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PARTNERSHIPS:

Connecting Parent Involvement and Student Achievement

BY NORMAN D. POWELL
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More than ever before, young adults need a good education and useful skills in order to succeed in the workplace and to become responsible members of society. As teachers, however, we realize that we cannot carry this responsibility alone. Overwhelming evidence from the past three decades indicates that parental participation is crucial to student success in school. In fact, parent involvement is more important than any other single factor—including family income level, education level, and cultural background.¹ And contrary to what many may believe, the value of parent involvement does not end with elementary school, but is critical during the secondary school years as well.²

Summary of Major Research Findings

A review of the literature since 1992 on parent involvement in education reveals that thousands of articles have been written. Henderson and Berla thoroughly reviewed the research of the past three decades and compiled a comprehensive summary of 66 salient studies for the third edition of the *Evidence* series.³ Their review of family involvement in education revealed a number of recurring themes in the major findings of the research, five of which are pertinent to this discussion.

1. Effects on Student Attitudes

The first of these themes relates to the effect of parents on student attitudes. Families contribute significantly to student attitudes about learning and achievement—from preschool all the way through secondary school and possibly beyond. Efforts to improve student achievement are far more effective when parents take an active role—and this is true at each level, from preschool through high school.

Parental involvement is most beneficial when matched with support from the school. Although positive attitudes about learning are formed primarily at home, it is important that these attitudes also be nurtured at school. High expectations from both parents and teachers promote positive attitudes about

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learning and achievement. Also, students are motivated if they see that their choices will influence their future. Parent and teacher modeling helps students understand that they can earn respect from society by hard work and achievement.⁴

2. Academic Effects

Students achieve more and remain in school longer when parents spend time at school, attend and participate in school functions, and maintain good relationships with school staff, especially teachers. Teachers generally have higher expectations of the students whose parents are involved with school functions and who think more highly of the school. These students often have better grades and test scores. Students whose parents do not actively participate at school are far more likely to drop out of school or to not attend college.⁵

3. School Improvement

Involved parents make better schools. Based on selected research data, some writers suggest that if at least one-third of parents are active on campus, the whole school becomes a

better place to learn. When significant numbers of parents are active in the school, taking on a variety of roles, all students benefit—not just the children whose parents are involved.⁶

4. Parents as Advocates

The fourth clear theme in the literature deals with parents as teachers, supporters, advocates, and decision-makers in their children's learning. That kind of participation is clearly related to an increased likelihood of student success in school. Parents can promote and reinforce at home what is being taught at school. They can also teach by modeling values and life skills for responsible adulthood. They thereby enrich the curriculum with their unique knowledge and skills, as they provide extra support to students. When parents become advocates, they can help to ensure fair treatment of all students and make schools more responsive to all families. Parents can also serve as decision-makers on school boards or committees and provide input for effective decision-making.⁷

5. Enhancing Partnerships

The fifth theme relates to the quality

of the home/school relationship. The highest benefits to student achievement can be anticipated when a comprehensive, positive relationship exists between home and school. This is true for all students, but especially so for those students who are falling behind their peers in learning. Although this kind of comprehensive home/school relationship requires tremendous effort from parents and educators, it produces clear benefits in terms of achievement.⁸

Henderson and Berla concluded that “taken together, what is most interesting about the research is that it all points in the same direction. The form of parent involvement does not seem to be critical, so long as it is reasonable, well-planned, comprehensive and long-lasting.”⁹ These research findings may not only hold true for “regular” students in “regular” school programs, but also for specific types of students. Many studies are being conducted to document the effects of parent involvement in the education of the gifted and talented, and those with mild to severe learning disabilities, emotional or behavior problems, as well as students in drug-prevention programs, those whose primary language is not English, and

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students from international cultures.

Clearly, strong partnerships between home and school can be beneficial to parents, educators, and students. Such partnerships promote higher academic and skill achievement, as well as more responsible citizenship and higher moral values.

Adventist Family Involvement in Education

Parent involvement in education is not a new philosophy to Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen White wrote at the turn of the century that “the teachers in the home and the teachers in the school should have a sympathetic understanding of one another’s work. They should labor together harmoniously, imbued with the same missionary spirit, striving together to benefit the children physically, mentally, and spiritually.¹⁰ Furthermore, “never will education accomplish all that it might and should accomplish until the importance of the parents’ work is fully recognized.”¹¹

Adventist schools should be the leaders in encouraging parent-school cooperation because of the nature of their relationship with and dependence on parental support. Unfortunately, in many Seventh-day Adventist schools, it has been difficult to establish positive parent-school partnerships. Recent research on teacher stress in Seventh-day Adventist schools in Texas revealed that interacting with parents produced the highest levels of stress of any factor tested.¹² How tragic that such interaction produces high levels of stress when parents and teachers share the same goal—the education of the child! Parent-teacher interaction should be among the most pleasant of teaching activities.

Reasons for Lack of Parent Involvement

As we have seen, parent involvement in education is imperative to student success. The National Education Goals described in Goals 2000 stipulate that “every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.”¹³ Many U.S. localities have

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laws regarding family involvement in education.¹⁴ For instance, California has passed legislation mandating parent-involvement programs at all schools receiving Title I aid, and requiring that the governing boards of all school districts adopt parent-involvement policies for academic accountability.¹⁵

However, research shows that only one public school in 10 has effectively achieved “genuine partnerships” between schools, families, and communities.¹⁶ Can even that large a proportion of Adventist schools claim to have formed genuine partnerships with families and church communities? Or are we lagging behind public schools?

There may be a number of reasons why some school/parent partnerships are not strong. The most common reason suggested is the lack of time. In many families, both parents work outside the home. Single parents have trouble keeping up with their many responsibilities. Another reason is that many parents simply do not know how to help with their children’s education—they need guidance from the school. In countries that are culturally diverse, many parents may not speak or understand the language used in school, and educators simply do not know how to

communicate effectively with them. And finally, many schools have not established a supportive environment for families, especially single and low-income parents.¹⁷

Since parent-involvement programs are so effective, school leaders and teachers should ensure that their school environment supports them. One teacher who has experienced success in creating such an environment is Judy Shull.¹⁸ She reports that in order to develop the most positive relationships, she focused on trust building. She found that the two most important trust-building elements were learning to listen and establishing two-way lines of communication.

Perhaps you’ll have to rethink your attitude toward parents. When you find it tiring and stressful to deal with certain difficult parents, ask yourself this question: With which kind of parent would you really prefer to work—the parent who can be excessively bothersome, or the parent who doesn’t even care? Most of us would prefer the caring parent. The key is to focus those caring energies into productive efforts. You can do this by implementing well-designed parent-involvement programs.

Ideas to Promote Family Involvement

How does a school go about designing and planning parent-involvement programs? While this need not be complicated, there is no magic formula. Planners need to consider the following points:

1. There is no single best kind of parent-involvement program.
2. Any well-planned parent-involvement program is more effective than none.
3. Parent-involvement programs must have educational excellence as their primary goal.¹⁹

The La Sierra University School of Education, under a grant from the North American Division Department of Education and with a committee of talented and creative parents, educators, child-development specialists, and health-care educators, spent four years studying parent-involvement programs. As a result, the committee developed a

comprehensive program called PARTNERSHIPS. This program has been published in booklet form and includes planning guides and copy-ready materials designed for easy implementation in any school. The program includes seven parent-involvement modules:

1. *Back to School Night* is designed especially for parents of secondary students to get acquainted with the school program.

2. *Folders* is a home and school communications program that includes parent-child learning activities and weekly classroom updates.

3. *Open House* gets parents of elementary students acquainted with the school program.

4. *Parent-School Contract* is designed to improve parent involvement at school through various agreements between parents and educators that are signed during registration as the school year begins.

5. *Parent University* provides adult education and parenting seminars at the school site.

6. *Project PASS* (Planning Ahead for School Success) encourages communication and parent involvement with pre-school-age children.

7. *Volunteers* outlines a program for parent involvement in the day-to-day activities of elementary and secondary schools.

The modules may be modified to fit the specific needs of individual schools. Each module contains a planning section that explains the steps for implementation. The program section describes its various components, while the follow-up section makes suggestions for evaluation or further activities. Also, each plan provides sample material that may be copied or revised by schools. While most of these modules may stand alone, the goals of PARTNERSHIPS are best achieved by their integration, so schools may truly form "partnerships" with homes.²⁰

The benefits of creating and fostering effective partnerships between

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schools and parents are beyond dispute. If Adventist schools are to continue to offer students a superior education, they must actively recruit parents to participate in every aspect of school life. ☞

For more information about how you can improve parent involvement at your school, contact your local conference office (U.S. and Canada only), or the North American Division of Education, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, U.S.A. to obtain a copy of the PARTNERSHIPS program. The cost for the manual is \$7.50 plus \$5.00 for shipping and handling.

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