

Parental Involvement in Education

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In recent years, the focus of much research has been directed toward discovering ways to increase student performance. Advances have been made in several areas including special education, test preparation, and assessment strategies, just to mention a few. However, one of the most effective areas of increased student motivation lies not in the schools at all, but in the homes of the students. Parental involvement continues to be the most influential factor in student achievement and motivation. Students whose parents are closely involved in their school lives and who monitor their progress fare best in high school (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1985).

In my own recent work with students, I have observed less parental and family involvement in local schools in and around my local communities and am thus motivated to discover the extent of the correlation between parent involvement and increased student performance. My research and observations supports on-going efforts to create stronger bonds between school and home. Through analyzing several studies, I have found significant proof that parents and family are the leading models and motivators for secondary education students.

As someone who works with students of the community on a regular basis, I am able to say that the individuals that I have accompanied in various services have been much more motivated towards increasing the amount of positive experiences in the community. Many of the parents of these students stay involved during the middle and high school years, as well. This, of course, is not an easy task. As children approach their teen years, many parents find it difficult to strike a balance between "letting go" and "being there" for their children. The middle and high school years are difficult for young people, filled with growing peer pressure, dramatic physical changes, and an awakening need for more independence. Research shows that parent involvement begins to decline at the onset of the pre-teen and adolescent years—but that doesn't mean children wouldn't still benefit from it.

The reasons for this decline in parent involvement just as teens are entering middle and high school is a double-edged sword. First, children who are beginning to mature have a growing need to develop a sense of self and independence that is separate from their families. They begin to weigh choices and consequences, make more decisions on their own, learn from their mistakes, and establish their own set of values to guide their decisions and actions. They begin refusing help from their parents and don't want them along during activities and meeting with their friends.

Second, parents' roles are also going through a changing process as well; in order to allow for their children's self-identity development. While parents continue to offer support and love, they begin giving their children more and more room in order to show their respect for their children's growing independence, and their understanding for the maturing process. Parents must begin to let adolescents make their own choices—good and bad—and have them take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

The decline in parent involvement in middle and high school years also can be connected to changes in attitudes of the children. Young people make it clear they don't want their parents playing the same large role in their upbringing and schooling that they once did. Many parent-student activities that children find acceptable in elementary school, like registering for classes, attending school events, or walking to and from school, are seen as student-only events by middle and high school students.

As children begin to adjust to their new school environments and meet the challenges of their new courses, parents may have less understanding of the work their kids are doing in school. Various researches has found that the number-one reason high school parents gave for becoming less involved in their children's education was due to increased difficulty of student coursework. Parents may feel unable to help with homework and hesitate to discuss curriculum issues with teachers, resulting in their becoming less involved overall.

I feel that communication is a key ingredient to bridge the gap between teachers' expectations of the parents and parents' goals for their children during school hours. By increasing the amount of information that is available for the parents and teachers, there will be a clearer path towards success. Much of this has been going on, however; more teachers are reaching out to the parents, and there is also an increase in parental effort and involvement to improve conditions for their children. A key understanding for the teachers to keep in mind is that even though they (the teachers) deal with students of a certain age every day and every school year, this may be the first time that the parents are experiencing a child of that age. I feel that having teachers not only teach the students coursework and character development, but to also instruct parents about how to be involved with a student of that age would also help situations and would leave less room for guessing and mistakes during the child's matriculation process.

There are three main types of parents: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parents. Authoritative parents (found to be the style with more success in upbringing) establish a balance between making demands and being responsive to their children's specific needs. These parents give their children encouragement and embody positive attitudes towards work and effort. As a result, their children receive the motivation they need when they receive good or bad grades. These children also feel more comfortable asking for help when they need it most. Children of these parents tend to do better while in school.

Authoritarian parents follow a style where they simply tell their children what to do, and not to argue with them. Children from parents of this type get punished for bad grades which often make them feel uneasy when asking for help; even worse, may exhibit rebellion against parental authority. Often, these students display a loss of confidence and motivation without continuous positive reinforcement.

Permissive parents are very passive and feel that their child's life should be their own responsibility and are often expressing an "I don't care" attitude towards achievement. This can be dangerous in that the student's motivation is almost completely based on observation and peer influences, leaving a large variable on the location and condition of the child's upbringing. These parents are not necessarily neglecting their children, or being uncaring; however, they give the appearance of this much of the time.

As support for my topic, I have chosen to analyze several bodies of research. The main body of research that I have chosen has been provided by Elizabeth L. Nelms. Her research is titled, "The Effects of a Teacher-Created Web Page on Parent Communication: An Action Research Study." Specifically, this study sparked my interest because the instructional area I'm pursuing centers on instructing secondary students in the technological field with heavy emphasis on computers. However, my main focus on this study (and the following studies) is the topic of parent involvement in their child's education. Nelms herself has been driven to the study; she states: "One of the major goals of my school is to increase parent involvement."

She continues, "The purpose of this action research study was to determine why parents use or do not use a teacher-created web page as an informational resource, as well as how teacher-created web pages affect communication among parents, teachers, and students." The study focuses primarily on parent-teacher communication through technology. Nelms takes a qualitative approach to this topic with the help of ten parents and/or guardians of second-grade students. Two surveys were done: one prior to the implementation of a teacher-created web page, and one afterwards. This technique allowed Nelms to determine if there was a change in parent-teacher communication.

The survey, or questionnaire, consisted of open-ended responses concerning certain components of the web page that the parents had considered most beneficial. Interviews with five

sets of the parents were also conducted to get further information about the perceived effectiveness of the web page. A log was taken to group all of the information and to record any additional observations or insights. The information gathered showed that the parents perceived the teacher-created web page to be an effective tool to increase communication between parents and their child's educator. The most popular aspect of the web site was that the parents were able to follow along with what their children were doing in school. Nelms found that "knowing what their children were learning about and how their children were performing academically helped them to stay more involved in their children's education."

Details of this study include a population of 778 students between the grades of K-2. Within this population, 59 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch. Out of the 68 possible participants, only 10 decided to contribute their time and input (eight Caucasian families and two African-American families). These families were protected by written consent forms, restricted internet access, and a guarantee to anonymity. The participants were surveyed prior to the study to find out how many families had access to a computer with internet access, and what level of familiarity they had with the machines. These surveys—to the parents—were sent home with the students. Of the 68 that were sent out, 65 were returned. It was discovered that just over half had access to an internet machine. The survey also polled the parents to see how they currently communicated with the school and how often. It was found that personal visits were the most popular media of contact; the least popular was email, which was never used.

Results of the study do not differ greatly from a face value interpretation. Nelms notes that, "According to information obtained from the questionnaire, all participants felt that the web page was beneficial to improving parent/teacher communication."

The study was effective for the type of information that the author was attempting to gather. The author was able to see a benefit of and implications for improved parent

communication utilizing a teacher-created web site. Nelms was able to submit this information to her school administrators, who "found this information particularly useful since they are currently working on a school web page. They felt that the information gained from this study would be helpful in making the school web page more effective." Their reaction suggests that the study had been a success.

However, I found weak areas in the study; there are several areas that could have been improved in increase the validity of the research. There was an extremely low response rate (n=10) out of a large qualification group of 68 possible participant families. Even though the research was done qualitatively, I feel that Nelms should have reassessed the study and attempted the study with a different population in order to gather a larger study sample. A larger population would also have been interesting to implement. Surveying older age groups would have been beneficial to the data. Secondary students usually have more involved types of schoolwork, in much larger quantities. Parents of secondary students may have found it more beneficial to use the web site to keep up with the flux of student information.

Questioning and surveys were done properly and documented satisfactorily; improvement possibilities lie within the report on this information. It would have aided an analysis of the data to see the questions presented. Another factor affecting this study is that the author had a bias in her research. She obviously displayed a bias towards the creation of a teacher-created web site to aid in her presentation to the administration. This factor is not extremely significant although it is important to keep in mind during further analysis of her research.

This research was essential to my topic of parent involvement in education because of the approach to the study. It was important that the research used technology as the dominant medium of communication. However, it is extremely important to look at all of the aspects and angles of this study to determine the correlation between parent involvement and student grades.

An extremely useful resource that I found in my continued search for correlation was provided by Arizona State University through research by Douglas B. Downey, a student of Ohio State University. His article discussed the separate importance of parental interaction and involvement in the school and the impact of parental involvement in the home. Other research I have gathered separates these two main areas by involving teacher-based strategies of improved parental involvement in the school and other studies that specifically focus on home strategies of improved parental involvement and the relationship between these actions and the performance of the student. Information can be secured through the internet, but is also available in a textbook titled Human Development. My searches have been confined to the last 20 years in education, and I have only considered articles providing sources of the data. The articles and information utilized address various ways of analysis on related topics.

Downey's article discusses in detail the many faces of parental involvement. Downey cites several similar studies. He effectively separates the areas of parental involvement: parents at school, parents at home, low-income parents, critic opinions and findings; he also offers a section of recommendations. He provides both sides of the argument, showing support as well as opposing data for each topic.

In his section concerning parental involvement at school he discusses parent-teacher relationships and how they are essential to increase student's performance. "When parents attend parent/teacher conferences, for example, it creates continuity between the two dominant spheres of influence in the child's life, home, and school." He supports this finding with secondary sources that show direct correlations between attendance at conferences and PTO meetings with student success in schoolwork. In contrast, he also reports the opposite with findings that show "an inverse relationship between parent/school contact and children's school success." However, he claims that there was not enough cross sectional data to support these latter findings.

School level parent involvement is found to be important, but Downey also states that children “also fare better merely by attending a school where many other parents are highly involved” because lines of communication are more open between school and home. This practice alone is important and provides positive examples to all stakeholders. Downey proposes that even though this idea seems to have enough face validity, there has been mixed support for this idea present. This idea of “social closure” showed support for performance in mathematics and student attendance stability but had no effect on the test scores or grades associated with reading. It is important to report that there are many different types of ways to increase involvement between parents and teachers and students in the school environment, but there is little that educational associates can do to increase parental involvement in a child’s school life at home-- reported to be the most important avenue of increasing student performance.

Parental involvement in education in the home has much to do with the specific parenting style within the home. One of the biggest ways to attach the home and school with parents is the expectations that parents have for their children. “Children with parents who hope and expect them to do well are more likely to do well in school than their counterparts with parents who do not have high educational expectations for their children.” However, Downey finds that the most effective way to accomplish this task is to “combine high expectations with parental responsiveness or warmth.” Parenting styles that lean towards authoritative styles have been said to be more effective.

Most importantly this study shared its findings that parent involvement, though important, is not considered a defining factor in student achievement. “Surprisingly, they find little evidence that parental involvement matters. They conclude that ‘there is no convincing evidence that the ways in which parents have been involved in previous early intervention research studies result in more effective outcomes.’” Downey also points out that geneticists believe that student achievement is

more related to genetic makeup of parents; they feel that “if parents who create good environments are also parents with good genes, associations between good parenting behaviors and students’ school success may have little to do with parenting actions and may simply represent the genetic advantages typical of parents who also happen to use good parenting practices.” Research has strengthened this hypothesis by showing that adopted children are more like their biological parents in terms of intelligence even if they were adopted at birth.

Even though there is a significant number of studies that support the correlation between parent involvement and student success, it is the findings of the opposite that are most important to me. There is a high face value assumption with this topic, and I feel that is essential to find results of research that go beyond that possible bias.

Sheri Wilkins, a doctoral student at U.C. Riverside, conducted several studies at the Lewis Center on parent involvement. One paper was a quantitative analysis linking parent involvement and student achievement. She noted that “research has highlighted a correlation between parental involvement and student achievement at school.” This research was effective. Wilkins drew her data from charter school records and a population of middle school students (grades six through twelve). Her sample consisted of thirty students and was drawn randomly using a random number table. This sample was evenly spread through the three grades (9 sixth graders, 13 seventh graders, and 8 eighth graders). Wilkins includes virtually all data about each student, linking their family income, grades, and demographics in cross-sectional data tables. Data were collected on preliminary achievement of the students in reading, language, and math as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test 9. Family research was also sent home and available online to gather information on family income and parental education level.

All data that were gathered were analyzed and entered using SAS. All statistical information were compiled and calculated. The results yielded a statistically significant correlation

between educator's educational level and student achievement in reading ($p < .05$). Insufficient statistical correlation could link family income to student achievement.

This research was extremely helpful in adding a quantitative approach to my findings. However, Wilkins ran into frequent statistical insignificance in her study and she was unable to achieve p levels of less than .10 for many of her analyses. To increase her statistical significance level, I would advise an increase in her sample size.

Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund provided analysis of many types of data in their report on "Parental Involvement in Education." They bring up the question of, "Is parent involvement a valuable, if largely untapped, resource for schools struggling to provide state-of-the-art instruction with diminishing funds—a way to instill pride and interest in schooling, increase student achievement, and enhance a sense of community and commitment?" The authors provide extensive research, both primary and secondary, to fortify their conclusion. In their report, they analyze—in great depth—correlation studies pertaining to parental involvement, specifically discerning between multiple strategies. One of their main findings that caught my attention was that their information was non-conclusive. Even though they have found overwhelming research that "demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement," there is also evidence that states "research on parent involvement in the education of older students was too limited to permit drawing any conclusions about its effectiveness. The strength in this study is their finding that "all of the active forms of parent involvement seem more or less equally effective in bringing about improvements in students' attitudes and behavior."

This detail suggests that if there actually is a direct correlation between parent involvement and student achievement, there is not necessarily a specific activity or relationship that should be achieved between the parent and the school. Also, a conclusion is drawn suggesting that even though their research does lean towards a direct correlation, they feel that "school staff wishing to

institute effective programs will need to be both open minded and well-organized in their approach to engaging parent participation.”

To finalize my analyses, I was fortunate to come across a research study completed by Rebecca Deutscher, Ph.D. and Mary Ibe. Their research titled, “Relationships between Parental Involvement and Children’s Motivation” gave me an important ingredient to my own research by dealing with the topic of motivation. This study took an in-depth look at the role of parents in student motivation. “It examined various areas such as volunteering, home involvement, attending parent classes, etc. Parent involvement has been shown to be an important variable in children’s education, and more schools are trying to encourage increased involvement.”

This study involved 400 students between the grades of seventh and eleventh. In contrast to previous studies I have discussed, the sample size in this research is large which aids the statistical significance of its findings. However, the research has been conducted within a single school district. Improvements would lie in an expansion of the population to multiple areas with varying demographics and cultures. However, the data presented were extremely significant in proving correlations between parental involvement and educational continuity in the home. “The parents who more often talked to teachers had students who more likely would find out extra information about a topic outside of school.” Many other correlation links were also shared that proved to contain p-levels of far less than .05.

In considering all of the information that I was able to compile for this research, I was able to learn that the face value assumption was not the only available outcome for correlation studies of parental involvement. I was impressed to find data to support either side of the argument. I did find, through this research, a breadth of information linking parental involvement to student achievement and motivation. I can not name specific dominant styles that would best achieve education maximization; however, I am able to see that the more people there are in a child’s life,

the more he will be to become someone that he himself admires. This realization will allow me to better teach my future students. By achieving a better understanding of the precursors of their achievement, I will be able to relate to them through the curriculum more effectively.

Though many parents might be surprised to realize it, research shows that they have a strong influence on their teenage children. Many parents want to be involved, but just don't know how. There are many things parents can do to maintain strong involvement in their children's lives as they approach adolescence.

1. Keep lines of communication open. Parents need to have regular conversations with their teens and supply them with honest and accurate information on the many issues teens face. Start important discussions with your children and teens—about smoking, drugs, sex, drinking—even if the topics are difficult or embarrassing. Don't wait for teens to come to you.
2. Set fair and consistent rules. Parents need to set boundaries that help children learn that with their new independence comes responsibility. Parents and adolescents can work together to set appropriate limits. Be sure that young people understand the purpose behind the rules.
3. Support their future. Even if parents don't feel they can help with homework, parents need to demonstrate that education is important to them and their child's future. It's important to know children's teachers and to create a home environment that supports learning.
4. Be an example. Parents need to demonstrate appropriate behaviors. Show concern for and be involved in the community and at school. Maintain regularly scheduled family time to share mutual interests, such as attending movies, concerts, sporting events, plays, or museum exhibits.

Although students may not want parents directly involved in their classroom, there are many ways parents can be involved in middle and high schools that lead to positive effects on students. Here are some successful program ideas school communities have used to create comprehensive parent involvement programs.

1. Provide special transition or orientation sessions for parents and students entering middle and high school.
2. Establish a family resource center at your school to share information and provide parenting classes and other resources on adolescent development.
3. Provide training and instruction for parents on curriculum, teaching methods, and tracking, assessment, and placement procedures and how they effect students.
4. Encourage parents to volunteer by adopting and sponsoring academic programs, school clubs, or teams.
5. Invite parents and students to serve on site-based management teams to participate in school decision-making.
6. Invite teachers, parents, and students to work together to design and monitor different community service experiences.

Increasing parent involvement in middle and high schools benefits parents, teachers, schools, and most importantly, the students themselves. Understanding how these young adults feel about their parents during their middle and high school years is important to developing effective parent involvement programs. More importantly, I feel that it is essential to be a positive role model as an educator, as well as a parent. To successfully accomplish this, I need to show them reasons to be proud of where they are coming from. As a former student of Boyertown School District, I was personally motivated by every single teacher of mine along the way to become an educator myself. I also plan to be involved in my own children's lives, as well as

communicate the pride that I have in my own community and hope that this translates to unconditional support to my students, themselves.

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