

# From Parent Involvement to Family Partnerships

Many researchers, educators, and family advocates have shifted from using the term “parent involvement” to the phrase “family partnerships.” For those in education with lots on their plate, this switch in terminology may seem trivial, but using new terminology shows a shift in attitudes and actions that often come from new insights.

First to consider are the words “parent” and “family.” Parent usually implies only the mother and father of a specific child; and, in terms of parent involvement, it has most frequently meant the child’s mother. Family implies a larger network of people available to support the child in his or her education. Family could include older siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even close friends or neighbors.

## Parents Involved in Schools

Traditionally, parent involvement has been viewed as one-sided, with parents providing the time, resources (money), and expertise to support the school or be involved in school-sanctioned programs and activities. This view of parent involvement has typically focused on specific activities that include volunteering in the classroom; acting as a chaperon; fund raising; attending school-sponsored athletic, music, and drama events; and participating in PTO/PTA meetings, open houses, and parent/teacher conferences. These are important activities, but—for some families—these

typical requests can conflict with work schedules, lack meaning, feel intimidating, and fail to provide a clear connection to the academic success of their children.

Educators often acknowledge that these activities do not reach all families. In addition, they may not see how the activities can increase student achievement or how the activities are connected to overall school improvement goals.

## Family Members in Partnership With Schools

Partnerships, by definition, are different from involvement. Partnerships build “relationships between individuals or groups that are characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal” (American Heritage® Dictionary, 2000). Within a partnership, decisions are made collaboratively, roles and responsibilities are clear, and everyone has an opportunity to make a contribution to the common goal. **Partnerships assume mutual responsibility, trust, and respect**—while being beneficial to all parties involved.

Thus, a school-family partnership is a collaborative relationship between family members and school staff designed to produce positive educational and social outcomes for all children and youth in the learning community. The best interest



The best interest of the child is at the heart of the partnership.



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of the child—and his or her success—is at the heart of the partnership.

In the 1995 *Phi Delta Kappan* article—“School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share,” Joyce Epstein wrote: “In a partnership, teachers and administrators create more family-like schools. A family-like school recognizes each child’s individuality and makes each child feel special and included. Family-like schools welcome all families, not just those that are easy to reach. In a partnership, parents create more school-like families. A school-like family recognizes that each child is also a student. Families reinforce the importance of school, homework, and activities that build student’s skills and feelings of success.”

Thus, the difference between parent involvement and family partnerships is not just about semantics, but about the attitudes and beliefs that allow families to be true partners with you in the education of their child.

The Harvard Family Research Project—in *Family-School-Community Partnerships: A Compilation of Professional Standards of Practice for Teachers* (Caspé, 2001)—compiled professional standards of practice related to family and community partnerships (p. 3). These standards expect teachers to:

- Work with and through parents and families to support children’s learning and development
- Know the important of establishing and maintaining a positive collaborative rela-

tionship with families to promote academic, social, and emotional growth of children.

- Propagate communication between home and school that is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- Foster relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies to the larger community to support students’ learning and well-being.
- Communicate about academic goals to help families and other caregivers.
- Maintain an open, friendly, and cooperative relationship with each child’s family, encourage their involvement in the program, and support the child’s relationship with his or her family.

One way to establish relationships with families is to learn about and support the ways families help their children learn outside school. One language arts teacher did this by having her students write short essays about something they learned outside the classroom that was taught to them by a relative or community member. This new knowledge about the skills and abilities of the families helped change her focus from “look at what the school is doing for your child” to “thank you for the many ways you are educating your child.”

For more concrete ideas in how to create effective partnerships, see *Creating Partnerships Early* (OregonPIRC.org/web\_fm\_send/12).