

Chapter 1

UNDERSTANDING PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS TODAY

“The process is simple,” says Dan Rothstein. . . . “It requires a shift from the habit of delivering information to parents towards facilitating inquiry.”

—Cushman, 1998, p. 2

Some of the questions this chapter addresses:

- How have people thought about parent involvement in the past?
- What might be a new way to think of parental involvement and parent-teacher relationships?
- How might goals differ in past and current conceptions of parent-teacher relationships?
- How are educators from other countries thinking about this issue? What recommendations are they making?
- What are some challenges of implementing this new, engagement-focused approach to parent-teacher relationships?

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FRAMING THE ISSUES

Parents and teachers often struggle with the rising expectations for parent involvement today. Parents are sometimes reluctant to get involved in the way schools expect them to, and administrators and teachers sometimes hesitate to interact with parents (Graue & Brown, 2003). This reluctance is at odds with the current thinking about involvement, which is almost always that more is better. Furthermore, little is known about the meaning of this involvement to the various parties involved. Many believe teachers and parents want children to succeed, and there is evidence to support this belief (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Parents and educators are bombarded with research studies reminding them that involvement is related positively to academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Yet their conscious and unconscious resistance does not really surprise anyone. We have only to look at our own situations, history, and the components and principles of parent-teacher involvement and adult learning to find some reasons involvement remains problematic. Take a moment to consider your own experiences and expectations of parent involvement in schools. What comes to mind for many of us are often-dreaded parent-teacher conferences, a teacher calling a parent about a child's failures or misbehavior, a room mother who organizes the holiday party for an elementary school class, or a parent prodding a child to do homework. In addition, many educators have experience with parents' advocating for special needs children or getting involved in fundraising.

■ How Have People Thought About Parent Involvement in the Past?

The theme that generally emerges is parent involvement in association with overcoming obstacles to the academic success of a child or the school or with "extra," fun things. The reason parents appear in these scenarios is, according to many, their desire to be a positive influence within the system, but their actual influence has been limited. Even with the No Child Left Behind parent involvement mandate, many feel the parents' role is confusing and limited. As Wendy Puriefoy (2005), president of the Public Education Network, noted, "Rather than bringing people closer to their schools, the No Child Left Behind law is causing many Americans to feel increasingly distrustful of and marginalized by professional educators" (p. 1).

Not surprisingly, theories, research, and writing in the field have focused on themes of parent involvement in specific areas, such as academics. As a developmental psychologist studying the growth and development of parents, I was frustrated while teaching in a school of education to find that the typical texts focused not on parents as individuals but on parent involvement or what parents should do or not do. When you type *parents* into a search engine, you often find *parent*

involvement, which almost always focuses on children's academic success. Added to helping with homework, volunteering in the classroom in the early school years, or advocating for a special needs child, I found topics such as dealing with illiteracy and other parental limitations. The theme was frequently that educators had to "deal with" parents and "get them" to support the school and their child. If parents did not do what the school wanted them to do (usually to help with academics), it was the parents' fault if their child did not succeed.

Promoters of parental involvement have often been early childhood or special education teachers who realize the importance of parent support to their own efforts on behalf of children. Other parent involvement promoters include federal agencies and state departments of education, whose involvement guidelines, posted on their Web sites, talk about adult learning, two-way communication, and decision making, but the learning is still described in terms of parents' learning about the child or the school in order to support school goals. The State of Iowa Department of Education (1994) description of parent involvement is typical of many state definitions of parental involvement: "receiving ideas from the school, learning about school programs, becoming confident in terms of helping children learn and having more positive views of teachers" (p. 1). All this is good, and the state of Iowa is in fact exemplary when it comes to supporting parents and teachers, but many teachers, principals, and supporters of initiatives like the Comer School Development Project, the School of the 21st Century, the Coalition for Community Schools, and the Institute for Responsive Education believe it is time for a "new frontier" in parent involvement. How can government agencies think about parent involvement in a new way?

TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Government agencies promote parent involvement and are clear in their goals. The U.S. Department of Education Web site (www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/partnership.html) indicates that the focus of parental involvement is primarily academic success even though the materials for parents are described as "preparing children for the 21st century." There is no opportunity to question school goals or too narrow academic standards or for all stakeholders to react to the goal of academic success. What of all the parents who think the main goal of education has to do with the moral and social development of children, as Reese (2001) has found to be the case with immigrant Latino parents?

For years, Epstein (1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2002) has been educating and supporting schools and parents as they think about and define parent involvement

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and home-school partnerships. The Guides for Parent Involvement (Epstein & Salinas, 2004) are roughly as follows:

1. Parenting (“assist families with parenting skills” and human development, understand families’ background, culture, and goals)
2. Communicating (via parent-teacher conferences and school-home mail)
3. Volunteering in the school (recruit parents as identified by individual school need to support students in school)
4. Learning at home (encourage parents to help with homework, support student goals, and encourage children to involve parents in homework activities)
5. Decision making (involve parents as leaders, e.g., in parent-teacher associations and school committees and advocacy activities)
6. Collaborate with community groups, including businesses, organizations, and universities (to provide family and school services and to work together to improve the community)

These components provide ample room for a growth-enhancing role for parents, though it is often not addressed in schools. In Part II of this text, I will discuss many of the components above, though in a more parent-focused and developmental way than is often the case.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has delineated similar national standards and also allows for parent development. Its Web site notes,

1. “Communicating between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
3. Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. Parents are welcome in the school and their support and assistance are sought.
5. Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families and student learning.” (PTA, 2000–2006)

Many parents feel that they are not involved in decision making and that the language of school policies and mandates is often unnecessarily difficult to understand



PTAs work with schools on a variety of projects, such as planting trees, monitoring playgrounds and classrooms, and organizing afterschool activities for students.

SOURCE: Reprinted with permission from PTA/Michelle LaFond.

(Puriefoy, 2005). How has the school identified the skills parents need? Are those skills related only to tutoring? The PTA Web site (www.pta.org) is filled with helpful information for parents. It also has information on the research pointing to the significant and positive relationship between parent involvement and student academic success. Some critics of this research (Levine & Weins, 2003; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992) have concluded that given the methodological flaws in many studies, the impact of parent involvement in schools may be overstated. They note that definitions and measures of involvement remain difficult to isolate from everything else going on in students' lives. (This criticism is the reason groups that promote the involvement of communities and businesses to support, strengthen, and advocate for families are so important.) While terms like *decision making* and *collaboration* are often mentioned in connection with *parent involvement*, one still wonders what this involvement looks like in typical schools. Many researchers have pointed to the power discrepancies within most school systems as obstacles to ideal partnerships (Cervero, Wilson, & Associates, 2001; Graue, 1998; Sarason, 1995; Vincent, 1996).

POLITICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Political, cultural, and philosophical forces come into play in the dilemma of parent and teacher resistance to school expectations for parent involvement. To understand this resistance, we must understand what parents have expected from

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schools in the past, what is expected now, and what will be expected in the future. How is this resistance related to government policies and today's culture, economics, and politics? And how is it related to the way educational institutions were and are currently structured?

Lareau (1989, 2003) has suggested that parental actions related to education are still built into school philosophies of an appropriate role for parents, which is to do what is good for children—and the school defines what that is. Graue and Brown (2003) also found this attitude in new education majors in a Midwestern university setting. The 130 future teachers who participated in their study seemed to think family involvement should come in response to school directions. They were somewhat suspicious of parents, whom they viewed as caring more about themselves than their children and unwilling to admit their children had problems. These future teachers described the ideal parent as attentive and deferential to teachers and their expertise. The study participants were preoccupied with needing to establish their authority as teachers and saw the relationship between schools and parents as asymmetrical. Graue and Brown suggested that future teachers needed to reflect on how their own experiences and their own positions of privilege shape their views of parents.

McConchie (2004), in an issues paper prepared for Australian educators and communities concerned about involvement, cites other barriers to family-school partnerships, including fears that partnering with families in decision making will diminish the principal's authority. Some teachers in this review felt that because parents did not understand the school or the system, they likely would not know how to get involved in those types of roles. McConchie also suggested that teachers felt their professionalism was threatened when parents were involved in pedagogical issues, and this fear led in turn to parents' being excluded from any efforts to rethink educational practices. The paper concluded that parent initiatives often succeeded or failed based on teachers' perceptions (p. 8).

■ What Might Be a New Way to Think of Parental Involvement and Parent-Teacher Relationships?

Most educators may not realize that parental noninvolvement in school activities such as homework can be a parent's personal and political statement that what a school does is not always a good thing. In other words, parents may define good involvement as refusing to help a child do 4 hours of nightly homework, because that much homework interferes with family life. Such a refusal is usually seen as a deficiency in parents because doing homework is rarely questioned by society. (See Kohn, 2006, for a thoughtful and well-researched critique of homework.) If one were "thinking mindfully," students, parents, and teachers might meet to reflect on homework together and look at it in a new way.

Palmer (1998) suggests that the way to get at the truth of a matter is not to have an expert talk down to stakeholders but to put the subject in the middle and let all stakeholders provide insights into its meaning (p. 102). One might ask, what are a school's goals in giving homework? Are there different kinds of homework? What about relationship "work" at home and school and in the community? Thus, parents would not react by just assisting with homework without question but could take "critical actions" (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004), in which they evaluate the school's assumptions, policies, and beliefs about homework. Or in the case of *No Child Left Behind*, parents could critically evaluate what it is really doing for poor and disadvantaged children and how the focus on test performance to assess learning is in effect "dumbing down classrooms" (Kohn, 2004, as cited in Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004, p. 91).

Graue (1998) has introduced the informative concept of *answerability*, which complicates the situation even further. Most middle-class parents feel they are answerable primarily to their own children and must advance their children's achievement in society rather than advance society by questioning the amount of homework, competition, and individual achievement promoted in the United States and the lack of focus on caring, cooperation, citizenship, and life skills many feel are so important in adult life. They rarely question the funding of education, which leaves poor children with fewer resources than their own children enjoy. Our schools and governments have a responsibility to ensure equality for all. Do all U.S. schools "overcome the differences in starting point of children from different social groups" (Coleman, 1966, p. 72), as they were originally designed to do? If not, why not? Certain parents are rewarded more than others by an institution that has not been asked enough by parents, society at large, and policymakers to critically review the emphasis on homework, competition, and other school structures and goals. Almost a century ago, Winship (1912, p. 517) questioned this emphasis, believing homework disadvantaged poor children.

On the other hand, many teachers who choose to focus on cooperation feel a push from some parents to be more competitive. Thinking mindfully, we can look at competition and cooperation in a different way. Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) describe people mindlessly learning the basics about something. One of the things many people mindlessly accept as fundamental is the belief that homework, like competition, is good. Another is that reading, writing, and math are what children need to succeed. Langer and Moldoveanu note,

Having mindlessly accepted this information, it rarely occurs to us to question who determined what the basics are. . . . Once we learn the basics mindlessly so that we no longer have to think about them, we are not in a position to vary them readily as we get more information about the task. (p. 3)

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Some of the most thought-provoking suggestions for viewing the situation differently and relating to parents come from de Carvalho (2001), an educator who grew up in South America but did her graduate work in education in the United States and reared her own children here. She suggests that how schools involve families is a political and cultural issue with some negative ramifications for families. She questions the use of the school culture as the starting point (a top-down approach) for learning and suggests the home culture should be more influential in this regard.

Like Graue, de Carvalho (2001) concludes that “the main contradiction of parental involvement in schooling as a policy is that, albeit wrapped as grassroots, it is really top down” (p. 110). She too might praise the parent who refuses to help with homework without questioning its need or value. She notes, “Although families basically exist for children, they have their own needs, obligations, and policies (goals and practices), including children’s house chores, sleep time, and family activities (not family math!), with which school homework interferes” (p. 128).

Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) also noted the danger of schools’ seeing parents through the lens of a deficit model simply if these parents do not do what schools value. This concern has also been voiced by educators in Australia in a position paper compiled after several meetings with diverse stakeholders and much research:

One of the disturbing but common research findings is that school views about families are often predicated on a deficit model, which sees parents and their children in terms of having particular needs since they lack particular desirable attributes. Teachers and other professionals are charged with providing skills and knowledge to compensate for these deficiencies. This view can then lead to paternalistic practices whereby the views of parents and their children are neither sought nor valued when they are known. . . . Further, parents may be classified as either “good” or “bad,” based on generalizations that are simply not supported by research such as:

- single, supporting mothers are assumed to be both poor and bad parents;
- low income parents are assumed to be both disinterested and unsupportive of schools, have low literacy skills and unable to support their children with reading or other homework;
- parents whose first language is not English cannot help with homework;
- when children are poorly behaved their parents must be deficient in some way;
- good parents come to the school when invited or are required to do so. (McKeand, 2003, as cited in McConchie, 2004, pp. 6–7)

This research is cited because in my experience in Australia and review of its department of education findings and recommendations, I found much to commend these researchers' honest look at these macro issues. Being mindful, teachers will not accept myths such as those listed above as fact but will try to get to know and understand all parents and their sociocultural contexts. Teachers will also try to learn from parents (Turnbull, Blue-Banning, Park, & Turbiville, 1999, p. 168).

To support child, family, and teacher development within a cultural context, we would need a great deal of change, especially in the way the relationship between the school and the family is defined.

■ How Might Goals Differ in Past and Current Conceptions of Parent-Teacher Relationships?

Everyone, not just students, needs to be thought of as part of a learning community. A learning community is not just about fixing parents or children who are deficient or who complain about teachers. If people are always learning, then they need not criticize each other for sometimes getting things wrong. There also needs to be room for people to discuss the how, what, and when of children's learning (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004). This is a concern regarding the No Child Left Behind mandate. As Puriefoy (2005) noted, many parents believe that schooling should be done at local community schools rather than moving children outside their communities. These parents also believe important course content should not be eliminated so that instruction can focus only on passing tests. Parents also feel they should not have to fill all family hours with homework (Kohn, 2006). De Carvalho (2001) elaborates as follows:

This movement towards family educational accountability can be interpreted in terms of a redefinition of the scope and functions of schooling within cultural politics, as a movement that extends the reach of the school and its knowledge . . . in order to encompass domestic education and community cultural life. Through the formalization of homework within the family-school partnership, educational policy is regulating family life and socio-cultural life, an interesting case of extending the *disciplinary power* (Foucault, 1977) of the school to children's homes and to parenting activities. (p. 132)

Thus, homework becomes a "basic" and a case of family education and cultural politics, and parents who do not help unquestioningly are considered, in a way, bad children. Perhaps this kind of treatment is why so many parents resist involvement in their children's schools. Thinking mindfully, we could ask, what are some

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things parents do in their family and community activities to support their child's learning? What can children learn from the relationships between their parents and others in their community, such as senior citizens, neighborhood groups, and others? What are some ways teachers could integrate into school learning activities those things children do and care about in their out-of-school lives?

NEW PARADIGMS AND NEW SOLUTIONS: FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT

To summarize thus far, though there is some sensitivity to family context in various guidelines, in reality parent involvement is primarily still a matter of the school and the government, as experts, reaching out to families who need support to help their children or to get assistance to help their children. Official learning about children's familial and community contexts is still limited.

■ How Are Educators From Other Countries Thinking About This Issue? What Recommendations Are They Making?

In Australia, schools are attempting to revise curricula ("Essential Learnings" and "New Basics") in some states where "greater value [is] being placed on the knowledge and skills that children bring to the classroom as a result of family and community influences" (McConchie, 2004, p. 1). Similar initiatives in the United States are cited later in this text.

Graue and Brown (2003) suggest that field experiences with parents should be an essential component of teacher training. Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) suggest that schools use the word *engagement* rather than *involvement*, as this book will do from now on, emphasizing the parents, not just in what they do but in who they are and what relationships they form with people in schools and communities. Calabrese Barton et al. see engagement as "a desire, an expression, and an attempt by parents to have an impact on what actually transpires around their children in schools and the kinds of human, social and material resources that are valued within schools" (p. 11). Their research allows others to view parents as authors and agents in schools and not as passive recipients of unexamined directions.

Just as some parent education programs focus on understanding children so that parents can "manage" them, understanding families often seems more a means than an end in itself. The many schools and community organizations that are sensitive to family needs today are clearly an improvement over schools that focus on children and disregard their family context. Williams (1998), for example, describes a context-sensitive approach. This School Reform Project focused not just on needs but also on family culture as a dynamic resource.

Principals took the lead. Other exciting programs to be described in later chapters include *Libros y familias*; the Tellin' Stories Project (teachingforchange.org); the Parents Write Their World Project, affiliated with the Big City Program of the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education; the Study Circles (study-circles.org); and appreciative inquiry projects in schools. Other exciting programs are highlighted in the MetLife's Teacher-Parent Engagement through Partnerships resource (MetLife Foundation, 2002). Head Start and the School of the 21st Century (Finn-Stevenson & Zigler, 1999) also focus on this strengths-based approach to understanding parents.



Photo by Stacy Mitchell.

Grandfather is interviewed by his grandson as part of a school effort to make family history topics an integral part of the curriculum.

■ What Are Some Challenges of Implementing This New, Engagement-Focused Approach to Parent-Teacher Relationships?

Many parent involvement models are in transition today. Just as people question the likelihood of success of a so-called new FBI or CIA without real changes to the system, they also question new ideas about parent involvement that don't critically analyze current school structure, philosophies, and policies that might affect their own situation. Lopez (2003) describes many community actions to enhance the power of parents for system reform and school accountability: Community education organizing "focuses on 'relational power' which is the power to act collectively in order to make system change" (Cortes, 1993, as cited in Lopez). Lopez goes on to say,

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Organizing counters this individualized trend by bringing people into relationships with one another so that they can identify and act on school issues. Through one-on-one conversations, group dialogue, and reflection, parents and other residents develop a strong sense of community, and learn how to use their collective power to advocate for school change. In contrast, parent involvement approaches that focus on individual skill building rarely provide opportunities for dialogue about common problems. (p. 3)

The discussion that many hope we can eventually have would address the following questions:

- How are current school policies and approaches to parent involvement viewed by prospective teachers, current teachers, students, and families?
- How do many current school practices and guidelines impact children and the adults in children's lives, who are also growing and learning human beings with their own experiences, beliefs, needs, goals, ideas, and feelings?

Answering these questions encourages the development of the adults in children's lives and benefits children academically and personally as well.

So while government agencies mention the need for schools to better understand families, they do not usually mean truly changing the school system or having family life inform school life to a great degree. Not-for-profit agencies like Family Focus and some of the school reform programs (Comer et al., 1999; Williams, 1998) have supported new ways of working with parents, but much of this work still originates in or refers to agencies or special grants or focuses primarily on child outcome—a failing not only of schools but also of many of the helping professions.

Leaders in higher education today complain that future teachers are not required to take a course in understanding family dynamics and culture. See, for example, Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, and Lopez (1997). If family engagement is needed for success, then teachers need to be prepared to do it well. However, few states incorporate family engagement into teacher training and certification. Shartrand et al.'s study of 60 teacher certification programs in 22 states showed that when these programs existed at all, they tended to be in preschool teacher training. Some of the reasons they were not included elsewhere were resistance in attitudes of teachers and administrators and a lack of external pressure, funding, or other support. In addition to this book, the Family Involvement Network of Educators is an excellent resource to help teachers better understand families, as is the new text *Preparing Educators to Involve Families*, edited by Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, and Chatman (2005).

SUMMARY

I have described parent involvement guidelines for the purpose of background, not criticism. They are consistent with the way schools are currently construed and structured. Their authors presumably have the good of children in mind and can point to philosophical and empirical work to justify their conclusions. But these conclusions must continue to be reevaluated as educators think mindfully about the issues of today's society, the best practices in school settings, adult development and learning, and what children need in order to survive and thrive.

In spring 2002, *60 Minutes* did a telecast about the high quality of parent involvement in military base schools. Much of that involvement had to do with a system in which equal opportunity and democracy were key goals for the military culture and for their schools. Teachers were encouraged to involve parents in planning and were required to involve them in decision making. This situation turned out to be win-win. An educator in an institution of higher learning noted on the show that this degree of parent involvement is still rare and that in general, teachers are not prepared adequately to work effectively with parents as equal partners, which implies that parents play some role in decision making. Cuttance and Stokes (2000) describe effective parent involvement as comprising (a) different but equally valued roles for parents and educators and (b) mutuality, including listening to each other and maintaining a responsive dialogue.

What does *partnership* really mean? Vincent (1996) says, "Like 'participation,' 'partnership' is a diffuse concept. It implies a broad spectrum of ideas embracing equality, consensus, harmony and joint endeavor" (p. 3). Achieving partnership between parents and educators in our schools would take time and a huge paradigm shift within school cultures. This book will demonstrate how this shift can be accomplished through a comprehensive, caring school decision-making model and other parent initiatives being implemented nationally and internationally.

Some Activities and Questions for Investigation, Reflection, and Action

In this guided action process, I ask you to think, reflect, and plan on the basis of ideas and findings from this chapter:

Think

1. How do people mentioned in this chapter suggest educators rethink parent involvement?

(Continued)

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(Continued)

2. Think about one issue in this chapter that might be new to you, such as the relationship between power and the expectations of parents with regard to homework or the concept of answerability. Read more about the topic from the authors cited or other sources or perspectives and evaluate their analysis of the topic. How might your own experiences inform your analysis?

Reflect

3. Reflect on your own experience of parent involvement as a student in school or as a teacher now. What would you like to see remain the same? What might you like to see change? Discuss how your own experience might shape your views of parents today.

Plan

4. Plan on journaling as you use this text. See Appendix E1: Journaling Guides (www.sagepub.com/mcdermottappendices) for more information on journaling. Write about the following: As a professional, what are your hopes and fears regarding your relationships with parents? How might they relate to what you read in this chapter?
5. Role-play a discussion between someone who supports a more traditional view of parents and someone who uses mindfulness to look at parents in a new way. What kind of questions might the second person ask? Reflect on the results of this process. What questions might you now have for others when some of these conversations happen in real life?