

# School/ Family/ Community Partnerships

CARING FOR THE CHILDREN WE SHARE



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When schools form partnerships with families and the community, the children benefit. These guidelines for building partnerships can make it happen.

## By Joyce L. Epstein

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students.

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. They can improve

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school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life. When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work.

**Just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about it.**

What do successful partnership programs look like? How can practices be effectively designed and implemented? What are the results of better communications, interactions, and exchanges across these three important contexts? These questions have challenged research and practice, creating an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into school, family, and community partnerships with "caring" as a core concept.

The field has been strengthened by supporting federal, state, and local policies. For example, the Goals 2000 legislation sets partnerships as a voluntary national goal for all schools; Title I specifies and mandates programs and practices of partnership in order for schools to qualify for or maintain funding. Many states and districts have developed or are preparing policies to guide schools in creating more systematic connections with families and communities. These policies reflect research results and the prior successes of leading educators who have shown that these goals are attainable.

Underlying these policies and programs are a theory of how social organizations connect; a framework of the basic components of school, family, and community partnerships for children's learning; a growing literature on the positive and negative results of these connections for students, families, and schools; and an understanding of how to organize good programs. In this article I summarize the theory, framework, and guidelines that have assisted the schools in our research projects in building partnerships and that should help any elementary, middle, or high school to take similar steps.

**OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE**

Schools make choices. They might conduct only a few communications and interactions with fami-

lies and communities, keeping the three spheres of influence that directly affect student learning and development relatively separate. Or they might conduct many high-quality communications and interactions designed to bring all three spheres of influence closer together. With frequent interactions between schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school.

The *external model* of overlapping spheres of influence recognizes that the three major contexts in which students learn and grow — the family, the school, and the community — may be drawn together or pushed apart. In this model, there are some practices that schools, families, and communities conduct separately and some that they conduct jointly in order to influence children's learning and development. The *internal model* of the interaction of the three spheres of influence shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community. These social relationships may be enacted and studied at an *institutional level* (e.g., when a school invites all families to an event or sends the same communications to all families) and at an *individual level* (e.g., when a parent and a teacher meet in conference or talk by phone). Connections between schools or parents and community groups, agencies, and services can also be represented and studied within the model (Epstein 1987, 1992, 1994, 2001).

The model of school, family, and community partnerships locates the student at the center. The inarguable fact is that students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school. School, family, and community partnerships cannot simply produce successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes. The assumption is that, if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best to learn to read, write, calculate, and learn other skills and talents and to remain in school.

Interestingly and somewhat ironically, studies indicate that students are also crucial for the success of school, family, and community partnerships. Students are often their parents' main source of information about school. In strong partnership programs, teachers help students understand and conduct traditional communications with families (e.g., delivering memos or report cards) and new communications (e.g., interacting with family members about homework or participating in parent/teacher/

student conferences). As we gain more information about the role of students in partnerships, we are developing a more complete understanding of how schools, families, and communities must work with students to increase their chances for success.

### HOW THEORY SOUNDS IN PRACTICE

In some schools there are still educators who say, “If the family would just do its job, we could do our job.” And there are still families who say, “I raised this child; now it is your job to educate her.” These words embody the theory of “separate spheres of influence.” Other educators say, “I cannot do my job without the help of my students’ families and the support of this community.” And some parents say, “I really need to know what is happening in school in order to help my child.” These phrases embody the theory of “overlapping spheres of influence.”

In a partnership, teachers and administrators create more *family-like* schools. A family-like school recognizes each child’s individuality and makes each child feel special and included. Family-like schools welcome all families, not just those that are easy to reach. In a partnership, parents create more *school-like* families. A school-like family recognizes that each child is also a student. Families reinforce the importance of school, homework, and activities that build student skills and feelings of success. Communities, including groups of parents working together, create school-like opportunities, events, and programs that reinforce, recognize, and reward students for good progress, creativity, contributions, and excellence. Communities also create *family-like* settings, services, and events to enable families to better support their children. *Community-minded* families and students help their neighborhoods and other families. The concept of a community school is reemerging. It refers to a place where programs and services for students, parents, and others are offered before, during, and after the regular school day.

Schools and communities talk about programs and services that are “family-friendly” — meaning that they take into account the needs and realities of family life in the 1990s, are feasible to conduct, and are equitable toward all families. When all these concepts combine, children experience *learning communities* or *caring communities* (Brandt 1989; Epstein 1987; Lewis, Schaps, and Watson 1995).

All these terms are consistent with the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, but they are not abstract concepts. You will find them daily in conversations, news stories, and celebrations of many kinds. In a family-like school, a teacher might say, “I know when a student is having a bad day and how to help him along.” A student might slip and call a teacher “mom” or “dad” and then laugh with a mix-

ture of embarrassment and glee. In a school-like family, a parent might say, “I make sure my daughter knows that homework comes first.” A child might raise his hand to speak at the dinner table and then joke about acting as if he were still in school. When communities reach out to students and their families, youngsters might say, “This program really made my schoolwork make sense!” Parents or educators might comment, “This community really supports its schools.”

Once people hear about such concepts as family-like schools or school-like families, they remember positive examples of schools, teachers, and places in the community that were “like a family” to them. They may remember how a teacher paid individual attention to them, recognized their uniqueness, or praised them for real progress, just as a parent might. Or they might recall things at home that were “just like school” and supported their work as a student, or they might remember community activities that made them feel smart or good about themselves and their families. They will recall that parents, siblings, and other family members engaged in and enjoyed educational activities and took pride in the good schoolwork or homework that they did, just as a teacher might.

### HOW PARTNERSHIPS WORK IN PRACTICE

These terms and examples are evidence of the potential for schools, families, and communities to create caring educational environments. It is possible to have a school that is excellent academically but ignores families. However, that school will build barriers between teachers, parents, and children — barriers that affect school life and learning. It is possible to have a school that is ineffective academically but involves families in many good ways. With its weak academic program, that school will short-change students’ learning. Neither of these schools exemplifies a caring educational environment that requires academic excellence, good communications, and productive interactions involving school, family, and community.

Some children succeed in school without much family involvement or despite family neglect or distress, particularly if the school has excellent academic and support programs. Teachers, relatives outside of the immediate family, other families, and members of the community can provide important guidance and encouragement to these students. As support from school, family, and community accumulates, significantly more students feel secure and cared for, understand the goals of education, work to achieve to their full potential, build positive attitudes and school behaviors, and stay in school. The shared interests and investments of schools, families, and



communities create the conditions of caring that work to “overdetermine” the likelihood of student success (Boykin 1994).

Any practice can be designed and implemented well or poorly. And even well-implemented partnership practices may not be useful to all families. In a caring school community, participants work continually to improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth or successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships withstand questions, conflicts, debates, and disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained — even strengthened — after differences have been resolved. Without this firm base, disagreements and problems that are sure to arise about schools and students will be harder to solve.

### WHAT RESEARCH SAYS

In surveys and field studies involving teachers, parents, and students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, some important patterns relating to partnerships have emerged (see Epstein 1986, 1990, 1992, 1996; Ames, Khoju, and Watkins 1993; Baker and Stevenson 1986; Bauch 1988; Becker and Epstein 1982; Clark 1983; Dauber and Epstein 1993; Dornbusch and Ritter 1988; Eccles 1996; Epstein and Lee 1995; Lareau 1989; and Scott-Jones 1995).

- Partnerships tend to decline across the grades, unless schools and teachers work to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership at each grade level.
- Affluent communities currently have more positive family involvement, on average, unless schools and teachers in economically distressed communities work to build positive partnerships with their students’ families.
- Schools in more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having, unless they work at developing balanced partnership programs that include contacts about positive accomplishments of students.
- Single parents, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school, and fathers are less involved, on average, at the school building, unless the school organizes opportunities for families to volunteer at various times and in various places to support the school and their children.

Researchers have also drawn the following conclusions.

- Just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities so as to remain good partners in their children’s education.
- Just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive programs and are consequently fearful about trying. This creates a “rhetoric rut,” in which educators are stuck, expressing support for partnerships without taking any action.
- Just about all students at all levels — elementary, middle, and high school — want their families to be more knowledgeable partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in assisting communications between home and school. However, students need much better information and guidance than most now receive about how their schools view partnerships and about how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions.

The research results are important because they indicate that caring communities can be built on purpose; that they include families that might not become involved on their own; and that, by their own reports, just about all families, students, and teachers believe that partnerships are important for helping students succeed across the grades.

Good programs will look different in each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, ages and grade levels of students and their families. However, there are some commonalities across successful programs at all grade levels. These include a recognition of the overlapping spheres of influence on student development; attention to various types of involvement that promote a variety of opportunities for schools, families, and communities to work together; and an Action Team for School, Family, and Community Partnerships to coordinate each school’s work and progress.

### SIX TYPES OF CARING

A framework of six major types of involvement has evolved from many studies and from many years of work by educators and families in elementary, middle, and high schools. The framework (summarized in the accompanying tables) helps educators

develop more comprehensive programs of school and family partnerships and also helps researchers locate their questions and results in ways that inform and improve practice. (The three tables update earlier versions that were based on only five types of involvement. For other discussions of the types, practices, challenges, redefinitions, and results, see Epstein 1992; Connors Tadros and Epstein 2002;

Epstein and Connors Tadros 1994, 1995. Schools' activities with various types of involvement are outlined in Davies, Burch, and Johnson 1992.)

Each type of involvement includes many different *practices* of partnership (see Table 1). Each type presents particular *challenges* that must be met in order to involve all families and needed *redefinitions* of some basic principles of involvement (see Table 2).

**TABLE 1.**  
**Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement and Sample Practices**

<b>Type 1 Parenting</b>	<b>Type 2 Communicating</b>	<b>Type 3 Volunteering</b>	<b>Type 4 Learning at Home</b>	<b>Type 5 Decision Making</b>	<b>Type 6 Collaborating with Community</b>
<p>Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.</p>	<p>Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.</p>	<p>Recruit and organize parent help and support.</p>	<p>Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.</p>	<p>Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.</p>	<p>Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.</p>
<p><b>Sample Practices</b></p>	<p><b>Sample Practices</b></p>		<p><b>Sample Practices</b></p>	<p><b>Sample Practices</b></p>	<p><b>Sample Practices</b></p>
<p>Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level.</p>	<p>Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed.</p>	<p><b>Sample Practices</b></p> <p>School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents.</p>	<p>Information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade.</p>	<p>Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees (e.g., curriculum, safety, personnel) for parent leadership and participation.</p>	<p>Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services.</p>
<p>Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., GED, college credit, family literacy).</p>	<p>Language translators to assist families as needed.</p>	<p>Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, resources for families.</p>	<p>Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.</p>	<p>Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements.</p>	<p>Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students.</p>
<p>Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services.</p>	<p>Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comments.</p>	<p>Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times and locations of volunteers.</p>	<p>Information on how to assist students to improve skills on various class and school assessments.</p>	<p>District-level councils and committees for family and community involvement.</p>	<p>Service integration through partnerships involving school, civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations, and businesses.</p>
<p>Home visits at transition points to preschool, elementary, middle, and high school. Neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families.</p>	<p>Parent/student pickup of report card, with conferences on improving grades.</p>	<p>Class parent, telephone tree, or other structures to provide all families with needed information.</p>	<p>Regular schedule of homework that requires students to discuss and interact with families on what they are learning in class.</p>	<p>Information on school or local elections for school representatives.</p>	<p>Participation of alumni in school programs for students.</p>
<p>Clear information on choosing schools or courses, programs, and activities within schools.</p>	<p>Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.</p>	<p>Parent patrols or other activities to aid safety and operation of school programs.</p>	<p>Calendars with activities for parents and students at home.</p>	<p>Networks to link all families with parent representatives.</p>	<p>Service to the community by students, families, and schools (e.g., recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities for senior or others).</p>
<p>Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions.</p>	<p>Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions.</p>	<p>Parent participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work.</p>	<p>Family math, science, and reading activities at school.</p>	<p>Summer learning packets or activities.</p>	<p>Participation of alumni in school programs for students.</p>
					

Finally, each type is likely to lead to different *results* for students, for parents, for teaching practice, and for school climate (see Table 3). Thus schools have choices about which practices will help achieve important goals. The tables provide examples of practices, challenges for successful implementation, redefinitions for up-to-date understanding, and results

that have been documented and observed.

## CHARTING THE COURSE

The entries in the tables are illustrative. The sample practices displayed in Table 1 are only a few of hundreds that may be selected or designed for each type of involvement. Although all schools may use

**TABLE 2.**  
**Challenges and Redefinitions for the Six Types of Involvement**

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating with Community
<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>Provide information to all families who want it or who need it, not just to the few who can attend workshops or meetings at the school building.</p> <p>Enable families to share information with schools about culture, background, children's talents and needs.</p> <p>Make sure that all information for and from families is clear, usable, and linked to children's success in school.</p> <p><b>Redefinitions</b></p> <p>"Workshop" to mean more than a <i>meeting</i> about a topic held at the school building at a particular time.</p> <p>"Workshop" may also mean making information about a topic available in a variety of forms that can be viewed, heard, or read anywhere, any time, in varied forms.</p>	<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>Review the readability, clarity, form, and frequency of all memos, notices, and other print and nonprint communications.</p> <p>Consider parents who do not speak English well, read well, or need large type.</p> <p>Review the quality of major communications (newsletters, report cards, conference schedules, and so on).</p> <p>Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home.</p> <p><b>Redefinitions</b></p> <p>"Communications about school programs and student progress" to mean two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community.</p>	<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>Recruit volunteers widely so that all families know that their time and talents are welcome.</p> <p>Make flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable parents who work to participate.</p> <p>Organize volunteer work; provide training; match time and talent with school, teachers, and student needs; and recognize efforts of the participants are productive.</p>  <p><b>Redefinitions</b></p> <p>"Volunteer" to mean anyone who supports school goals and children's learning or development in any way, at any place, and at any time not just during the school day and at the school building.</p>	<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>Design and organize a regular schedule of interactive homework (e.g., weekly or bi-monthly) that gives students responsibility for discussing important things they are learning and helps families stay aware of the content of their children's classwork.</p> <p>Coordinate family-linked homework activities, if students have several teachers.</p> <p>Involve families and their children in all important curriculum-related decisions.</p> <p><b>Redefinitions</b></p> <p>"Homework" to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life.</p> <p>"Help" at home to mean encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing — not "teaching" school subjects.</p>	<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>Include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the school.</p> <p>Offer training to enable leaders to serve as representatives of other families, with input from and return of information to all parents.</p> <p>Include students (along with parents) in decision-making groups.</p> <p><b>Redefinitions</b></p> <p>"Decision making" to mean a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not just a power struggle between conflicting ideas.</p> <p>Parent "leader" to mean a real representative, with opportunities and support to hear from and communicate with other families.</p>	<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>Solve turf problems of responsibilities, funds, staff, and locations for collaborative activities.</p> <p>Inform families of community programs for students, such as mentoring, tutoring, business partnerships.</p> <p>Ensure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs or to obtain services.</p> <p>Match community contributions with school goals; integrate child and family services with education.</p> <p><b>Redefinitions</b></p> <p>"Community" to mean not only the neighborhoods where students' homes and schools are located but also any neighborhoods that influence their learning and development.</p> <p>"Community" created not only by low or high social or economic qualities, but by strengths and talents to support students, families, and schools.</p> <p>"Community" means all who are interested in and affected by the quality of education, not just those with children in the schools.</p>

**TABLE 3.**

**Expected Results of the Six Types of Involvement for Students, Parents, and Teachers**

<b>Type 1 Parenting</b>	<b>Type 2 Communicating</b>	<b>Type 3 Volunteering</b>	<b>Type 4 Learning at Home</b>	<b>Type 5 Decision Making</b>	<b>Type 6 Collaborating with Community</b>
<p><b>Results for Students</b></p> <p>Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents.</p> <p>Positive personal qualities, habits, beliefs, and values, as taught by family.</p> <p>Balance between time spent on chores, on other activities, and on homework.</p> <p>Good or improved attendance.</p> <p>Awareness of importance of school.</p>	<p><b>Results for Students</b></p> <p>Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades.</p> <p>Understanding of school policies on behavior, attendance, and other areas of student conduct.</p> <p>Informed decisions about courses and programs.</p> <p>Awareness of own role in partnerships, serving as courier and communicator.</p>	<p><b>Results for Students</b></p> <p>Skill in communicating with adults.</p> <p>Increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or target attention from volunteers.</p> <p>Awareness of many skills, talents, occupations, and contributions from parents and other volunteers.</p>	<p><b>Results for Students</b></p> <p>Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classwork.</p> <p>Homework completion.</p> <p>Positive attitude toward schoolwork.</p> <p>View of parent as more similar to teacher and of home as more similar to school.</p> <p>Self-concept of ability as learner.</p>	<p><b>Results for Students</b></p> <p>Awareness of representation of families in school decisions.</p> <p>Understanding that student rights are protected.</p> <p>Specific benefits linked to policies enacted by parent organizations and experienced by students.</p>	<p><b>Results for Students</b></p> <p>Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences.</p> <p>Awareness of careers and of options for future education and work.</p> <p>Specific benefits linked to programs, services, resources, and opportunities that connect students with community.</p>
<p><b>For Parents</b></p> <p>Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child, and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school.</p> <p>Awareness of own and others' challenges in parenting.</p> <p>Feeling of support from school and other parents.</p>	<p><b>For Parents</b></p> <p>Understanding school programs and policies.</p> <p>Monitoring and awareness of child's progress.</p> <p>Responding effectively to students' problems.</p> <p>Interactions with teachers and ease of communication with school and teachers.</p>	 <p><b>For Parents</b></p> <p>Understanding teacher's job, increased comfort in school, and carry-over of school activities at home.</p> <p>Self-confidence about ability to work in school and with children or to take steps to improve own education.</p>	<p><b>For Parents</b></p> <p>Know how to support, encourage, and help student at home each year.</p> <p>Discussions of school, classwork, and homework.</p> <p>Understanding of instructional program each year and of what child is learning in each subject.</p> <p>Appreciation of teaching skills.</p> <p>Awareness of child as a learner.</p>	<p><b>For Parents</b></p> <p>Input into policies that affect child's education.</p> <p>Feeling of ownership of school.</p> <p>Awareness of parents' voices in school decisions.</p> <p>Shared experiences and connections with other families.</p> <p>Awareness of school, district, and state policies.</p>	<p><b>For Parents</b></p> <p>Knowledge and use of local resources by family and child to increase skills and talents or to obtain needed services.</p> <p>Interactions with other families in community activities.</p> <p>Awareness of schools' role in the community and of community's contributions to the school.</p>
<p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <p>Understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of children.</p> <p>Respect for families' strengths and efforts.</p> <p>Understanding of student diversity.</p> <p>Awareness of own skills to share information on child development.</p>	<p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <p>Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly.</p> <p>Appreciation for and use of parent network for communications.</p> <p>Increased ability to elicit and understand family views on children's programs and progress.</p>	<p>Awareness that families are welcome and valued at school</p> <p>Gains in specific skills of volunteer work.</p> <p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <p>Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school.</p> <p>Awareness of parents' talents and interests in school and children.</p> <p>Greater individual attention to students, with help from volunteers.</p>	<p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <p>Better design of homework assignments.</p> <p>Respect of family time.</p> <p>Recognition of equal helpfulness of single-parent, dual-income, and less formally educated families in motivating and reinforcing student learning.</p> <p>Satisfaction with family involvement and support.</p>	 <p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <p>Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions.</p> <p>View of equal status of family representatives on committees and in leadership roles.</p>	<p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <p>Awareness of community resources to enrich curriculum and instruction.</p> <p>Openness to and skill in using mentors, business partners, community volunteers, and others to assist students and augment teaching practice.</p> <p>Knowledgeable, helpful referrals of children and families to needed services.</p>



the framework of six types as a guide, each school much chart its own course in choosing practices to meet the needs of its families and students.

The challenges shown (Table 2) are just a few of many that relate to the examples. There are challenges — that is, problems — for every practice of partnership, and they must be resolved in order to reach and engage all families in the best ways. Often, when one challenge is met, a new one will emerge.

The redefinitions (also in Table 2) redirect old no-

**Most schools have some teachers who conduct some practices of partnership with some families some of the time.**

tions so that involvement is not viewed solely as or measured only by “bodies in the building.” As examples, the table calls for redefinitions of workshops, communication, volunteers, homework, decision making, and community. By redefining these familiar terms, it is possible for partnership programs to reach out in new ways to many more families.

The selected results (Table 3) should help correct the widespread misperception that any practice that involves families will raise children’s achievement test scores. Instead, in the short term, certain practices are more likely than others to influence students’ skills and scores, while other practices are more likely to affect attitudes and behaviors. Although students are the main focus of partnerships, the various types of involvement also promote various kinds of results for parents and for teachers. For example, the expected results for parents include not only leadership in decision making, but also confidence about parenting, productive curriculum-related interactions with children, and many interactions with other parents and the school. The expected results for teachers include not only improved parent/teacher conferences or school/home communications, but also better understanding of families, new approaches to homework, and other connections with families and the community.

Most of the results noted in Table 3 have been measured in at least one research study and observed as schools conduct their work. The entries are listed in positive terms to indicate the results of well-designed and well-implemented practices. It should be fully understood, however, that results may be negative if poorly designed practices exclude families or create greater barriers to communication and exchange. Research is still needed on the results of specific practices of partnership in various schools, at various grade levels, and for diverse populations of students, families, and teachers. It will be important

to confirm, extend, or correct the information on results listed in Table 3 if schools are to make purposeful choices among practices that foster various types of involvement.

The tables cannot show the connections that occur when one practice activates several types of involvement simultaneously. For example, volunteers may organize and conduct a food bank (Type 3) that allows parents to pay \$15 for \$30 worth of food for their families (Type 1). The food may be subsidized by community agencies (Type 6). The recipients might then serve as volunteers for the program or in the community (perpetuating Type 3 and Type 6 activities). Or consider another example. An after-school homework club run by volunteers and the community recreation department combines Type 3 and Type 6 practices. Yet it also serves as a Type 1 activity, because the after-school program assists families with the supervision of their children. This practice may also alter the way homework interactions are conducted between students and parents at home (Type 4). These and other connections are interesting, and research is needed to understand the combined effects of such activities.

The tables also simplify the complex longitudinal influences that produce various results over time. For example, a series of events might play out as follows. The involvement of families in reading at home leads students to give more attention to reading and to be more strongly motivated to read. This in turn may help students maintain or improve their daily reading skills and then their reading grades. With the accumulation over time of good classroom reading programs, continued home support, and increased skills and confidence in reading, students may significantly improve their reading achievement test scores. The time between reading aloud at home and increased reading test scores may vary greatly, depending on the quality and quantity of other reading activities in school and out.

Or consider another example. A study by Seyong Lee, using longitudinal data and rigorous statistical controls on background and prior influences, found important benefits for high school students’ attitudes and grades as a result of continuing several types of family involvement from the middle school into the high school. However, achievement test scores were not greatly affected by partnerships at the high school level. Longitudinal studies and practical experiences that are monitored over time are needed to increase our understanding of the complex patterns of results that can develop from various partnership activities (Lee 1994. For a discussion of issues concerning the results of partnerships, see Epstein, 1996. For various research reports on results of partnerships for students and for parents, see Ep-



stein 1991; Epstein and Dauber 1995; Epstein and Jacobsen 1994; Epstein and Lee 1993; and Henderson and Berla 1994).

The six types of involvement can guide the development of a balanced, comprehensive program of partnerships, including opportunities for family involvement at school and at home, with potentially important results for students, parents, and teachers. The results for students, parents, and teachers will depend on the particular types of involvement that are implemented, as well as on the quality of the implementation.

### **ACTION TEAMS FOR PARTNERSHIPS**

Who will work to create caring school communities that are based on the concepts of partnership? How will the necessary work on all six types of involvement get done? Although a principal or a teacher may be a leader in working with some families or with groups in the community, one person cannot create a lasting, comprehensive program that involves all families as their children progress through the grades.

From the hard work of many educators and families in many schools, we have learned that, along with clear policies and strong support from state and district leaders and from school principals, an Action Team for School, Family, and Community Partnerships in each school is a useful structure. The action team guides the development of a comprehensive program of partnership, including all six types of involvement, and the integration of all family and community connections within a single, unified plan and program. The trials and errors, efforts and insights of many schools in our projects have helped to identify five important steps that any school can take to develop more positive school/family/community connections (Connors Tadros and Epstein 1994; Epstein and Connors Tadros 1994; Epstein and Dauber 1991; and Epstein, Herrick, and Coates in press. For other approaches to the use of action teams for partnerships, see Burch and Palanki 1994; Burch, Palanki, and Davies 1995; Davies 1991, 1993; Davies, Palanki, and Palanki 1993. For an example of an organizing mechanism for action teams, see Johnson 1994).

#### **STEP 1: CREATE AN ACTION TEAM**

A team approach is an appropriate way to build partnerships. The Action Team for School, Family, and Community Partnerships can be the “action arm” of a school council, if one exists. The action team takes responsibility for assessing present practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, evaluating next steps, and continuing to improve and coordinate practices

for all six types of involvement. Although the members of the action team lead these activities, they are assisted by other teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members.

The action team should include at least three teachers from different grade levels, three parents with children in different grade levels, and at least one administrator. Teams may also include at least one member from the community at large and, at the middle and high school levels, at least two students from different grade levels. Others who are central to the school’s work with families may also be included as members, such as a cafeteria worker, a school social worker, a counselor, or a school psychologist. Such diverse membership ensures that partnership activities will take into account the various needs, interests, and talents of teachers, parents, the school, and students.



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**Diverse membership ensures that partnership activities will take into account the various needs, interests, and talents of teachers, parents, the school, and students.**

The leader of the action team may be any member who has the respect of the other members, as well as good communication skills and an understanding of the partnership approach. The leader or at least one member of the action team should also serve on the school council, school improvement team, or other such body, if one exists.

In addition to group planning, members of the action team elect (or are assigned to act as) the chair or co-chair of one of the six subcommittees for each type of involvement. A team with at least six members (or perhaps as many as 12) ensures that responsibilities for leadership can be delegated so that one person is not overburdened and so that the work of the action team will continue even if members move or change schools or positions. Members may serve

renewable terms of two or three years, with replacement of any who leave in the interim. Other thoughtful variations in assignments and activities may be created by small or large schools using this process.

In the first phase of our work in 1987, projects were led by “project directors” (usually teachers) and were focused on one type of involvement at a time. Some schools succeeded in developing good partnerships over several years, but others were thwarted if the project director moved, if the principal changed, or if the project grew larger than one person could handle. Other schools took a team approach in order to work on many types of involvement simultaneously. Their efforts demonstrated



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**The action team might use formal questionnaires, telephone interviews, or organize a panel of teachers, parents, and students to assess starting points.**

how to structure the program for the next set of schools in our work. Starting in 1990, this second set of schools tested and improved on the structure and work of action teams. Now, all elementary, middle, and high schools in our research and development projects and in other states and districts that are applying this work are given assistance in taking the action team approach.

### **STEP 2: OBTAIN SUPPORT**

A modest budget is needed to guide and support the work and expenses of each school’s action team. Funds for state coordinators to assist districts and schools and funds for district coordinators or facilitators to help each school may come from a number of sources. These include federal, state, and local

programs that mandate, request, or support family involvement, such as Title I, Title II, Title VII, Goals 2000, and other federal and similar state funding programs. In addition to paying the state and district coordinators, funds from these sources may be applied in creative ways to support staff development in the area of school, family, and community partnerships; to pay for lead teachers at each school; to set up demonstration programs; and for the other partnership expenses. In addition, local school/business partnerships, school discretionary funds, and separate fund-raising efforts targeted to the schools’ partnership programs have been used to support the work of their action teams. At the very least, a school’s action team requires a small stipend (at least \$1,000 per year for three to five years, with summer supplements) for time and materials needed by each subcommittee to plan, implement, and revise practices of partnership that include all six types of involvement.

The action team must also be given sufficient time and social support to do its work. This requires explicit support from the principal and district leaders to allow time for team members to meet, plan, and conduct the activities that are selected for each type of involvement. Time during the summer is also valuable — and may be essential — for planning new approaches that will start in the new school year.

### **STEP 3: IDENTIFY STARTING POINTS**

Most schools have some teachers who conduct some practices of partnership with some families some of the time. How can good practices be organized and extended so that they may be used by all teachers, at all grade levels, with all families? The action team works to improve and systematize the typically haphazard patterns of involvement. It starts by collecting information about the school’s present practices of partnership, along with the views, experiences, and wishes of teachers, parents, administrators, and students.

Assessments of starting points may be made in a variety of ways, depending on available resources, time, and talents. For example, the action team might use formal questionnaires (surveys for teachers and parents in the elementary and middle grades and for teachers, parents, and students in high school, developed and revised in 1993 by Joyce L. Epstein, Karen Clark Salinas, and Lori Connors Tadros, are available from the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children’s Learning at Johns Hopkins University) or telephone interviews to survey teachers, administrators, parents, and students (if resources exist to process, analyze, and report survey data). Or the action team might organize a panel of teachers, parents, and students to speak at a meeting

of the parent/teacher organization or at some other school meeting as a way of initiating discussion about the goals and desired activities for partnership. Structured discussions may be conducted through a series of principal's breakfasts for representative groups of teachers, parents, students, and others; random sample phone calls may also be used to collect reactions and ideas, or formal focus groups may be convened to gather ideas about school, family, and community partnerships at the school.

What questions should be addressed? Regardless of how the information is gathered, some areas must be covered in any information gathering.

*Present strengths.* Which practices of school/family/community partnerships are now working well for the school as a whole? For individual grade levels? For which types of involvement?

*Needed changes.* Ideally, how do we want school, family, and community partnerships to work at this school three years from now? Which present practices should continue, and which should change? To reach school goals, what new practices are needed for each of the major types of involvement?

*Expectations.* What do teachers expect of families? What do families expect of teachers and other school personnel? What do students expect their families to do to help them negotiate school life? What do students expect their teachers to do to keep their families informed and involved?

*Sense of community.* Which families are we now reaching, and which are we not yet reaching? Who are the "hard-to-reach" families? What might be done to communicate with and engage these families in their children's education? Are current partnership practices coordinated to include all families as a school community? Or are families whose children receive special services (e.g., Title I, special education, bilingual education) separated from other families?

*Links to goals.* How are students faring on such measures of academic achievement as report card grades, on measures of attitudes and attendance, and on other indicators of success? How might family and community connections assist the school in helping more students reach higher goals and achieve greater success? Which practices of school, family, and community partnerships would directly connect to particular goals?

#### **STEP 4: DEVELOP A THREE-YEAR PLAN**

From the ideas and goals for partnerships collected from teachers, parents, and students, the action team can develop a three-year outline of the specific steps that will help the school progress from its starting point on each type of involvement to where it wants to be in three years. This plan outlines how

each subcommittee will work over three years to make important, incremental advances to reach more families each year on each type of involvement. The three-year outline also shows how all school/family/community connections will be integrated into one coherent program of partnership that includes activities for the whole school community, activities to meet the special needs of children and families, activities to link to the district committees and councils, and activities conducted in each grade level.

**If the action team makes only one good step forward each year on each of the six types of involvement, it will take 18 steps forward over three years.**

In addition to the three-year outline of goals for each type of involvement, a detailed one-year plan should be developed for the first year's work. It should include the specific activities that will be implemented, improved, or maintained for each type of involvement; a time line of monthly actions needed for each activity; identification of the subcommittee chair who will be responsible for each type of involvement; identification of the teachers, parents, students, or others (not necessarily action team members) who will assist with the implementation of each activity; indicators of how the implementation and results of each major activity will be assessed; and other details of importance to the action team.

The three-year outline and one-year detailed plan are shared with the school council and/or parent organization, with all teachers, and with the parents and students. Even if the action team makes only one good step forward each year on each of the six types of involvement, it will take 18 steps forward over three years to develop a more comprehensive and coordinated program of school/family/community partnerships.

In short, based on the input from the parents, teachers, students, and others on the school's starting points and desired partnerships, the action team will address these issues.

- *Details.* What will be done each year, for three years, to implement a program on all six types of involvement? What, specifically, will be accomplished in the first year on each type of involvement?
- *Responsibilities.* Who will be responsible for developing and implementing practices of partnership for each type of involvement? Will staff development be needed? How will teachers, administrators, parents, and students

be supported and recognized for their work?

- *Costs.* What costs are associated with the improvement and maintenance of the planned activities? What sources will provide the needed funds? Will small grants or other special budgets be needed?
- *Evaluation.* How will we know how well the practices have been implemented and what their effects are on students, teachers, and families? What indicators will we use that are closely linked to the practices implemented to determine their effects?

### **The development of a partnership is a process, not a single event.**

#### **STEP 5: CONTINUE PLANNING AND WORKING**

The action team should schedule an annual presentation and celebration of progress at the school so that all teachers, families, and students will know about the work that has been done each year to build partnerships. Or the district coordinator for school, family, and community partnerships might arrange an annual conference for all schools in the district. At the annual school or district meeting, the action team presents and displays the highlights of accomplishments on each type of involvement. Problems are discussed and ideas are shared about improvements, additions, and continuations for the next year.

Each year, the action team updates the school's three-year outline and develops a detailed one-year plan for the coming year's work. It is important for educators, families, students, and the community at large to be aware of annual progress, of new plans, and of how they can help.

In short, the action team addresses the following questions. How can it ensure that the program of school/family/community partnership will continue to improve its structure, processes, and practices in order to increase the number of families who are partners with the school in their children's education? What opportunities will teachers, parents, and students have to share information on successful practices and to strengthen and maintain their efforts?

#### **SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS**

As schools have implemented partnership programs, their experience has helped to identify some important properties of successful partnerships.

*Incremental progress.* Progress in partnerships is incremental, including more families each year in ways

that benefit more students. Like reading or math programs, assessment programs, sports programs, and other school investments, partnership programs take time to develop, must be periodically reviewed, and should be continuously improved. The schools in our projects have shown that three years is the minimum time needed for an action team to complete a number of activities on each type of involvement and to establish its work as a productive and permanent structure in a school.

The development of a partnership is a process, not a single event. All teachers, families, students, and community groups do not engage in all activities on all types of involvement all at once. Not all activities implemented will succeed with all families. But with good planning, thoughtful implementation, well-designed activities, and pointed improvements, more and more families and teachers can learn to work with one another on behalf of the children whose interests they share. Similarly, not all students instantly improve their attitudes or achievements when their families become involved in their education. After all, student learning depends mainly on good curricula and instruction and on the work completed by students. However, with a well-implemented program of partnership, more students will receive support from their families, and more will be motivated to work harder.

*Connection to curricular and instructional reform.* A program of school/family/community partnerships that focuses on children's learning and development is an important component of curricular and instructional reform. Aspects of partnerships that aim to help more students succeed in school can be supported by federal, state, and local funds that are targeted for curricular and instructional reform. Helping families understand, monitor, and interact with students on homework, for example, can be a clear and important extension of classroom instruction, as can volunteer programs that bolster and broaden student skills, talents, and interests. Improving the content and conduct of parent/teacher/student conferences and goal-setting activities can be an important step in curricular reform; family support and family understanding of child and adolescent development and school curricula are necessary elements to assist students as learners.

The connection of partnerships to curriculum and instruction in schools and the location of leadership for these partnership programs in district departments of curriculum and instruction are important changes that move partnerships from being peripheral public relations activities about parents to being central programs about student learning and development.

*Redefining staff development.* The action team ap-





**Helping families understand, monitor, and interact with students on homework can be an important extension of classroom instruction.**

proach to partnerships guides the work of educators by restructuring “staff development” to mean colleagues working together and with parents to develop, implement, evaluate, and continue to improve practices of partnership. This is less a “dose of inservice education” than it is an active form of developing staff talents and capacities. The teachers, administrators, and others on the action team become the “experts” on this topic for their school. Their work in this area can be supported by various federal, state, and local funding programs as a clear investment in staff development for overall school reform. Indeed, the action team approach as outlined can be applied to any or all important topics on a school improvement agenda. It need not be restricted to the pursuit of successful partnerships.

It is important to note that the development of partnership programs would be easier if educators came to their schools prepared to work productively with families and communities. Courses or classes are needed in preservice teacher education and in advanced degree programs for teachers and administrators to help them define their professional work in terms of partnerships. Today, most educators enter schools without an understanding of family backgrounds, concepts of caring, the framework of partnerships, or the other “basics” I have discussed here. Thus most principals and district leaders are not prepared to guide and lead their staffs in developing strong school and classroom practices that inform and involve families. And most teachers and administrators are not prepared to understand, design, im-

plement, or evaluate good practices of partnership with the families of their students. Colleges and universities that prepare educators and others who work with children and families should identify where in their curricula the theory, research, policy, and practical ideas about partnerships are presented or where in their programs these can be added. (Ammon 1990; Chavkin and Williams 1988; Hinz, Clarke, and Nathan 1992. To correct deficiencies in the education of educators, I have written a course text or supplementary reader based on the theory, framework, and approaches described in this article. See Epstein 2001. Other useful readings for a university course include Christenson and Conoley 1993; Fagnano and Werber 1994; Fruchter, Galletta, and White 1992; Rioux and Berla 1993; Swap 1993.)

Even with improved preservice and advanced coursework, however, each school’s action team will have to tailor its menu of practices to the needs and wishes of the teachers, families, and students in the school. The framework and guidelines offered in this article can be used by thoughtful educators to organize this work, school by school.

### **THE CORE OF CARING**

One school in our Baltimore project named its partnership the “I Care Program.” It developed an I Care Parent Club that fostered fellowship and leadership of families, an I Care Newsletter, and many other events and activities. Other schools also gave catchy, positive names to their programs to indicate to families, students, teachers, and everyone else in

the school community that there are important relationships and exchanges that must be developed in order to assist students.

Interestingly, synonyms for “caring” match the six types of involvement: Type 1, parenting: supporting, nurturing, and rearing; Type 2, communicating: relating, reviewing, and overseeing; Type 3, volunteering: supervising and fostering; Type 4, learning at home: managing, recognizing, and rewarding; Type 5, decision making: contributing, considering, and judging; and Type 6, collaborating with the community: sharing and giving.

**Underlying all six types of involvement are two defining synonyms of caring: trusting and respecting.**

Underlying all six types of involvement are two defining synonyms of caring: trusting and respecting. Of course, the varied meanings are interconnected, but it is striking that language permits us to call forth various elements of caring associated with activities for the six types of involvement. If all six types of involvement are operating well in a school’s program of partnership, then all of these caring behaviors could be activated to assist children’s learning and development.

Despite real progress in many states, districts, and schools over the past few years, there are still too many schools in which educators do not understand the families of their students; in which families do not understand their children’s schools; and in which communities do not understand or assist the schools, families, or students. There are still too many states and districts without the policies, departments, leadership, staff, and fiscal support needed to enable all their schools to develop good programs of partnership. Yet relatively small financial investments that support and assist the work of action teams could yield significant returns for all schools, teachers, families, and students. Educators who have led the way with trials, errors, and successes provide evidence that any state, district, or school can create similar programs. (See, for example, Lloyd 1996; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 1994; and the special section on parent involvement in the January 1991 *Phi Delta Kappan*.)

Schools have choices. There are two common approaches to involving families in schools and in their children’s education. One approach emphasizes conflict and views the school as a battleground. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment guarantee power struggles and disharmony. The other approach emphasizes partnership and views

the school as a homeland. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment invite power sharing and mutual respect and allow energies to be directed toward activities that foster student learning and development. Even when conflicts rage, however, peace must be restored sooner or later, and the partners in children’s education must work together.

**NEXT STEPS**

Collaborative work and thoughtful give-and-take among researchers, policy leaders, educators, and parents are responsible for the progress that has been made over the past decade in understanding and developing school, family, and community partnerships. Similar collaborations will be important for future progress in this and other areas of school reform. To promote these approaches, I am establishing a national network of Partnership-2000 Schools to help link state, district, and other leaders who are responsible for helping their elementary, middle, and high schools implement programs of school, family, and community partnerships by the year 2000. The state and district coordinators must be supported for at least three years by sufficient staff and budgets to enable them to help increasing numbers of elementary, middle, and high schools in their districts to plan, implement, and maintain comprehensive programs of partnership.

Partnership-2000 Schools will be aided in putting the recommendations of this article into practice in ways that are appropriate to their locations. Implementation will include applying the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the framework of six types of involvement, and the action team approach. Researchers and staff members at Johns Hopkins will disseminate information and guidelines, send out newsletters, and hold optional annual workshops to help state and district coordinators learn new strategies and share successful ideas. Activities for leaders at the state and district levels will be shared, as will school-level programs and successful partnership practices.

The national network of Partnership-2000 Schools will begin its activities in the fall of 1995 and will continue until at least the year 2000. The goal is to enable leaders in all states and districts to assist all their schools in establishing and strengthening programs of school/family/community partnership. (For more information about the national network of Partnership-2000 Schools, send the name, position, address, and phone and fax numbers of the contact person/coordinator for partnerships for your state or district to Joyce Epstein, Partnership-2000 Schools, CRESPAR/Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children’s Learning, Johns Hop-

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