

Questioning Mom and Dad

Parent Involvement and Public Policy

The past two decades have been filled with policies encouraging parent involvement. From the Goals 2000: Educate America Act to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal government has been creating legislation to increase parent participation in schools. Most recently, under NCLB, schools and school districts receiving Title I funding are required to create and implement an parent involvement policy. At the local level, nearly all public schools hold activities to encourage parent involvement. A survey sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics looked at what kinds of activities schools used to promote parent involvement in the 1995-1996 school year. Findings ranged from 97 percent of public elementary schools having a back-to-school night to 84 percent of the same schools having a science fair or other academic demonstration (Carey, Lewis, and Farris 1998). Obviously the nation is pushing schools to increase their parent involvement. Is this energy being put to the best use?

Along with the increase in policy about parent involvement in schools, there has been an increase in research. Generally this research presents a positive picture of parent involvement. Parent involvement is positively related to children's learning. It is positively correlated with student attitudes and social behavior. Parent involvement generally decreases as students age, but it is still positively associated with achievement. A quick overview of the research supports the idea that parent involvement should be encouraged by various public policy.

However, a closer examination of the research presents a different picture. One of the obstacles to obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the research is that the issues being examined are not consistently defined. The definition of parent involvement can include, but is not limited to, attending school functions, involvement in school governance, or monitoring homework. When public policy encourages parent involvement it rarely specifies the form this involvement should take, simply relying on the idea that research indicates that parent involvement is a good thing. Furthermore, some studies look at the effects of parent involvement on student learning, mostly by looking at achievement on tests, while others look at how it affects student behavior.

Some forms of parent involvement are more effective than others in improving student learning. The programs that are most strongly correlated with student achievement have parents work directly with their children at home, especially when teachers provide materials and instructions for parents to use (Cotton and Wikelund 2001). Active forms of parent involvement—for example, attending school activities or volunteering in classrooms—appear to be more effective than passive forms of involvement—for example, receiving phone calls or letters from the school or attending a parent-teacher conference (Cotton and Wikelund 2001). Training or orientation to introduce parents to a parent involvement program helps maximize the effectiveness. However, an extended training session is less effective than a basic training course, perhaps because the extended time commitment makes parents less willing to stay involved. When policy requires parent involvement for the purpose of improving student learning, it should promote the types of parent involvement that are most effective rather than a general idea of involvement.

Parent involvement is positively associated with improved student behavior and decreased dropout rate. There is no clear evidence that one form of parent involvement is better for student behavior than another, but it is suggested that it is important for parent involvement to build trust between school staff and parents so that both the staff and parents feel gratification from the experience (Cotton and Wikelund 2001). Because the effects of parent involvement are more consistently linked to student behavior than they are to improved learning, policies should consider the goal of their parent involvement programs.

Despite the general sense that parent involvement is an effective way to improve student achievement and behavior, there are some cautions against it. There is a strong possibility that parent involvement is not a cause of education outcome, but only correlated with it. Race and class backgrounds can change the apparent effectiveness of parent involvement (Domina 2005). It may be that the race and class of a student are the cause of student improvement and that the students whose parents are most involved are the ones who already have the most advantageous backgrounds in these areas. If parent involvement is an artifact of race and class, then encouraging parent involvement may not be an effective way of actually improving student achievement.

There is also research that parent involvement may not be as effective as it is promoted to be. There are multiple studies that report a significant, negative association between parents' educational contacts with schools and student achievement (Domina 2005). While some reviews of the literature paint a positive picture of parent involvement, for example Cotton, others found little empirical evidence that parent involvement is an effective way to improve student achievement or change student,

parent, or teacher behavior (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar 2002). One study that controlled for students' socioeconomic backgrounds and prior performance found that the effect of parent involvement on academic achievement was negative or nonsignificant (Domina 2005). Some of this may be due to a ceiling effect; studies that take prior performance into account may overlook the impact parent involvement had at an earlier stage of learning. If students begin a study with high test scores, then they do not have as much room for improvement with current parent involvement as students who began a study with lower test scores. It is noteworthy that the same study did find that parents' active involvement prevented student's behavioral problems (Domina 2005), furthering the thought that parent involvement may have a larger impact on student behavior than on student learning. When considering the role of parent involvement in public policy, it is important to remember that it may not always have the positive effects promised.

Even in studies where parent involvement is found to be an effective way to improve student performance, it is not always the best option. For example, a study in California looked at schools with similar students but a variety of test scores to see what factors were correlated with high performing students. The study found four interrelated practices that correlated with the highest academic performance. These factors were prioritizing student achievement, implementing a consistent; standards-based curriculum; analyzing student assessment from multiple sources; and ensuring instructional resources (Williams, Perry, Studier, Brazil, Kirst, Haertel, Reardon, Woody, Henne, Leven, and Levine 2006). In this study, parent involvement was found to improve student achievement, but it was not as important as other factors. In an article about this study,

the Washington Post used anecdotal evidence of one parent calling principals of three local schools that had higher achieving low-income black students than other schools with similar students. One principal is reported to have said, “The bottom line is this. We don’t have an expectation of the home. We don’t blame the home. We can’t teach parents. We don’t worry about whose responsibility it should be. We just consider it ours” (Mathews 2005). The school attributed its success to taking charge of its students learning. While parent involvement is not completely dismissed, neither is it seen as something that the schools must rely on in order to maximize their students’ learning. This anecdote and the study from California support the idea that while parent involvement can be important to student learning, the emphasis placed on it may, in fact, be disproportionate to its effectiveness.

If we want to most effectively utilize our energy and resources, we should consider how parent involvement is promoted in public policy. The research indicates that parent involvement may not be the untapped resource that it is promoted to be.

Current public policy emphasizes the need for parent involvement. Parent involvement is discussed throughout NCLB, but it is most clearly focused on in Section 1118, Title I of the Act. Parent involvement defined in NCLB as:

the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including:

- Assisting their child's learning;
- Being actively involved in their child's education at school;
- Serving as full partners in their child's education and being included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and
- The carrying out of other activities such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA Section 9101(32). (Public Education Network 2004)

This is the first time in the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(ESEA) that parent involvement is defined. Providing a definition is a step in the right direction, as it begins to clarify previously vague ideas about what parent involvement is.

Instead of just requiring parent involvement, public policy should take the next step of suggesting programs that could increase parent involvement. These programs should not be mandated across the board, because every school has different experience, expertise, resources and training in building school-parent-community partnerships. The unique situation of every school means that it should have a unique approach to involving parents. However, providing an outline of potential programs will allow schools to focus their energy and human resources on how to reach their parents, rather than have every school reinvent “new” methods to involve parents. By including these suggestions in public policy, schools would not have to seek out the latest research, but be able to access when they referred to the requirements.

In order to fully represent the range of research, public policy should prioritize forms of parent involvement found to be most effective. The definition in NCLB begins to prioritize forms of involvement, because it does not include all types of parent involvement in its definition. Parents’ behaviors at home that are independent of the school (e.g., monitoring the amount of television a student watches) do not qualify as parent involvement under this definition. If public policy is unable to propose feasible ways of increasing these most effective forms of parental involvement, it may be more important to shift the focus away from parent involvement and onto practices that are more uniformly found to be effective.

It is also important for policy to specify what its goals are in encouraging parent involvement. By declaring what the purpose of the involvement is, then policy can

suggest the forms of involvement that will be most effective. The goal of NCLB is to improve student learning, especially as measured by various standardized tests. NCLB is especially concerned with using parent involvement to help students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those who are receiving Title I funds, perform at the same level as their peers. The only form of parental involvement that McNeal found to be positively correlated with increased learning achievement was the degree to which parents and students had discussions relating to education (McNeal 1999). (Note that this behavior does not qualify as parent involvement under the NCLB definition.) Domina found that parents attending PTA meetings, volunteering outside the classroom, and checking student's homework were all correlated with increased learning achievement, even when socioeconomic background was controlled for (Domina 2005). By knowing that the goal is to improve learning and not necessarily to affect student behavior, it is possible to choose the forms of parent involvement that correlate with that goal.

When the research is considered as a whole, it may be most advantageous for public policy to change its mission for parent involvement. Parent involvement is more uniformly found to be correlated with improved student behavior—including decreased truancy and decreased dropout rates—than it is to improved student learning. Almost all forms of parent involvement are effective in improving student behavior, though some may have a larger effect than others. However not all forms of parent involvement improve student learning. Instead of focusing solely on the forms of involvement that improve student learning, it may be most effective to encourage parent involvement for the purpose of improving student behavior. Energy and funding used to increase parent involvement for the purpose of improving student achievement can then be spent on other

programs that have proven more effective at improving achievement. Based on the California study, this could include programs that prioritize student achievement, implement a consistent; standards-based curriculum; analyze student assessment from multiple sources; and ensure instructional resources.

Parent involvement is still a valuable resource and should not be discouraged. It may well be that the impact of parent involvement is not currently being measured. Perhaps the true impact comes through the confidence of parents who feel connected to their schools, the improved morale of teachers who feel that their parents support them, or the conviction of a school that knows it has the respect of its community. However, it is not the certain means to the end of improved student achievement that common wisdom purports it to be. It is not consistently a way, nor is it often the best way, to the end result that public policy currently sets for it. We must change the way we promote parent involvement to reflect the ends it achieves. This will allow us to utilize our resources as effectively as possible to the benefit of all children.

Works Cited

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- Williams, Trish, Mary Perry, Carol Studier, Noli Brazil, Michael Kirst, Edward Haertel, Sean Reardon, Elisabeth Woody, Melissa Henne, Jesse Leven, and Roger Levine. 2006. "Similar Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?" *EdSource*.

Annotated Bibliography

- Baker, Amy J. L. and Laura M. Soden. 1998. "The Challenges of Parent Involvement Research." *ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education*.

This article offers a critique of research on parent involvement. If public policy is to rely on research, it should be critical of the research and be able to choose which studies are most valid in their conclusions. This is also useful for researchers who want to improve on previous research instead of repeating the same shortcomings.

- Cotton, Kathleen and Karen Reed Wikelund. 2001. "Parent Involvement in Education."

This literature review presents a positive picture of research on parent involvement. It suggests a variety of benefits of parent involvement as well as what forms of parent involvement are most effective. It will help the reader gain a basic understanding of different types of parent involvement.

- Domina, Thurston. 2005. "Leveling the Home Advantage: Assessing the Effectiveness of Parental Involvement in Elementary School." *Sociology of Education* 78:233-249.

This study looks at the effects of different forms of parent involvement on student learning and student behavior. It controls for socioeconomic background and

prior academic performance, in an effort to see how much of the obvious effects of parent involvement are really due to other variables. It provides useful insight into how parent involvement may not be as powerful as conventional wisdom suggests.

McNeal, R. B. 1999. "Parental involvement as social capital: Differential effectiveness on science achievement, truancy, and dropping out." *Social Forces* 78:117-144.

This study provides a background for understanding parent involvement as a form of social capital. It looks at correlations between different forms of parent involvement and student learning and student behavior, especially truancy and dropout rates. This article is especially useful because its framework and findings offer insight to the inconsistent findings of earlier research.

Public Education Network. 2004. "Parental Involvement: Action Guide for Parents and Communities."

This action brief gives a through summary of the role of parent involvement under NCLB. In addition to telling what the law says, it also offers bullet points of action for community leaders and parent leaders to ensure that their schools are following the law. It also has checklists to see if your school is following the law. This is useful to understand what the current public policy is and provides an example of what policy could include to ensure research is accessible.

Williams, Trish, Mary Perry, Carol Studier, Noli Brazil, Michael Kirst, Edward Haertel, Sean Reardon, Elisabeth Woody, Melissa Henne, Jesse Leven, and Roger Levine. 2006. "Similar Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?" *EdSource*.

This study looked at why students from similar backgrounds performed at different levels on tests. This research suggests that while parent involvement does help it is not the most important practice. It should be of interest to policy makers who want to target limited resources to programs that will be the most effective.

This table summarizes the findings of two studies that looked at different forms of parental involvement and their correlations with student learning achievement and student behavior. The forms of involvement that have the most desirable outcomes are denoted with a ★.

Author	Form of Involvement	Outcome (Statistically Significant Correlations)
McNeal 1999	<p>★ Parent-child discussion: "The degree to which parents and children actively engage in conversations pertaining to education." (p 124)</p> <p>Parent involvement in PTO</p> <p>Monitoring (e.g., requiring chores, checking whether homework is done, limiting time spent watching TV)</p> <p>Direct parent involvement in the educational process (e.g., whether parents attend a school meeting, spoke to teacher or counselor, visited student's classes)</p>	<p>Positive learning achievement, and decreased truancy. Not significantly correlated with dropout rates.</p> <p>Negative learning achievement, decreased truancy, and decreased dropout rates.</p> <p>Negative learning achievement, decreased truancy, and decreased dropout rates.</p> <p>Increased truancy. Not significantly correlated with learning achievement or dropout rates.</p>
Domina 2005	<p>Parents attended one-on-one meetings with teacher</p> <p>★ Parents attended PTA meeting</p> <p>Parents volunteered in classroom</p> <p>★ Parents volunteered outside classroom (e.g., supervising lunch, chaperoning field trips)</p> <p>★ How often parents checked homework</p> <p>How often parents helped with homework</p>	<p>Increased learning achievement, however when socioeconomic background was controlled for, was statistically significantly correlated with decreased learning achievement and increased behavior problems. Not correlated with learning achievement when prior achievement was controlled for.</p> <p>Increased learning achievement across socioeconomic backgrounds and decreased behavior problems in general. Not correlated with learning achievement when prior achievement was controlled for.</p> <p>Decreased behavior problems. Not significantly correlated with learning achievement. Not correlated with learning achievement when prior achievement was controlled for.</p> <p>Increased learning achievement and decreased behavioral problems across socioeconomic backgrounds. Not correlated with learning achievement when prior achievement was controlled for.</p> <p>Increased learning achievement and decreased behavioral problems across socioeconomic backgrounds and prior achievement.</p> <p>Decreased learning achievement across socioeconomic backgrounds and prior achievement. Not significantly correlated with student behavior.</p>