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# Effective Practices Brief



Another Quality Publication Produced by the Center on Disability Studies, COE University of Hawai'i at Manoa

## Supporting All Students to Achieve High Standards

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## Family Involvement: An Expanded Perspective

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### Purpose

To provide educators and administrators with research-based practices blended with local “what’s working” examples and to reveal some misconceptions about quality parental and family involvement in their child’s education. An expanded definition of “family” involvement, to include all those who have a key influence in the home and on the child, will be used in this Brief.

### Overview

A family’s involvement in their child’s education is recognized as the single most important factor in school success and achievement (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999). Research has shown that not only does parental involvement increase academic achievement as reflected in higher test scores and graduation rates, it increases the likelihood that a child will pursue a higher education, and positively affects behavior and optimistic attitudes in students, according to the California Department of Education (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

In recent years there has been a significant shift in how schools conceptualize family involvement. This shift moves from an earlier focus on what families could give to the school system to assist in student learning (in the form of contributions of time, money, and other resources), to a current orientation of what schools can do to support families. Ultimately, moving toward the most ideal and progressive mindset: parent and school partnerships that nurture and support all children to learn.

As we review effective family involvement practices, it is critical to remember the great diversity among our families. These differences are not only cultural or socio-economic. The wide range of these differences requires that school staff “put themselves in the shoes” of parents and families to understand the diverse needs and interests families bring to each situation. Consider the vast differences between families whose primary focus is on limited use of English in the home, or developmental issues like transitioning into kindergarten, or dealing with the internal emotional changes of adolescents, or having children with emotional/behavioral/learning challenges or disabilities. Then reflect on how these various families might benefit from investing their time to best support their own child. It becomes clear that no one-size-fits-all, but an individualized orientation toward including families will build strong home involvement practices at school.

## What Matters

“Over and over we hear that parents must feel they are really being heard, that their opinions are being asked as experts on their children, and that they are being listened to.” John Aki, the DOE Administrator for Family Support Services stresses the importance of families feeling valued, and schools being responsive to the specific the needs of the families at their school. Mr. Aki also finds parents need to feel welcomed by school faculty onto the school campus in formal and informal ways. This may include acknowledging and greeting parents and visitors, positive body language and attitudes, talking story, and showing real concern for the family. This creates a climate of genuine collaboration and cooperation.

Research tells us that creating and sustaining family involvement requires a school-wide commitment to consistent attitudes and practices that create a climate that values relationships among all members of the school community, from volunteers on campus to the support staff, faculty, and administrators. Schools that have been successful in enhancing family participation are characterized by the following. These schools are:

- Committed to involving family members.
- Reaching out to families through personal contacts and relationship building (invitations, phone calls, or peer buddies to accompany families).
- Clear about the specific and varied intentions of family involvement.
- Offering a wide range of ways for individuals to be involved, providing opportunities for families with different barriers and skill levels.
- Clear about what is required and practiced in recruiting, initiating, enhancing, and maintaining home involvement. They adequately train staff in school procedures.
- Drawing on mechanisms in their system dedicated to home involvement and creating systems to continually train staff and overcome institutional barriers.
- Creating programs that are responsive to the needs and interests of their families that support parent empowerment and interaction.

*Effective parent involvement at the school is championed by the Principal and implemented by administrators, teachers, and staff.*

## Expanding the idea of parent involvement

Allow yourself to consider these ideas and notice if they shift your perspective...Consider parents as customers of the education system, it is their taxes that pay the bills. Does this change how we approach parents and families? In some Native American tribal communities there is a ceremony where parents give permission to the school to teach their children. The parents entrust their children to the schools for their learning, ritually marking the school’s contract and responsibility to the child. These perspectives may help to create a shift in the climate of parent involvement that is sometimes perceived by educators and parents alike as ineffective and depleting coupled with a general air of everyone feeling under appreciated.

On a practical level we often times think of “involvement” as getting the parents on campus to participate in an activity with their child or for the school community. This is one way to become involved. However, due to the wide range of barriers and individual differences, the school faculty must allow for and promote participation in various ways, at different levels of commitment, and frequencies. Effective approaches:

- Ensure a variety of ways to participate.
- Agree to home participation in any opportunity and to the extent that it is feasible.
- Account for cultural and individual differences.
- Enable participation for all who want to contribute, regardless of skill level.
- Provide support to improve participation skills.

In thinking about and promoting parent involvement in a broad way, we open the educational doorway to the value of nurturing and loving children. Feeding the spirits, interests, and curiosities of students becomes an integral part of parent involvement for overall student development. We open the window to rich possibility that can fuel a climate of learning for the whole family.

*An expanded view of parent involvement includes nurturing a child’s spirit, curiosities, and interests.*

## Some Misconceptions

Some parents are dealing with layers of issues with their child or family. These issues may include learning, physical or developmental disabilities; language barriers and cultural differences; behavioral and emotional issues; family crisis, or poverty. Families under these additional stresses will be very selective about how they invest the resources of time and energy. Sometimes it is a misconception that “parent’s involvement in educational programs equals good parents and, conversely, noninvolvement equals bad parents. Such reasoning is a gross oversimplification of the situation.” (MacMillan & Turnbull, 1983.) The inaccurate assumption lies in a one-size-fits-all mentality, which overlooks that families might be investing their time in helping their child and family with multiple skills and supports at home or through other community organizations. Again, it is valuable to consider all the stresses and requirements that are part of the lives of the families we serve. We should, “be aware that disengagement does not necessarily reflect disinterest, but rather may be in the best interests of some, or all, of the parties involved” (MacMillan, & Turnbull, 1983) and that individualized choices rather than general offerings might truly provide for the most accessible parent involvement.

*Individualized choices rather than general offerings provide for the most accessible parent involvement.*

## “What’s Working”

Focusing on our strengths is a proven way to build on them, a way to spark enthusiasm and plant the seeds of innovation, creation, and collaboration. The following examples are a select few “what’s working” practices in our state.

**One Example:** Parent Teacher Partnerships, Phase 3 & 4 of PCNC.

This program is being implemented in a few Hawaii schools (one being Kapunahala Elementary on Oahu) with a strong emphasis on relationship building between parents and teachers. Data shows that a strong parent-teacher partnership with a focus on supporting each other to support students has been very effective. Findings show improved learning outcomes through “trained and developed parent-teacher partnerships at the classroom level. Even if the parent is not in the classroom...when the parent knows what the standards are and how to support and supplement their child’s work away from school, we see consistent improvements.” (Vivian Ing, Resource Teacher, Family Support Services DOE.)

*Parent-teacher partnerships at the classroom level bring about achievement and success.*

**One Example:** Central District’s ESLL school/home assistant, Isobel Mahimer, has worked with parents from various backgrounds to write stories from their homelands. These stories have been published in a book, which is given to various school libraries for all children to learn from and enjoy. This project centers around a computer class and ESL class for these same parents. They write their stories in both their native language and English or in English only. These parents often become more involved in the general life of their children’s schools, and can be found volunteering to sit with young children as they practice their reading, allowing the adult to provide a loving ear to the child and improving their own English as well. This one well-conceived, implemented and supported program touches on multiple needs for parents, children and schools.

## Conclusion

Family involvement in their child’s education is the single greatest factor in that child’s academic success and achievement. To foster parent involvement there must be consistent school-wide commitment to welcome, listen to, respond to, and actively include parents as partners in their child’s educational experience. Principals lead the way and set the tone through staff and parent training and development opportunities, which provide a wide variety of ways for parents to be involved. Parent and school partnerships are a dynamic process, one that is most effectively practiced through positive relationships and developed through shared commitment to support children to succeed.