits that it falls short in providing enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance at the state and local levels. School systems cannot be sure that schools are actually complying with the federal mandate (2010).

On a local school level, the parental involvement piece seems to get overshadowed by other mandates, such as standardized testing. After all, measuring the level and quality of parental engagement in a school isn't nearly as easy as measuring the growth of yearly end of grade test scores. Because there is no accountability in this area, it's understandable why policy makers and administrators may put this issue on the back burner. However, taking the above research into account, it seems that establishing programs that truly engage parents in their child's education, may not only increase test scores, but more importantly empower students to be successful in all areas of their lives.

When I was teaching, aside from the PTA, there was no school wide program that encouraged parents to take a more active role in their child's education. In addition, there were no workshops or professional development opportunities mandated for teachers to learn how to engage parents in their teaching process. On a county level, my local school system, Wake

County Public Schools, has no official mandated program to encourage parental engagement.

The only public position on a parent's role in their child's education given by Wake County

Public Schools is as follows:

A child's education is a responsibility shared by the school and the family. Parents, families, schools, and communities working as partners can promote increased student achievement and positive attitudes about self and school. The Board of Education supports the development, implementation and regular evaluation of a comprehensive parental involvement program in each school to involve parents at all grade levels in a variety of roles (2008).

As a teacher leader, aware of the benefits of parental engagement in a child's education, I think there needs to be a more organized, county wide enrichment program for parents. To me, the vagueness of the statement, "The Board of Education supports the development, implementation, and regular evaluation of a comprehensive parental involvement program in each school..." leaves much to be interpreted, or neglected.

The absence of a county-wide parental involvement program simply means the possibility exists for one to be implemented in the near future. According to Epstein (2002), all schools can use the research-generated framework of six types of involvement to develop a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships. These six types of involvement are as follows:

**Type 1—Parenting:** Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.

**Type 2—Communicating:** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress in varied, clear, and productive ways. Create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school so that families can easily communicate with teachers, administrators, counselors, and other families.

**Type 3—Volunteering:** Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with regular and occasional volunteers who assist and support students and the school.

**Type 4—Learning at Home:** Involve families with their children in academic

learning activities at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities and decisions. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting work and ideas with family members.

**Type 5—Decision Making:** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO, and other parent organizations. Assist family and teacher representatives to obtain information from and give information to those they represent.

**Type 6—Collaborating with Community:** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, colleges or universities, and other community groups. Enable students, staff, and families to contribute their service to the community.

While schools may choose from hundreds of practices to represent the six types of involvement, each type of involvement has explicit challenges that must be met to turn an ordinary program into an excellent one. Larry Ferlazzo, in his book, *Engaging Parents in School: Going Beyond Parent Involvement*, suggests another way to turn an ordinary program into an excellent one is being aware of the difference between *involvement* and *engagement*. For instance, when we're involving parents, schools tend to focus on supporting students by strengthening and assisting school programs and priorities. When we're *engaging* parents, schools support students by developing parent relationships and often working with parents to improve their local communities. Ferlazzo (2007) states, "I am not saying parent *involvement* is bad. Most studies have shown that just about any kind of increased connection between schools and parents is beneficial for the student. What I am saying is that parent *engagement* is better, and offers opportunities for transformative, beneficial change—for the school, for the community, for the family and for the student".

One example of a successfully implemented program that seems to encompass most, if not all of Epstein's 6 Types of Involvement, is Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools', Parent

University. Parent University grew out of CMS Superintendent Peter Gorman's strategic plan for 2010. Gorman wanted to increase parent involvement in their kids' lives, and so began CMS expansion of providing relevant, useful, and free lectures to some decidedly nontraditional "students". The community based program offers classes on a variety of different topics taught by CMS teachers, community leaders, and parents. Of the 64 classes currently offered county wide, some include topics such as: "Transitioning from elementary to middle school," "Preparing for the end-of-course tests" and "Teen driving safety," to cultural awareness courses, such as "Hip hop/pop culture — a bridge for connecting with urban youth", to personal development classes, such as "Car buying for busy people," "Identity theft and Internet safety" and even "Careers in the healthcare field." By its second semester, 12,000 parents were enrolled in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Parent University program (Calvani, 2009). Only in its second year, it may be hard to predict the effect that Parent University has had on student achievement. In any case, more CMS parents than ever before are being equipped with new knowledge and skills that will support positive learning outcomes for their school age children.

Joyce Epstein highlights a number of "examples from the field" in her article, *Attainable Goals? The Spirit and Letter of the No Child Left Behind Act on Parental Involvement*. One noteworthy program is the Action Team for Partnership in an elementary school serving mainly Latino and Hmong families in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The faculty write annual plans with activities for the six types of involvement. Some of these activities include a "Second Cup of Coffee," a monthly open forum for parents and educators to talk about testing, homework, and other topics; "Reading-at-Home" programs to engage all students and families in reading; and many other involvement activities that are linked to school goals. This school's leaders attribute gains in students' test scores of 13 percent in reading and 10 percent in math in 2004 to a combination of good teaching and family involvement (Epstein, 2005).

Despite the lack of enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with the federal mandates, these two parental engagement programs, along with 1,000's of other programs across the country, have taken the initiative themselves for the sake of the students that they teach. As public servants, teachers, administrators, and policy makers have an obligation to reach to the parents. As a teacher leader, recognizing this obligation, not only has a positive impact on our students and their parents, but can empower us as educators as well. In their book, 13 Steps to Teacher Empowerment, Steven Zemelman and Harry Ross include "Reach out to Parents" as one of the steps to taking a more active role in your school community, stating, "If we reach out to the wider world, we strengthen ourselves as teachers and build authentic power" (2009).

The first step in opening the lines of communication with parents and working towards creating a more authentic relationship begins in the classroom. Listen to the parents of your students and give them opportunities to voice their opinions. Be personal, share stories about yourself and your past experiences with school-the good and the bad. Organize parent projects or activities that encourage them to get involved in their child's learning experience. According to Zemelman and Ross, "...building trust is central. When it's lacking, parents and teachers often end up viewing each other as adversaries".

Being aware of the Epstein's 6 Types of Parental Involvement and the differences between parental *involvement* versus parental *engagement* (Furlazzo, 2007) can help give an educator a more critical lens in which to view existing parental engagement tools. Below is a list of some of the resources available to teachers interested in increasing parental engagement in their schools.

-North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Parental Involvement Toolkit: A step by step, comprehensive guide to increasing parental engagement in your school, available free through their website.  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/parents/toolkit/>.

-Family and Schools Together (FAST):an award-winning set of preventive/early intervention after-school programs  
[www.familiesandschools.org](http://www.familiesandschools.org)

-Project Appleseed: a non-profit organization devoted to public school improvement through parental involvement, includes a parental involvement pledge to share with school staff and parent organizations  
[www.projectappleseed.org](http://www.projectappleseed.org)

-National Network of Partnership Schools: founded by Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, a leader in the field of family involvement in education. The site offers success stories, research on family involvement, and opportunities for professional development workshops and conferences  
[www.csos.jhu.edu](http://www.csos.jhu.edu)

As an educator, and now a parent of a rising kindergartener, I want to urge all teachers to bridge the gap between their student's home life and their school life. In the words of Roland Barth, "If we are really committed to developing communities of learning, we must engage in activities that have the capacity to build community and to promote learning and a lifetime love of learning" (2001, pg 40). Effective parental engagement programs have the capacity to promote this lifetime love of learning throughout an entire community. Neglecting to incorporate them into our schools is failing to meet the needs of the entire "village"-students, parents, and teachers alike.