

# Parent Involvement in Education

Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund

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## INTRODUCTION

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It is no wonder that parent involvement with the schools has become a major educational issue in the 1980s. This is an era of increasing concern about the quality of education in this country. States are taking a greater role in monitoring and maintaining academic standards. Communities are ever more watchful of the expense of public education. Local schools are concerned about continuing to provide high-quality teaching and other services with dwindling resources. And parents want assurance that their children will receive adequate preparation to lead rewarding adult lives.

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? Or is it one more responsibility to add to overburdened teachers and administrators--or even a threat to the autonomy and professionalism of the schools?

This review of the literature on parent involvement examines these issues, focusing, in particular on the following five areas:

- Does parent involvement have positive effects on student achievement? If so, what type of involvement works best?
- What are the effects of parent involvement on other student outcomes, such as attitude, self-concept, classroom behavior, and attendance?
- Is parent involvement useful beyond the preschool and early elementary grades--in middle school and high school? If so, what form should it take?
- What is known about the uses of parent involvement in predominantly minority and/or lower income communities?
- What, if any, effects on children's schooling can be attributed to parent involvement in the governance of schools?

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## **DEFINITION OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT**

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The term "parent involvement" is used broadly in this report. It includes several different forms of participation in education and with the schools. Parents can support their children's schooling by attending school functions and responding to school obligations (parent-teacher conferences, for example). They can become more involved in helping their children improve their schoolwork--providing encouragement, arranging for appropriate study time and space, modeling desired behavior (such as reading for pleasure), monitoring homework, and actively tutoring their children at home.

Outside the home, parents can serve as advocates for the school. They can volunteer to help out with school activities or work in the classroom. Or they can take an active role in the governance and decision making necessary for planning, developing, and providing an education for the community's children.

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## **THE PARENT INVOLVEMENT LITERATURE**

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There are literally hundreds of books, journal articles, and stand-alone reports on the subject of parents' involvement in their children's education. These writings include research reports, expert opinions, theory papers, program descriptions, and guidelines for setting up programs. A great many of these reports are informative and useful, and, because parent involvement has become a "hot topic" in the past few years, there is considerable current information.

The present report synthesizes information from forty-one documents on different aspects of parent involvement. Because several of these are review/summaries of still other documents, many additional writings are represented.

Documents were selected to reflect research on the effects of parent involvement on student achievement and other student outcomes. Twenty-five of the supporting documents are research studies, eight are reviews, and eight are program descriptions and research-based guidelines for setting up programs. All age/grade levels are represented in the research, as are specific student populations, such as the disadvantaged, special education, and limited English proficient students.

The kinds of parent involvement investigated include telephone and written home-school communications, attending school functions, parents serving as classroom volunteers, parent-teacher conferences, homework assistance/tutoring, home educational enrichment, and parent involvement in decision making and other aspects of school governance. The researchers focused on a variety of student outcome areas, including general achievement; achievement in reading, math, or other specific curricular areas; IQ scores; and an array of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

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## EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects. This holds true for all types of parent involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students.

Looking more closely at the research, there are strong indications that the most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities in the home. Programs which involve parents in reading with their children, supporting their work on homework assignments, or tutoring them using materials and instructions provided by teachers, show particularly impressive results.

Along similar lines, researchers have found that the more active forms of parent involvement produce greater achievement benefits than the more passive ones. That is, if parents receive phone calls, read and sign written communications from the school, and perhaps attend and listen during parent teacher conferences, greater achievement benefits accrue than would be the case with no parent involvement at all. However, considerably greater achievement benefits are noted when parent involvement is active--when parents work with their children at home, certainly, but also when they attend and actively support school activities and when they help out in classrooms or on field trips, and so on.

The research also shows that the earlier in a child's educational process parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effects will be. Educators frequently point out the critical role of the home and family environment in determining children's school success, and it appears that the earlier this influence is "harnessed," the greater the likelihood of higher student achievement. Early childhood education programs with strong parent involvement components have amply demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach.

What about orientation and training for parents who wish to become more involved in their children's learning? Those research studies which have compared parent involvement programs that include orientation/training components with those that do not indicate that providing orientation and training enhances the effectiveness of parent involvement. Research in this area indicates that parents generally want and need

direction to participate with maximum effectiveness. Orientation/training takes many forms, from providing written directions with a send-home instructional packet; to providing "make-and-take" workshops where parents construct, see demonstrations of, and practice using instructional games; to programs in which parents receive extensive training and ongoing supervision by school personnel.

A word of caution about training activities for parents: While research indicates that orientation/training activities are beneficial, those researchers who have looked at the extent of training have found that a little is better than a lot. That is, programs with extensive parent training components do not produce higher student achievement than those with only basic training, and they sometimes experience considerable attrition--presumably because their time and effort requirements overtax the willingness of parents to stay involved.

Researchers have also found that the schools with the most successful parent involvement programs are those which offer a variety of ways parents can participate. Recognizing that parents differ greatly in their willingness, ability, and available time for involvement in school activities, these schools provide a continuum of options for parent participation.

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### **THE EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT ON STUDENT ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR**

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Sixteen of the documents on which this report is based address the relationship between parent involvement and achievement and then also look at the effects of parent involvement on student outcomes other than achievement. These include attitude toward school or toward particular subject areas, self-concept, classroom behavior, time spent on homework, expectations for one's future, absenteeism, motivation, and retention.

While not as extensively researched as the parent involvement-student achievement relationship, the relationship between parent involvement and these affective outcomes appears to be both strong and positive. All the research studies which address these areas found that parent involvement has positive effects on student attitudes and social behavior.

As might be expected, the pattern of parent involvement shown to confer the most positive effects on students' achievement is also the most beneficial with respect to these other student outcomes. In general, active parent involvement is more beneficial than passive involvement, but passive forms of involvement are better than no involvement at all. As for which specific kinds of involvement in children's learning have the greatest affective benefits, no clear answer emerges from the research. Whereas direct parent involvement in instruction seems to be the single most powerful approach for fostering achievement benefits, all of the active forms of parent involvement seem more or less equally effective in bringing about improvements in students' attitudes and behavior.

Although the main focus of this report is the effects of parent involvement on student outcomes, it is certainly worth noting that research reveals many benefits for school systems and for parents themselves when parents become involved in their children's learning. School personnel benefit from the improved rapport that generally accompanies increased parent involvement. This rapport is often expressed in parents' increased willingness to support schools with their labor and resources during fundraising activities or special projects. And certainly, the many ways in which parent involvement benefits students' achievement, attitudes, and behavior have a positive impact on school staff.

The research also reveals that improved parent attitudes toward the school and improved parent self - concepts characteristically result when parents become involved in their children's learning. Parents often begin their participation doubting that their involvement can make much difference, and they are generally very gratified to discover what an important contribution they are able to make. In this connection, it is important for school people and parents to be aware that parent involvement supports students' learning, behavior, and attitudes regardless of factors such as parents' income, educational level, and whether or not parents are employed. That is, the involvement of parents who are well-educated, well-to-do, or have larger amounts of time to be involved has not been shown to be more beneficial than the involvement of less-advantaged parents. All parent involvement works and works well.

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### **PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL AND SECONDARY LEVELS**

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There is a much higher incidence of parent involvement at the preschool level and in the primary grades than at the middle school or secondary level, and, consequently, the majority of research on parent involvement has been conducted with young children and their families. Indeed, just a few years ago, research on parent involvement in the education of older students was too limited to permit drawing any conclusions about its effectiveness.

In recent years, however, more research has been conducted with middle school and secondary students and their families. This research shows that parent involvement remains very beneficial in promoting positive achievement and affective outcomes with these older students.

Researchers have identified various differences in the incidence and types of parent involvement as students move through the upper elementary and secondary grades. They point out that parents generally become less involved as their children grow older for many reasons: schools are bigger and farther from home, the curriculum is more sophisticated, each student has several teachers, parents of older students are more likely to be employed, and students are beginning to establish some sense of separation and independence from their parents. For these reasons, the kinds of parent involvement engaged in by parents of younger children are no longer relevant or useful.

The research on the effectiveness of parent involvement with older students, therefore, often focuses on different forms of participation--e.g., parents monitoring homework, helping students make postsecondary plans and select courses which support these plans, parent-school agreements on rewards for achievement and behavioral improvements--as well as some of the "standby" functions, such as regular home school communication about students' progress and parent attendance at school-sponsored activities.

Clearly, parent involvement is effective in fostering achievement and affective gains at all levels, and schools are encouraged to engage and maintain this involvement throughout the middle school and secondary years.

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## **THE ROLE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT WITH DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS**

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Thus far, this report has focused on the effects of parent involvement on achievement and other outcomes for students in general. But what about specific populations of students, particularly those whose socioeconomic status puts them at an educational disadvantage as compared with their more fortunate peers?

The nature of the parent involvement research base makes this question easier to address than it might be if it were necessary to mount all-new research efforts with disadvantaged populations. As it is, much of the general parent involvement research has been conducted with low-income, often black or Hispanic families. Sometimes this has occurred because both the parent involvement activities and the evaluations of them have been mandated as part of government-funded programs for disadvantaged children. In other cases, educators sensed the potential of parent involvement programs in poor neighborhoods, set these up, and then compared outcomes with those from other schools which are demographically similar.

The first thing researchers discovered is that minority or low-income parents are often underrepresented among the ranks of parents involved with the schools. There are numerous reasons for this: lack of time or energy (due to long hours of heavy physical labor, for example), embarrassment or shyness about one's own educational level or linguistic abilities, lack of understanding or information about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators, and teachers and administrators' assumptions of parents' disinterest or inability to help with children's schooling.

Perhaps one of the most important findings of the research, however, is that parents of disadvantaged and minority children can and do make a positive contribution to their children's achievement in school if they receive adequate training and encouragement in the types of parent involvement that can make a difference. Even more significant, the research dispels a popular myth by revealing, as noted above, that parents can make a

difference regardless of their own levels of education. Indeed, disadvantaged children have the most to gain from parent involvement programs.

Because of the special problems and the potential associated with minority and disadvantaged parent involvement, care must be taken to emphasize the concept of parents as partners of the school. Too often, because of the discontinuities between teachers/administrators and the communities in which their schools are located, school personnel tend to view the parents and surrounding community as needing to change and having little to offer. This "deficit model," as it has been called, is clearly detrimental to the development of positive attitudes about education and good working relationships between the community and the school. The guidelines offered at the end of this report can help schools and communities break down some of these barriers and move toward genuine working partnerships.

It is worth mentioning, in passing, that parent involvement benefits members of other special student populations as well. While the investigation leading to this report did not involve an in-depth analysis of evidence regarding these populations, the research reviewed does indicate that special education, gifted, limited English proficient, and other student groups also experience achievement and affective benefits when their parents are involved in their learning.

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## **THE EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE**

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Turning from the matter of parent involvement in children's learning, what about the outcomes produced by parent involvement in school governance? The term "governance" here includes any activity which provides parents the opportunity to take part in decision making about school programs. This may include being a school board member, a participant on a parent advisory committee or a local school improvement council, or an active member of the PTA. Areas in which parents may be helping to make program decisions include goal setting, development and implementation of program activities, assessment, personnel decisions, and funding allocations.

This area of parent involvement is one of the most controversial. Surveys show that most parents would like to play a more active role in this type of involvement, whereas most school administrators and teachers exhibit great reluctance to encourage parents to become partners in governance.

The literature reviewed for this report indicates that although administrators agree that parents should be involved with the schools in a variety of ways and that school personnel should spend time encouraging and training parents to become involved, they disapprove of parent involvement in administrative areas such as teacher and principal selection and evaluation, and are less enthusiastic than parents regarding the utility of parent participation in other activities, such as the selection of texts and other teaching materials or setting priorities for the school budget. They also tend to feel that parents do not have enough training to make school decisions, although surveys of parents indicate that the majority of them feel they are capable of making sound decisions.

In this review, no examples were found of programs in which parent participation in decision-making roles could be directly linked to improved student achievement. The relationship between parent participation in decision making and student achievement is not nearly as extensively researched as the effects of parent involvement in students' learning. Indeed, writers on the topic indicate that it is more difficult to assess the effects of parent involvement in decision making precisely because the connection to student outcomes is more indirect.

Of the half-dozen documents which do address the connection between parent involvement in decision making and student achievement, none were able to offer evidence of a causal relationship, though some writers seem to believe that such a relationship exists.

The lack of evidence linking parent involvement in governance and student achievement should not be taken to mean that parents should not be included in some aspects of school

decision making, however. Researchers and others have identified benefits other than student achievement which have been found to emerge from involving parents in governance. These include:

- The elimination of mistaken assumptions parents and school people may hold about one another's motives, attitudes, intentions and abilities
- The growth of parents' ability to serve as resources for the academic, social and psychological development of their children--with the potential for much longer-term influence (because of continued interaction with their children over time)
- The increase of parents' own skills and confidence, sometimes furthering their own educations and upgrading their jobs, thus providing improved role models for their children
- The increase in parents serving as advocates for the schools throughout the community

Research indicates that the kinds of parent involvement referenced earlier in this report--attending parent teacher conferences and school functions, volunteering in classrooms, tutoring children at home, etc.--provide the best training ground to help prepare parents for roles in school decision making. These activities enable parents to understand something of the school's structure and its instructional programs and provide basic experience in working with school personnel. These experiences can expand parents' knowledge and increase their credibility with school staff as they move into decision-making roles.

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## **ENGAGING MEANINGFUL PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOLS**

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Investigators have identified lack of planning and lack of mutual understanding as the two greatest barriers to effective parent involvement. School staff wishing to institute effective programs will need to be both open-minded and well-organized in their approach to engaging parent participation.

Research has established that the most successful parent participation efforts are those which offer parents a variety of roles in the context of a well organized and long-lasting program. Parents will need to be able to choose from a range of activities which accommodate different schedules, preferences, and capabilities. As part of the planning process, teachers and administrators will need to assess their own readiness for involving parents and determine how they wish to engage and utilize them.

Other guidelines include:

- Communicate to parents that their involvement and support makes a great deal of difference in their children's school performance, and that they need not be highly educated or have large amounts of free time for their involvement to be beneficial. Make this point repeatedly.
- Encourage parent involvement from the time children first enter school (or preschool, if they attend).
- Teach parents that activities such as modeling reading behavior and reading to their children increase children's interest in learning.
- Develop parent involvement programs that include a focus on parent involvement in instruction--conducting learning activities with children in the home, assisting with homework, and monitoring and encouraging the learning activities of older students.
- Provide orientation and training for parents, but remember that intensive, long-lasting training is neither necessary nor feasible.
- Make a special effort to engage the involvement of parents of disadvantaged students, who stand to benefit the most from parent participation in their learning, but whose parents are often initially reluctant to become involved.
- Continue to emphasize that parents are partners of the school and that their involvement is needed and valued.