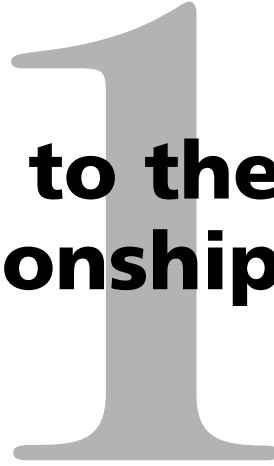


# Committing to the Relationship



*Programs designed with strong parent involvement produce students who perform better than otherwise identical programs that do not involve parents as thoroughly or that do not involve them at all.*

—Anne T. Henderson

**W**hy should schools work so hard to form and maintain positive parental relationships? In a nutshell, because research has clearly proven that student achievement improves when parents are involved in their child's education. So, in answer to the *why* question, the overwhelming answer is *increased student achievement*. It makes sense, then, since we are educators whose main goal is to help students learn and achieve, that we must believe in our obligation to forge strong relationships with the parents of our students.

A simple search of current and past literature on parent-school relationships will yield countless research reviews, books, and articles supporting the need for building strong relationships with parents and families. In a synthesis of 35 years of education research, Robert Marzano writes in *What Works in Schools* (2003) that community and parental involvement is one of 11 factors that are highly effective in enhancing student achievement. According to Henderson and Berla (1994), "The single best predictor of student success in school is the level of parental involvement in a child's education." The benefits of parental involvement

## 2 • The School-Home Connection

include improved academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, improved school behavior, increased academic motivation, and lower dropout rates.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that regardless of family income or background, students whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to have higher grades and test scores. They also found that when parents are invested and participate in school activities, their children attend school regularly, develop better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.

While the child's academic success is certainly the most important reason to build a strong, positive parent-teacher relationship, there are benefits that extend beyond those gained by the individual child. As parents and teachers forge strong ties, benefits expand to the teacher, parents, class, school, and, ultimately, the school district. Strong parent-teacher relationships can have a snowball effect on all stakeholders.

Henderson and Berla (1994) also found that, when parents participate in their child's school activities (e.g., volunteer readers, teacher assistants for special projects), the performance of not only their own child but that of all the children at school tends to improve. Additionally, they found that the more organized and comprehensive the partnership between parents and home, the higher the individual student academic achievement. Indeed, the presence of an additional adult in the classroom increases the amount and timeliness of direct attention the students receive and allows the teacher to focus on priority individual assistance where needed.

In reflecting on our personal experiences with the parents and families of our students, the evidence supporting the benefits of parental involvement is overwhelming. So much so that we often told parents that we needed their involvement, *even if* it was only to complain or to tell us that they were upset about something. We reminded them that it was their *job* to keep us on our toes, to keep us informed, and to advocate for their child. We referred to the educational process as "a three-part pie." One part is the student, one part is the school, and one part is the parent (i.e., home). We would further explain that "if one part spoils, the rest can go with it."

As we developed strong partnerships with parents, we began to observe numerous effects on the individual student, teacher, parent, classroom, school, and school district. A discussion of each follows, with some of the specific benefits we identified as we worked toward and developed strong parent-school relationships. We would encourage you, upon reflection of your own parental relationships, to think about observed and personally experienced benefits.

## **BENEFITS TO THE STUDENT**

As proven, when the teacher and parent have a strong, positive relationship, student achievement improves. With collaboration and teamwork, we have observed that even with severe academic deficiencies, students show improvement when parents are involved.

As parents form a closer partnership, they tend to support school efforts at home with more frequency and intensity. This increased support leads to better achievement, which in itself becomes a strong rationale for putting in the time and effort to keep a child's parents involved. It supports taking action to do whatever is needed to forge a strong partnership.

Another observed benefit of a strong school-home partnership is that many children exhibit a sense of security in knowing that both their teacher and their parents are working together to help them do well in school. By working harmoniously, home and school can set clearer and more concise expectations for the child. They can also establish and maintain boundaries that are well articulated and consistent and form a collaborative team that creates solutions to problems that may arise. For sure, all of these possible outcomes will benefit the child academically, socially, and behaviorally. Don't underestimate the power of school and home alignment.

A commanding example of what happens when school and home are at odds is that of James, age 12. James was so used to his parents being angry with his teachers and school that he had little trust in any of the school staff. His parents' negativity and distrust were passed on to James to such a degree that he felt disloyal to his parents if he enjoyed a certain class or teacher. Consequently, he began to resist going to school. His behavior in school became defiant and oppositional. His teachers, in turn, felt frustrated and misunderstood, and they grew wary of communicating with James's parents at all. The situation only grew worse.

Only when a couple of James's teachers slowly and consistently called his parents with good reports of his abilities did an opening for change occur. Gradually, with a great deal of patience and understanding on the part of school personnel, James's parents became less combative and more receptive to hearing from the school. Over time, as the relationship improved between home and school, James started to relax, ended his resistance to attending school, became more cooperative, and made academic progress.

Other benefits to the student include the following:

- Increased motivation
- Lower absenteeism

#### 4 • The School-Home Connection

- Decreased use of drugs and alcohol
- Fewer suspensions
- Improved attitude
- Increased cooperation

### **BENEFITS TO THE TEACHER**

Strong parent-teacher relationships have several advantages in addition to those enjoyed by the students. When teachers have positive relationships with students' parents, understanding of and support for classroom curriculum and activities rises. Collaboration often leads to improved ideas, enriched resources (e.g., volunteers, donations), expanded trust, and increased teacher willingness to try new things. All of these, in turn, lead to improved teacher confidence, job satisfaction, and self-esteem.

Through our discussions with and observations of teachers who had strong, positive relationships with parents, several noticeable commonalities appeared. In general, these teachers employed a more positive, nurturing approach to their instruction. They appeared to have more energy and less stress. They brought *home* into the discussion and made the school an extension of the child's life with his or her family. They increased the relevance of what students learned in school by sharing family situations and stories that were pertinent to the educational discussion. The teachers were seemingly happier with their job and provided classrooms that were positively charged.

In general, teachers who forge strong partnerships with parents and families enjoy higher levels of student achievement, professional license to try new things, and personal satisfaction with their day-to-day activities. We know how draining a negative or hostile parental relationship can be to our teaching. It makes the benefits of working hard to turn that negative into a positive all the more worth it.

Other benefits to the teacher include the following:

- Fewer discipline problems
- Increased time to focus on task at hand
- Greater sense of value to the classroom and school
- Decreased sense of isolation in their work
- Improved job satisfaction

## **BENEFITS TO THE PARENT**

The most valuable parental benefit of having a positive relationship with their child's teacher is the development of trust that emerges from this relationship. As parents' trust in their child's teacher increases, their anxieties tend to decrease. As their anxieties decrease, their willingness to support the efforts of the teacher increases. This, in turn, increases their child's academic achievement.

Another benefit of this forged relationship is the sense of partnership built in the educational process. This partnership can empower parents and increase their sense of ownership in their child's education. As their sense of ownership increases, their commitment to school events, activities, and requests for support will likewise increase. This commitment will lead to their own personal satisfaction and involvement in their child's education.

As the relationship develops in a positive fashion, parents will enjoy a higher level of comfort with the teacher. This will lead to a more honest and open sharing of information that is critical to the child's overall well-being and success in school. Parents will feel supported and assisted in their desires to have their child thrive in school.

Other benefits to parents include the following:

- Additional information source for potentially problematic family issues with negative educational effects
- Additional support for family initiatives that may need carryover outside the home (e.g., diet and health programs)
- Greater security in knowing that the child's educational needs are recognized and addressed
- A child who views school in a more positive light

## **BENEFITS TO THE CLASS**

As previously stated, when parents have positive relationships with teachers, they tend to become more involved in school activities. As their involvement increases, they offer more experiences to share with the class. They will be more likely to volunteer their services for special events or for in-class activities such as tutoring or aide programs in the classroom. Additional support in the classroom is of benefit to all.

Since the collective mind is always better than the single mind, increased parental involvement leads to increased ideas and creativity for

## 6 • The School-Home Connection

instruction. It is easier to establish the class as a community and allow the teacher to stay focused on the instruction while the parents take care of the extraneous duties to carry out the instructional plan (e.g., finding or setting up materials for activities).

Having another set of eyes in the classroom can be of great help to the entire class. If the teacher requests assistance with observing anything specific in the classroom, the parent may lend a unique perspective that can be most helpful to the teacher, who can't always see everything that is happening while focusing on instruction. The parent might even come up with some suggestions or ideas that will benefit the class or aid in the delivery of instruction.

One case in point involved a volunteer parent who consistently assisted in writing class. She noticed that a small group of students who were not strong writers were consuming a great deal of the teacher's time in getting started on their writing pieces. This caused the teacher to work less efficiently with stronger writers who still needed support with mechanics. The parent, working with the stronger writers, noticed that they got off to a quicker start because they could generate ideas faster for their writing pieces. The parent suggested pairing stronger writers with weaker ones to generate writing ideas, allowing both teacher and parent to work with all students on the mechanics of the writing samples being generated. The teacher accepted and used the suggestion very successfully from that time on.

Other benefits to the class include the following:

- Wider exposure to cultural differences represented by families
- Increased attention to each student with better student-adult ratio
- Increased on-task behavior
- Introduction of additional ideas and experiences to the curriculum

### **BENEFITS TO THE SCHOOL**

Strong, positive relationships between parents and teachers build trust in the entire school. This trust reaps significant positive public relations, which can then translate to support of schoolwide initiatives. We all know the benefits of having a strong, supportive parental group working toward the school's goals.

Strong, positive relationships between parents and teachers also serve to open the lines of communication and apprise administrators of important issues and concerns that parents may have about the school. By

receiving this information from parents, administrators can work proactively to address concerns or solve current problems brought to their attention. Concurrently, by listening to many parents, administrators can assess what is enjoyed and valued by the parental community.

With increased parental trust and school support, the success of school goals and objectives is enhanced.

Other benefits to the school include the following:

- Increased recruitment of highly qualified personnel because of positive parental support
- More positive school climate
- Increased community support for activities and initiatives

## **BENEFITS TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The positive public relations that come with strong parent-school relationships yield many benefits to the school district. Districts that are viewed positively become common knowledge in the areas in which they reside. Districts that enjoy a positive image in their local communities typically attract homeowners and the attention of local businesses and groups. Community agencies are frequently looking for sites to offer their services, and many of these services can help support school efforts. District partnerships with local agencies provide a win-win situation for both.

It's no secret that money for education is a national issue. Different states use different sources of school funding. However, regardless of the funding source, schools with higher achievement rates, higher levels of parental and community support, or both are more likely to receive what they need to continue their programs.

In our state, New York, money for school districts comes from property owners, and most budgets are voted on by the constituents of the district. In this situation, strong, positive relationships with parents will yield stronger support for the schools and an increased likelihood that the annual budgets will be passed.

Other benefits to the district include the following:

- Collective support for long-range referendums
- Good recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff
- Improved property values due to desirable education system

## **8 • The School-Home Connection**

As we reflect on the relationships we have had with parents over the years, one observation becomes absolutely clear. The more committed you are to working with parents and forging relationships between home and school, and the more positive those relationships become, the more successful and satisfying your work will be. Engaging parents in welcoming and valuable ways provides them with ownership in the educational process. Ownership leads to support and value for what is happening.

Parents and teachers must work together to support the development of the student at home and school. In forming strong collaborations, we not only help the individual student, we help ourselves, our classroom, our school, and our district. Ultimately, the school community is strengthened.

### **SUMMARY**

Educational research demonstrates strong support of the need for active parent involvement in their children's education. The benefits are numerous and extend beyond those to the students themselves. As we reviewed our personal observations and experiences over the years, it became obvious that everyone involved in a student's education benefitted from parental involvement in our schools.

The greater the collaboration between parents, teachers, and schools, the greater the benefits to the student, teacher, classroom, school, and the entire district. It is critical that teachers and administrators commit to forming positive relationships with parents and families to enhance student achievement, improve attendance and motivation, decrease behavioral problems, and facilitate school and district initiatives requiring community support.