Core Principle 6: Parent Involvement Dr. Alexa Posny

The sixth of the core principles on which the Kansas State Board of Education bases its redesign of the educational system is: *Schools must actively engage parents in the education of their children.* The following principle and indicators will be addressed in this paper:

Schools must actively engage parents in the education of their children.

- (a) Schools ensure that parents play an integral role in assisting in their child's learning and are informed of the expectations for their child.
- (b) Student progress is regularly reported to parents in a clear and understandable form and is available in several different ways including electronically.
- (c) Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- (d) Schools ensure that parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
- (e) Schools view parents as full partners in the decisions that affect their children and their family.

Introduction

Parent and family involvement has been and continues to be a priority of schools and districts. Effectively involving parents and families in support of children and their education produces meaningful and lasting results. As the National Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) has stated, "Parent and family involvement increases student success."

A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement, found that students with involved parents, "no matter what their income or background," were more likely to succeed in school—attending school regularly, earning higher grades, passing their classes, graduating and going on to postsecondary education. "When parents are involved in their children's education at home, they do better in school. And when parents are involved in school, children go farther in school – and the schools they go to are better" (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Many research studies have shown that when parents are involved in their child's education, these students achieve more—regardless of their socioeconomic status (SES), ethnic/racial background, or the parent's own education level. And many parents seem to be aware of how important their involvement is to children's success. The National PTA, in conjunction with the research organization Bennett, Petts, & Blumenthal, conducted a telephone survey of 800 parents of public school children from across the country. Ninety-one percent of parents polled felt that it was extremely important for parents to be involved in their children's education regardless of grade level.

It is difficult to read about school improvement without mentioning parental involvement as one of the keys to school and student success. This paper will focus on the core principle that "schools must actively engage parents in the education of their children."

Research

The importance of parent involvement has been documented by many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. A significant body of research (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Olmstead & Rubin, 1983) indicates that when parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes. Increased attendance, fewer discipline problems, and higher aspirations also have been correlated with an increase in parent involvement. Epstein (1983) reported that when teachers were committed to increasing parent involvement, the parents "... felt that they [the parents] should help their children at home; ... understood more about what their child was being taught in school; ... were more positive about the teacher's interpersonal skills, and rated the teacher higher in overall teaching ability. ..." This change in parents' perceptions is true even after socioeconomic status and student ability are taken into account (Epstein, 1983; Eagle, 1989). Furthermore, if increased parental involvement creates the perception that the school is more effective, it is likely that student achievement will increase (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992).

Two hundred studies were reviewed that focused on family, school, and community influences on children's learning in grades K-12. Indicators of positive student outcomes, identified by the review, included: "standardized tests, grades, teacher ratings of academic performance, and measures of school adjustment, including improved attendance, fewer suspensions, increased classroom participation, and improved self-esteem and motivation to learn." Correlations between family, school, or community influences on positive school performance ranged from low to "strong," but most were in the "low-moderate to moderate range." Authors concluded that students performed well when the following factors were in place at home, in school, and within the community: standards and expectations, structure, opportunity to learn, support, climate/relationships, and modeling (Christenson & Christenson, 1998).

Teachers, through their interactions with parents, play a major role in encouraging parents to support learning at home. Ames (1995) found that parents' overall evaluation of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported involvement in school activities was higher when parents received frequent and effective communications from teachers. When communication was continual, varied, and covered both classroom content and individual information about their own child, parents were more likely to take part in suggested activities. The degree of teacher enthusiasm for a particular strategy designed to increase parents involvement also is important (Bauch, 1994). Teachers who eagerly pursue a strategy find they are better able to engage parents in activities than teachers who "go along" with an administrative mandate. Since teacher preservice education does not provide extensive opportunities to develop the skills needed to communicate with and engage parents, schools that wish to promote parent involvement must craft opportunities for teachers to become adept at sharing information with parents and suggesting ways in which the parents can assist their children (Rich, 1993; Epstein, 1992a, 1992b). Schools must create an environment where teacher input on implementation of parent involvement strategies is sought out and encouraged.

The findings from a parent involvement study (Shaver, 1998) suggested that parent involvement, no matter what the family background, is a dynamic force that influences students' academic success. The following are some of the findings from this study:

- Students whose parents were more highly involved were more likely to make gains in both reading and math than students whose parents were less involved.
- Students in grades 2-4 made greater gains in both subjects than did students in grades 5-8.
- Parents were more likely to be involved when their children were in elementary school (grades 2-4) than in middle or junior high school.
- Families' income level did not affect their level of involvement.

Effective school-family partnerships can have important benefits for parents as well. This partnership helps parents to perceive their children's school in a more positive light, enhancing their sense of efficacy as parents, and changing their perceptions of their children as learners (Ames, 1993; Epstein, 1991). As teachers become aware of this, it is increasingly important they communicate to parents the importance of involvement (Haussler & Goodman, 1984). Parent involvement is greatly affected by a sense of efficacy in helping their student succeed (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents who create a constructive homework environment help their students achieve academically and behaviorally (Hampton & Mumford, 1998).

There appears to be a relationship between the age of the child and the forms of parental involvement. Greater efforts to involve parents are seen at the preschool and primary levels. Efforts here focus on assisting in the classroom and reading to children at home. Teachers of young children are the most frequent users of parent involvement techniques (Epstein, 1987).

At the middle and high school levels, parent involvement practices decline (Lucas & Lusthaus, 1978). Hollifield (1994) presents a number of reasons why this is so. The adolescent has a developmental need for autonomy and greater responsibility. Families often live further from the high school and are less able to spend time there. The organization of the secondary schools is more complex and teachers have contact with larger numbers of students. Few high schools make any one teacher responsible for a small group of students. Information on student progress involves contacting four or five individuals.

At the secondary level, what parents do at home seems to have the greatest impact. Keith, Reimers, Fehremenn, Pottebaum, and Aubey (1986) found that key strategies to follow at the secondary level were limiting recreational TV viewing and emphasizing the completion of homework assignments. Hollifield (1994) noted that parents of high school students are rarely guided to conduct discussions with their teenage children about important school decisions or plans for the future. Research also suggests a correlation between parent involvement and dropout rates. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornbusch (1990) found that students who drop out reported that their parents rarely attended school events or helped with homework. These parents were more likely to respond to poor grades with punishment. These high school students rarely consulted their parents when making educational decisions.

Rumberger et al. (1990) also noted a disparity between what teachers feel must be done and what they are able to do themselves. While nine out of ten secondary teachers feel parent involvement remains important at the high school level, only three out of ten feel that it is their responsibility to involve parents. Increasing communication between home and school and providing guidance to parents for discussions with their children about planning for the future were viewed as positive strategies. High school teachers, however, reported that they lack the time to pursue any

of these strategies. Brian (1994) reports that parents of high school students feel more uncertain about what is happening in their children's lives than they did during elementary school. Despite their need for autonomy, Brian finds that teens are less resistant to the idea of parent involvement than is commonly believed. Key here is the notion that parental efforts be seen as support rather than control.

Often minority parents are seen as less involved in their children's education. Many factors contribute to differences in the ways parents relate to school and how they view appropriate levels of involvement (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch, 1993), such as a history of bad experiences with schools, a general lack of trust of institutions, a traditional deference to education, a tendency to equate teachers' questioning with displays of disrespect, and the lack of English language skills. School staff must be sure not to equate unfamiliarity with the curriculum and procedures of the school with a lack of caring about their children's education. Chavkin and Williams (1993) studied the attitudes and practices of minority parents regarding the issue of involvement in their children's education and found that parents are concerned about their children's education and want to take an active role. Parents in the study expressed the highest level of comfort with coming to school events and/or working with their children at home on learning activities.

It is important for schools and teachers to develop attitudes and policies that are reflective of, and sensitive to, the community they serve. When they do (Zelazo, 1995), more parents become involved in ways that are recognized by the school as being engaged in the schooling process. However, before parents can be involved, they must feel comfortable with the staff and school. Goldenberg (1987) noted that when teachers sent home suggestions of things parents could do to support word-recognition skills, Hispanic parents responded favorably. Often what is interpreted as a lack of interest or caring is, instead, a cultural predisposition to interpret help at home with interference and disrespect for the teacher. Once parents became aware of the need to help their children at home and were given a set of strategies to follow, they were quite willing to help.

No matter the race, ethnicity, culture or income, most families have high aspirations and concerns for their children's success. This is one of the findings included in the latest research from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. Another finding states that families from racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities are actively involved in their children's schooling, although their involvement may differ somewhat from those of white, "mainstream" U.S. families. The synthesis discusses sixty-four research studies on the roles that families can play in improving academic achievement among minority, immigrant, and language minority students and students from low-income families. In compiling this synthesis, the center's staff looked for recent research studies that met basic standards for quality and rigor of research methodology and that discussed the relationships between student achievement and school, family, and community connections among diverse populations. The report says that the findings are limited as to whether minority and low-income families' high aspirations for their children have a positive impact on students' school achievement. Further, the synthesis states that more rigorous, highquality research needs to be done to draw firm conclusions about the complex interactions among families, communities, and schools in seeking to close the achievement gap. Focusing on only one of these factors is not enough. The synthesis also offers the following recommendations for building relationships among schools, communities and families:

- (1) adopt formal school- and district-level policies that promote family involvement, including an explicit focus on engaging families who reflect the full diversity of the student population;
- (2) demonstrate active and ongoing support from the school principal;
- (3) acknowledge both commonalities and differences among students and families;
- (4) provide supports to help immigrant families understand how schools work and what is expected of both families and students; and
- (5) recognize that it takes time to build trust.

While many research efforts have been undertaken to assess the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement, the literature does not indicate which form of parent involvement, if any, is more likely to be correlated with increased student achievement and other indicators of school success. Despite the lack of a clear research endorsement for any particular parent involvement strategy, efforts to increase the level of parent involvement seem to cluster around two major approaches: (1) encouraging parents to pursue at-home behaviors that encourage learning and indicate a value for schooling and (2) conducting at-school activities that support the teacher-parent relationship.

One key to involving all parents is creating an atmosphere in which teachers, administrators, and families all are seen as valuing parental involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Schools that are serious about developing partnerships with parents can provide information to parents about different ways they can be involved and understand the barriers that keep parents from being more active (Chavkin & Williams, 1993). The literature indicates that work needs to be done at the school and district level to develop policies and practices that encourage involvement at the school and guide parents in how to help at home.

Vision

How comprehensive do efforts to involve parents have to be? Broad-based, comprehensive approaches have their supporters (Seeley, 1993; Gordon, 1979). Morrison (1994) found that a mixture of informal and formal activities work well. Parents can become engaged through social and recreational activities. Once engaged, they are more likely to work with their children on school-related activities and view themselves as involved in their child's education. It is also essential for schools to provide supports such as childcare and transportation. Seeley (1993) argues for a different model of schooling—one in which parent involvement is a necessity. What is needed is a persistence of effort and a reorganization of budgets and roles to reflect the importance of parent involvement.

Recent literature on parent involvement has focused on the need for new directions for parent involvement and redefined roles for parents (teacher, supporter, advocate, decision maker). These roles can include:

- Fulfilling basic parent responsibilities for a child's education and social development at home. Making sure children arrive at school well rested, appropriately clothed, and well fed are some of the duties included in this role.
- Working with their children. Providing home-based learning activities, showing how they value education, monitoring homework, tutoring, etc., are examples of how families actively participate in the child's learning.
- Participating in and supporting school events. Included here is attendance at meetings and conferences, serving as an audience for school programs and sporting events, and volunteering time, being a classroom aide, fund-raising, or serving as a chaperone for field trips or otherwise assisting at the school.
- Serving as an advisor or decision maker on a committee with responsibility for advising school personnel on school governance issues.
- Being an advocate for the school and its programs in the community. Parents can demonstrate their involvement by vocally supporting efforts to increase school funding, encouraging local businesses to contribute to school programs, or serving as spokespeople for school issues at community forums (Epstein et al., 1997).

For whatever reason, extensive parent involvement has not been the norm in most schools. More important than any specific strategy, then, may be a schoolwide commitment to build strong home-school ties. Making a commitment that parents *will* be involved to a greater extent increases the likelihood of finding strategies that will increase parent participation.

Additionally, especially in dealing with the families of students who may be at-risk, there is a tendency to focus on the family "dysfunction" that may be contributing to the child's problems. Many parents receive only negative contacts about their child from the school. Yet all families have strengths, and collaborative relationships are best built by focusing on those. How can we build upon shared concerns to help students? What positive aspects of the family can provide a resource to the school for assisting troubled youth? One simple strategy for increasing trust is to begin to communicate to parents when their child does something positive in the school or classroom.

It often seems that those families needing to be involved in school will be the most difficult to get involved. Yet the chances of successfully bringing parents in to school can be greatly increased by making activities and meetings responsive to the needs of families. Are meetings scheduled at times when parents can attend? Is there childcare or other provision for families who have younger siblings? Are meetings free of professional jargon that may be unfamiliar to parents? Are there community resources that can assist us in reaching more parents? Some communities that have been frustrated in their attempts to involve parents have successfully reached parents by going through community churches.

Finally, advocates of parent-friendly approaches argue that parents seek access, voice, and ownership in decisions involving their children. Have parents had appropriate access to important decisions regarding their children? Have we as a school ensured that parents have a voice in the education of their sons and daughters? Finally, effective parent involvement means that parents are not simply informed of the results of school decision-making, but have real opportunities to participate and take ownership in decisions affecting schooling.

Dr. Joyce Epstein, the world's foremost authority on parent involvement, directs the National Network of Partnership Schools as part of her work with Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Dr. Epstein's research has helped identify and clarify the many different kinds of partnerships that contribute to student success. Epstein's vision for effective school, family and community partnerships includes the following:

The basic obligations of parents. Parents help ready their children to learn at all ages by keeping them healthy and safe, and by supervising, disciplining, and guiding them. They help children feel good about themselves and confident with others. They teach them a positive attitude about learning and school.

Communications between home and school. Schools provide information to parents about students' progress and school programs. They also provide ways for parents to share with school staff information important to their children's learning (phone calls, notes, conferences, open houses, newsletters, and report cards are examples).

Parent involvement at school. Parents assist teachers, administrators, and children in the classroom and school building by volunteering. They support their children by attending student performances, sports or other events, or attending workshops or classes for their own learning as parents.

Parent involvement in learning activities at home. Families learn together by talking and listening to each other, playing games, reading, going on trips, visiting museums, telling stories, singing and working on homework. Parents help children connect family learning to school learning.

Parent involvement in governance and advocacy. Parents help make decisions in the school through parent groups, building leadership teams, and other local school organizations. Parents work for school improvement at the district, state, and national level.

Parent involvement through community collaborations. Citizens in community agencies, businesses, service groups, cultural organizations, governmental units, faith-based communities, and other groups must work together with schools in the best interests of children's learning.

Recommendations for the Kansas State Board of Education to Consider

In 2004, the National Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) Association revised and updated its national standards for parent and family involvement programs. The standards have been endorsed by the KSBE as well as over 100 education, health and parent involvement organizations; adopted in school districts across the country; supported by state departments of education; and incorporated into legislation in numerous states. These six standards are research-based guidelines that can be used at all school levels. Thus, the recommendations for parent and community involvement, offered below, are predicated on these six operating principles:

Communication between home and school is regular, two-way and meaningful.

Communication is the foundation of a solid partnership. When parents and educators communicate effectively, positive relationships develop, problems are more easily solved, and students make greater progress. Too often, school or program communication is one-way without the chance to exchange ideas and share perceptions. Effective home-school communication is the two-way sharing of information vital to student success. Even parent-teacher conferences can be one-way if the goal is merely reporting student progress. A strong parent-teacher partnership requires give-and-take conversation, goal setting for the future, and regular follow-up interactions.

Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

Parents are a child's life support system. Consequently, the most important support a child can receive comes from the home. School personnel and program staff support positive parenting by respecting and affirming the strengths and skills needed by parents to fulfill their role. From making sure that students arrive at school rested, nourished, and ready to learn, to setting high learning expectations and nurturing self-esteem, parents sustain their children's learning. When staff members recognize parent roles and responsibilities, ask what support parents need, and work to find ways to meet those needs, they communicate a clear message to parents: "We value you and need your input" in order to maintain a high-quality program.

Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

Student learning increases when parents are invited into the process by helping at home. Enlisting parents' involvement provides educators and administrators with a valuable support system – creating a team that is working for each child's success. The vast majority of parents are willing to assist their students in learning, but many times are not sure what assistance is most helpful and appropriate. Helping parents connect to their children's learning enables parents to communicate in powerful ways that they value what their children achieve. Whether it's working together on a computer, displaying student work at home, or responding to a particular class assignment, parents' actions communicate to their children that education is important.

Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

When parents volunteer, both families and schools reap benefits that come in few other ways. Literally millions of dollars of volunteer services are performed by parents and family members each year in the public schools. Studies have concluded that volunteers express greater

confidence in the schools where they have opportunities to participate regularly. In addition, assisting in school or program events/activities communicates to a child, "I care about what you do here." In order for parents to feel appreciated and welcome, volunteer work must be meaningful and valuable to them. Capitalizing on the expertise and skills of parents and family members provides much-needed support to educators and administrators already taxed in their attempts to meet academic goals and student needs. Although there are many parents for whom volunteering during school hours is not possible, creative solutions like before- or after-school "drop-in" programs or "at-home" support activities provide opportunities for parents to offer their assistance as well.

Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

Studies have shown that schools where parents are involved in decision making and advocacy have higher levels of student achievement and greater public support. Effective partnerships develop when each partner is respected and empowered to fully participate in the decision-making process. Schools and programs that actively enlist parent participation and input communicate that parents are valued as full partners in the educating of their children. Parents and educators depend on shared authority in decision-making systems to foster parental trust, public confidence, and mutual support of each other's efforts in helping students succeed. The involvement of parents, as individuals or as representative of others, is crucial in collaborative decision-making processes on issues ranging from curriculum and course selection to discipline policies and overall school reform measures.

Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

As part of the larger community, schools and other programs fulfill important community goals. In like fashion, communities offer a wide array of resources valuable to schools and the families they serve. When schools and communities work together, both are strengthened in synergistic ways and achieve gains that outpace what either entity could accomplish on its own:

- Families access community resources more easily;
- Businesses connect education programs with the realities of the workplace;
- Seniors contribute wisdom and gain a greater sense of purpose; and ultimately,
- Students serve and learn beyond their school involvement.

The best partnerships are mutually beneficial and structured to connect individuals, not just institutions or groups. This connection enables the power of community partnerships to be unleashed.

APPENDIX

What is Kansas Doing?

Parents Are Getting Involved: Parents in Kansas are getting involved in their children's education. In Kansas, 100 percent of 4th grade parents participate in parent-teacher conferences (Education Week).

The1st Annual Parent Involvement Conference, co-sponsored by the Kansas Parent Information Resource Center and the Kansas Association of Black School Educators, was held on December 5-6, 2003, at the Hyatt Regency in Wichita, Kansas.

The Kansas State Board of Education endorses The Keys to Successful School, Family, Community Partnerships.

The Kansas Parent Information Resource Center (KPIRC) is a free resource to teachers and schools. Funded under Title V of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as "No Child Left Behind," KPIRC consists of eight statewide educational and parent advocacy partners that include Kansas National Education Association (KNEA).

A major goal of the KPIRC is to provide training, information, resources and support to schools, parents, and other organizations that carry out parent education and family involvement programs. This, in turn, helps teachers to communicate more effectively with parents of pre-K through 12 th grade students.

Services from the KPIRC are available to help build the capacity of parents to become an integral part of their children's educational success in meeting the Kansas Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA) academic requirements. KPIRC is offering free workshops to schools and districts on topics such as:

- Creating Parent Involvement Policies
- Best Practices in Title I Parent Involvement
- How Parents Can Help Children Learn At Home
- Developing Meaningful Parent/School Compacts.

In Kansas City, Kansas, the school district has a distribution of standards guides that explain what children should know and be able to do at each grade level and has been given to thousands of parents as a valuable tool to help them become more involved in their child's education.

<u>Just for Parents Booklets.</u> The Kansas Board of Education has developed and made available to schools booklets designed to help parents and guardians understand the academic expectations established for students through the state assessment program.

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