

Getting Parents Involved in the Classroom

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Abstract: “Most educators know that parent involvement can be a big factor in increasing student achievement...unfortunately, teachers sometimes have a hard time figuring out how to connect with parents in meaningful ways” (Epstein, 1988, 107). Parent involvement is a very important aspect of education, but many teachers struggle with how to engage parents in their student’s education. Through extensive research, I have learned that many new teachers struggle with this, and through this paper, I want to share the different types of involvement, ways to get parents involved, the positive outcomes of parent involvement, and parent involvement in secondary education.

Different articles give many different types of involvement, but the list that I found most relevant was in Gordon Greenwood and Catherine Hickman’s 1991 article “Research and Practice for Parent Involvement: Implications for Teacher Education.” Their list of types of parent involvement includes “parents as audience, parents as volunteer, parents as paraprofessionals, parents as teacher of own child, parents as learners, and parents as decision makers” (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991, 284).

Out of this list it is important for teachers to focus on the ideas of parents as teachers of own child. It is important for teachers to remember that school is not the only place where students learn. In a survey given to 3,700 elementary teachers in 600 Maryland schools, results showed that the teachers found four parent involvement activities were extremely important. These activities included spending time reading with their children, reading and signing paperwork and agendas, preparing materials, and encouraging summer learning at home (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991, 285). This list shows four different, and easy ways to get parents actively involved in their child’s education from their own home, without having to spend extra time volunteering in the classroom, or being on committees.

Teachers must keep in mind that not all parents are able to be involved in the same way, and that there are many different ways to utilize parents. “Because of parents’ work schedules, outside commitments, and individual preferences, it helps to give parents choices in how they can be involved” (Epstein, 1988, 107). Some parents may want to help in the classroom, and could share a talent, organize special events, or even assist with tutoring, while other parents would be more appreciative of ideas on how to help their children with schoolwork outside of school, or other ways to support learning outside of school (Epstein, 1988, 107). As teachers, it is our job to open and willing to work with each parent to get them involved, even if it is at the most basic level, because any involvement helps.

Other school districts, such as the low income ones in Connecticut that participated in the study that was part of the School Development Program believe that the best way to get parents involved is through a three level parent program. In James Comer and Norris Haynes 1991 article, “Parent Involvement In Schools: An Ecological Approach,” they outline the three levels, level one being a small group of parents elected by peers to serve on a council representative of all parents, followed by level two, parent participation in day-to-day classroom and school and activities, and finally level three, a strong turnout of parents for general activities. Through this program, teachers would be most involved in level two, which would be having parents in their classrooms to help with day-to-day routine items. In order to avoid conflict with this type of set up it is crucial that the teacher has “clearly defined roles and activities for parents to perform to avoid confusion and conflict” (Comer & Hayes, 1991, 275). As a teacher, I think it is very important to have control in your classroom and feel like you are in charge and having another adult in the room could challenge this, but if we want parents to be involved we have to welcome them into the classroom. To avoid problems it would be beneficial to set up a meeting with the parents who

want to help before hand, so you could get to know them better and learn what they want to do, or what they have experience doing, and from this information it would be easier to assign them specific jobs that they would be comfortable doing, and would be helpful to the whole classroom. This is also a time when you could discuss specific roles in the classroom, and make sure you are on the same page.

In Joyce Epstein's "Parent Involvement" she discusses Before-School Conferences as a way to get parents involved in their student's education right away. These Before-School Conferences are just a short meeting with the parent, their child, and the teacher before the school year starts that provides each of them the opportunity to get to know each other, discuss the upcoming school year, expectations, and anything else that either side feels is necessary. As a future teacher, this is something that I hope to implement into my classroom right away because it opens up communication right away, and also provides the opportunity to get parents involved right away, and to discuss how we can keep them involved (Epstein, 1988, 112). Many schools have something like this, usually called an Open House, but I think these Before-School Conferences would be more beneficial because they are more personal and allow for the teacher to focus on just one family at time, while at an open house there could be three or four families there at a time.

Parent involvement in the classroom is a hot topic because of its many benefits on students. After large amounts of research have been done on the topic of parent involvement, the results are in, and their positive impact cannot be denied. This research shows higher academic achievement, a greater sense of well-being from the students, increased student attendance, more positive student attitudes and behavior, a greater student readiness and willingness to do homework, better student grades, higher educational aspirations among both students and parents, and greater parent satisfaction with teachers (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991, 280-281). Although all of the benefits in this list are reason enough to get parents involved, the one that really sticks out to me greater parent satisfaction. Obviously as a teacher it is

impossible to please all parents, and that really isn't your job, but if you show an openness and willingness to work with the parents and they have a better attitude about you at home, which will carry into the attitude that their child brings to school. If by taking simple steps to get parents involved, even just a little bit, results in this many benefits for the students, every teacher needs to learn how to and focus on getting parents involved right away.

Parent involvement in secondary education can be difficult, because parents feel that their "students have passed [their] ability to help them in many subject areas; and high school is a time for students to learn independence" (Schrack, 1992, 36). Although parents' argument for students learning independence in high school is one of great validity, it has also been proven that students who receive continued support and whose parents remain involved in school are better students (Schrack, 1992). Ways for parents to give continued support and stay involved can be as easy as going to support the students in their extra curricular activities, or asking about their homework and grades on a day-to-day basis. As a student who had parents that remained actively involved in my education, it helped me a lot and motivated me to be a better student because I knew my parents were invested in my education and I wanted to make sure I was doing everything I could to make them proud. As a future high school teacher, I can clearly see the struggle here, but I believe that even in high school, parents need to remain involved, although not as involved as they once were. To satisfy the need for parents to be involved without demanding too much, I believe that a weekly or even bi-weekly news email to parents would be extremely beneficial. Through this email, parents could learn about what's been going on and what's coming up in my classroom, straight from the source, me, and this information would allow them to better interact with their students as far as what homework they may have. This communication could also prove to parents my willingness to openly communicate about any problems either of us have.

Another way to engage parents in secondary education is by bringing them into the classroom.

"Parents...are a ready-made resource for bringing a reality-based curriculum into secondary education," (Schrick, 1992, 6). I believe, especially in secondary education, that there is a need for students to see a connection between what is being taught and the real world, and the easiest way to do this is by bringing parents into the classroom and letting them talk about how they use what is being taught now in their day-to-day responsibilities. This would provide students with a real world connection, that they need to stay focused, and it could also show students job fields that they never knew existed. This idea of having parents in the classroom ties back into parents as paraprofessionals as part of the types of parent involvement I presented earlier, and it is a great way to get parents involved without them feeling as if they are being too involved in their older student's education and taking away the independence they are trying to teach them before sending them out into the real world.

From the benefits listed it is clear that the best results are achieved only when these two institutions, the school and the family, work together. When implemented correctly, parent involvement has huge benefits for students,

parents, and teachers. I have shared with you the different types of involvement, different ways to get parents involved, the positive outcomes of parent involvement, parent involvement in secondary education, and examples on different ways to implement and start parent involvement. I encourage as many teachers as possible to start getting the parents in their school district involved right away, and in as many ways as possible!

References

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