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A Comprehensive Framework

This chapter includes three summaries of research and practical approaches that will help school, district, and state leaders develop and sustain excellent programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

1.1: School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share by Joyce L. Epstein. This article summarizes the theory of ovelapping spheres of influence to explain the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for children's learning and development. It also charts the research-based framework of six types of involvement, challenges that must be solved for each type of involvement in order to engage all families, and expected results of well-designed and well-implemented practices.

The article outlines and discusses the basic structures and processes that are needed to develop effective partnership programs. The guidelines and tools throughout the *Handbook* were designed to help implement these strategies. For example, one key structure at the school level is an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP)—a committee of the School Council or School Improvement Team. The ATP includes teachers, administrators, parents, and others who plan, implement, evaluate, and continually improve school programs of partnership. With knowledge of the underlying theory, basic structures, and useful processes, leaders in schools, districts, and states will be able to strengthen goal-oriented partnership programs that contribute to student success.

1.2: Community Involvement in School Improvement: The Little Extra That Makes a Big Difference by Mavis G. Sanders. The second article summarizes research on school and community connections in comprehensive partnership programs. Businesses, organizations, agencies, groups, and individuals in the community offer many resources and opportunities to improve schools, strengthen families, and increase

student success. This article provides examples of school and community collaborations that are student-, family-, school-, and community-centered.

Sanders's research identifies four factors that support school and community partnerships: high commitment to learning, principal's support, a welcoming climate, and two-way communications and negotiated agreements between the school and community partners. The article also emphasizes the importance of reflection and evaluation for sustaining effective community partnerships.

1.3: Improving Student Outcomes With School, Family, and Community Partnerships: A Research Review by Steven B. Sheldon. The third article summarizes research on the effects of family and community involvement on student academic and behavioral outcomes. The overview presents results of family involvement for improving students' reading achievement at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels. Results also are reported of family involvement on students' math and science skills, attendance, and behavior.

The results of many studies help educators understand why well-implemented partnership programs should be linked to school improvement goals. Along with excellent teachers and well-managed schools, goal-oriented family and community involvement can affect a range of important student outcomes.

The three articles in Chapter 1 discuss a tested theoretical model, research-based structures and processes, and evidence of results of partnerships. This information underlies and supports educators' decisions to develop and sustain programs of school, family, and community partnerships that contribute to student success.

1.1 School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share

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. Partnerships can improve 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.

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. Since the late 1980s, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has included increasingly specific, research-based mandates and guidelines for programs and practices of family and community involvement. Most recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) outlines a "nested" system of school, district, and state requirements for developing research-based programs that involve parents in ways that contribute to student achievement and success in school. These guidelines must be met to qualify for and maintain federal funding.

As important, many states and districts have developed or are preparing their own policies to guide schools in creating more systematic connections with families and with community partners. The policies reflect research results and exemplary practices that show that goals for more effective programs of family and community involvement are attainable (Epstein, 2005a).

Underlying all the policies and programs is a theory of how social organizations connect with each other; a framework of the basic components of school, family, and community partnerships for children's learning; a growing literature on positive and negative results of these connections for students, families, and schools; and an

understanding of how to organize excellent programs. In this article I summarize the theory, framework, and guidelines from our research that should help elementary, middle, and high schools and education leaders take steps toward successful partnerships.

Overlapping Spheres of Influence: Understanding the Theory

Schools make choices. They may conduct only a few communications and interactions with families and communities, keeping the three spheres of influence that directly affect student learning and development relatively separate. Or, they may conduct many high-quality communications and interactions designed to bring all three spheres of influence closer together. With frequent interactions among schools, families, and communities, more students will 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 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 educators or parents and community groups, agencies, and services also can be represented and studied within the model (Epstein, 1987, 1992, 1994).

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 if they are 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, studies indicate that students are 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 both traditional communications with families (e.g., delivering memos or report cards) and new communications (e.g., interacting with family members about homework, using e-mail to communicate with teachers, or participating in or leading 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 the Theory Works in Practice

In some schools, there still are educators who say, "If the family would just do its job, we could do our job." And there still are families who say, "I raised this child; now it is your job to educate her." These words embody a view 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, too, 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 or full-service school is gaining acceptance (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002) This 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, are feasible to conduct, and are equitable toward all families. When all these concepts combine, children experience *learning communities* or *caring communities* (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1995).

All of 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 mixture 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 made my schoolwork make sense!" Parents or educators might comment, "This community really supports its schools."

Once people hear about the concepts of family-like schools and 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 would. They might recall things at home that were "just like school" and that 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 school-work or homework that they did, just as a teacher would.

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 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 shortchange students' learning. Neither of these schools exemplifies a caring, educational environment that requires academic excellence, good communication, and productive interactions involving the school, all families, and the 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 the immediate family, other families, and members of the community may provide important guidance and encouragement for these students. As support from school, home, *and* community accumulates, more students feel secure and cared for, understand and adopt the goals of education, work to achieve 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. 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 and successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships encourage questions and debates and withstand disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after conflicts and differences have been resolved. Without a firm base of partnerships, the problems and concerns about schools and students that are sure to arise will be harder to solve.

What Research Says

In surveys, experimental interventions, and other field studies involving teachers, parents, and students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, some important patterns relating to partnerships have emerged.

- 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 tend to 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 also include contacts about the 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 become involved and to volunteer at various times and in various places to support the school and their children. These parents may be as involved as other parents with their children at home.

Researchers from the United States and other nations have drawn the following conclusions from their studies of family and community involvement:

- Just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities in order 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 efficiently and effectively build positive and productive programs and, consequently, are fearful about trying. This creates a "rhetoric rut" in which educators are stuck expressing support for partnerships without taking necessary actions.
- 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 about how their schools view partnerships and more guidance about how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions.

The summary of results reflect findings in articles and chapters by Baker and Stevenson (1986), Bauch (1988), Becker and Epstein (1982), Booth and Dunn (1996), Burch and Palanki (1994), Clark (1983), Connors and Epstein (1994), Dauber and Epstein (1993), Davies (1991, 1993), Dornbusch and Ritter (1988), Eccles and Harold (1996), Epstein (1986, 1990, 2001, 2005c), Epstein and Connors (1994), Epstein and Dauber (1991), Epstein, Herrick, and Coates (1996), Epstein and Lee (1995), Epstein and Sanders (2000), Lareau (1989), Lee (1994), Sanders (2005), Scott-Jones (1995), Sheldon (2005, 2007a, 2007b), Sheldon and Van Voorhis (2004), Simon (2004), Van Voorhis (2003), Van Voorhis and Sheldon (2004), and others.

The research results are important because they indicate that caring communities can be built intentionally, 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 of family and community involvement will look different at each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, and ages and grade levels of its students. However, our studies have identified some commonalities across successful partnership programs at all grade levels. These include attention to the overlapping spheres of influence on

student development; attention to various types of involvement that promote many different opportunities for schools, families, and communities to work together; and an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) to coordinate each school's work and progress on family and community involvement. The best school-based programs are supported by district leaders for partnerships, whose expertise grows and who help all elementary, middle, and high schools in the district to plan, implement, and evaluate their programs and share best practices (Epstein, 2007).

Six Types of Involvement—Six Types of Caring

A framework of six major types of involvement is based on the results of 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. The framework also helps researchers locate their questions and results in ways that can inform and improve practice (Epstein, 1992, 1995).

The six types of involvement are *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making,* and *collaborating with the community.* Each type of involvement includes many different *practices* of partnership (see Table 1.1.1). Each type presents particular *challenges* that must be met to involve all families and needed *redefinitions* of some basic principles of involvement (see Table 1.1.2). Finally, each type is likely to lead to different *results* for students, parents, teaching practices, and school climates (see Table 1.1.3). Thus, schools must select which practices will help achieve the goals they set for student success and for creating a climate of partnerships. The tables provide examples of practices for each type of involvement, challenges for successful implementation, redefinitions for up-to-date understanding, and results that have been documented and observed in diverse school settings.

Charting the Course

The entries in the tables are illustrative. The sample practices displayed in Table 1.1.1 are a few of hundreds of activities that may be selected or designed for each type of involvement. Although all schools may use the framework of six types as a guide, each school must chart its own course in choosing practices to meet the needs of its families and students.

The challenges in Table 1.1.2 are a few of many that relate to the sample practices for each type of involvement. There are challenges—that is, problems—for every activity that must be resolved in order to reach and engage all families in the best ways. Often, when one challenge has been met, a new one will emerge.

The redefinitions, also in Table 1.1.2, redirect old notions so that involvement is not viewed solely as or measured only by "bodies in the building." For example, the table calls for changes in how we define, organize, and conduct workshops, communications, volunteers, homework, decision making, and connections with 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 in Table 1.1.3 should help correct the widespread misperception that any practice that involves families will raise children's achievement test

scores. Instead, it can be seen that certain practices are more likely than others to influence students' attitudes, attendance, and behavior in school, whereas other practices will influence skills, test scores, and other achievements over time.

Although students are the main focus of partnerships, the various types of involvement also promote various results for parents and teachers. For example, 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 and clearer school-home communications, but also better understanding of students' families, improved ability to take new approaches to homework, and more productive connections with families and the community.

The results listed in Table 1.1.3 have been measured in at least one research study and/or observed as schools conducted their work on partnerships. 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 barriers to communication and exchange. More research is 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 1.1.3 to help schools make purposeful choices among practices that foster various types of involvement.

The tables cannot show the connections that occur when one activity promotes several types of involvement simultaneously. For example, volunteers may organize and conduct a clothing swap shop (Type 3) that allows parents to obtain school uniforms or children's clothes at no cost (Type 1), and community businesses may offer discounts on school uniforms purchased at the swap shop (Type 6). The participating parents may serve as volunteers to keep the swap shop operating, thereby perpetuating activities and results for Types 1, 3, and 6.

As another example, an afterschool program may be conducted by parent and community volunteers and the community's parks and recreation department, combining Types 3 and 6. The afterschool program also serves as a Type 1 activity, because it assists families in supervising their children in a safe and purposeful place. The program also may alter the way homework is completed and how interactions about homework are conducted at home between students and parents (Type 4). Research is needed to understand the combination of types of involvement in complex activities. Practitioners should realize that various practices may activate several types of involvement.

The tables also simplify the influences that produce results over time. For example, the involvement of families with children in reading at home may make students more strongly motivated to read and to give more attention to reading instruction in school. This, in turn, may help students maintain or improve their daily reading skills in class and their reading report card grades. Over time, good classroom reading instruction and ongoing home support should increase students' skills and confidence in reading and significantly improve their reading achievement test scores. The time between a Family Reading Night or other family involvement activities in reading and the time that students increase their reading achievement test scores will vary depending on the quality and quantity of the reading-related activities in school and out.