

Journal of Negro Education

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Source: *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 70, No. 4, African American Children with Special Needs (Autumn, 2001), pp. 275-285

Published by: [Journal of Negro Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3211280>

Accessed: 13/11/2014 00:41

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Involving the African American Parent: Recommendations to Increase the Level of Parent Involvement within African American Families

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This article focuses on increasing African American parent involvement as a tactic to improve the school performances of African American children. The importance of parental involvement, emphasizing the areas of mandated parental involvement, achievement/behavior, and empowerment will be discussed. Factors contributing to the lack of parental involvement as well as recommendations for increasing the levels of parental involvement will be presented.

African American children are failing at record rates. Educators have identified several variables that contribute to the problem, including high rates of poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), lack of adequate resources (Kozol, 1991), poor communication between home and school (Weitock, 1991), and low rates of parental involvement (Wallis, 1995). Each of the aforementioned variables are important and impact the school success of African American children.

Parents hold a critical role throughout the educational process. Because parents serve as the first teachers in a child's life, they are considered to be the primary educators of their child. Parents can also serve as decision-makers and advocates and can collaborate with school teachers in an effort to aid in the smoothness of their child's educational career. Like other ethnic groups, African American parents want their children to achieve academically. However, some of these parents may lack the knowledge and resources to assist their child with academic success.

This article focuses on increasing African American parent involvement as a tactic to improve the school performance of African American children. The importance of parental involvement, emphasizing the areas of mandated parental involvement, achievement/behavior, and empowerment will be discussed. Factors contributing to the lack of parental involvement follows, as well as recommendations for increasing the levels of parental involvement will also be presented.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement has been defined in a variety of ways. Perroncel (1993) defines it as a partnership among home, school, and community members to support a child's

*Support for this research was provided by a Leadership Training Grant (H325D980018) from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, U.S. Department of Education. I appreciate the support of Drs. Ralph Gardner and Donna Ford.

education process. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) defines parent involvement as the active, ongoing participation of a child's parent(s) or guardian(s) in his or her education (NREL, 1999). NWREL recognizes that parents participate in their children's education in a variety of ways, ranging from reading to children at home and assisting in the classroom, to sitting on advisory councils at school. Similarly, Epstein (1995) summarized the ranges of family involvement within a classification system that included school-home communications, parent involvement within the school and the community, providing their child with home learning activities, and parents serving as decision-makers. Weitock (1991) uses the term "high parental involvement" and defines it as parent(s) who attend parent-teacher conferences, are able to be reached for conferences by phone, and attend PTA meetings and school programs. These parents are also described as those who are motivated and interested in the value of a good education, provide supervision for their children after school, and have materials such as paper, pencils, and books within the home.

To parents, involvement in their child's education may include an array of meanings. Some may feel that participating within the school setting in the capacity of a teacher's aide, a tutor, assisting with fundraising activities, and/or attending field trips is considered parent involvement. Other parents may feel that adequate parent involvement includes providing a place for their child to study, helping with homework, setting curfews, and monitoring the quantity and quality of such activities as watching television and "hanging out" with friends (Finders & Lewis, 1994). As described, parents possess different skills and differing levels of comfort when it comes to school involvement and it is important that educators take this into consideration (Decker, Gregg, & Decker, 1996). It is equally important that educators realize that both the child and the school benefit when parents participate in either school-based or home-based activities. The child benefits by having both the school and home place an emphasis on education while the school benefits by being in a partnership with parents who are supportive of their educational program.

Perceptions of Parental Involvement

In America's pioneer years, the parents' role in the educational process was acknowledged by virtue of the close relationship between education and the rearing of children (Berger, 1981). The presence of parents in school buildings shows support of the school as a major dimension of a child's life as well as provides collaboration between school and home (Flood, Lapp, Nagel, & Tinajero, 1995). Furthermore, when parents are involved in on-site programs, school faculty members are given an opportunity to reaffirm and achieve wider societal goals (Winters, 1993). However, public schools have contributed to the problem of decreasing parent involvement by gradually taking on more responsibilities once assumed by parents (Wallis, 1995).

Unfortunately, some school personnel are territorial and believe that the curriculum and education professionals should be the sole decision-makers on educational issues. They often resist any effort to program and implement parental involvement, which in turn complicates the problem of institutionalizing parent participation. However, the sense of integrity, pride, and self-respect should return to the schoolhouse and all constituencies be held accountable, including parents (Wallis, 1995). By doing so, all partnerships will be strengthened and the likelihood of these types of collaborations will increase.

Time

The participatory process is time consuming. It can take several hours to place phone calls or make visits. Weitock (1991) described the difficulty some teachers had in reaching

the parents of their students as an origin of the frustration between parents and teachers. Too often, when contact is made with parents the concern is focused on inappropriate behavior. In a study conducted by Finders and Lewis (1994), a parent stated, "They [the teachers] don't tell me anything [to do]. They just tell me my kid is bad" (p. 51). This type of interaction and frustration indicates a need for a different approach, such as establishing positive rapport, support, and communication with parents. Although conflicts and differences can surface when parents must become involved and additional professional time and involvement in negotiation and implementation of solutions may be necessary, educators must encourage meaningful parent participation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In 1980, *Phi Delta Kappan* released a landmark report that revealed that parental representation served as a significant factor in obtaining positive outcomes in urban schools. Urban schools are the houses of education for 43% of the minority population (Cotton, 1991; Olson & Jerald, 1998). Children who live in urban areas are more likely to attend schools with high concentrations of students from poor families (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996). Schools districts have struggled with limited success to meet the needs of urban students particularly poor minority children with special needs (Gardner & Talbert-Johnson, 2000). Yet, since the *Phi Delta Kappan* report (1980), other researchers have also reported that children whose parents are involved in their schooling can significantly increase their academic achievement and cognitive development (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Additionally, parental school involvement can positively impact parent-child relationships through the parents' participation in their child's activities (Hollifield, 1995).

Student behavior is also positively affected when parents are involved. A study conducted by Nweze (1993) revealed that students' appropriate school behavior increased when parents were involved in the discipline process, were made aware of their roles in the educational process, and were encouraged to participate in their child's educational process. Frazier (1997) also found a significant inverse correlation between parent involvement and suspension levels—namely, when the level of parental involvement increased, the number of student suspensions decreased. This is particularly important for African American students who are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or placed in serious emotionally disturbances (SED) special education classrooms than any other ethnic group (Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997).

Mandated Parental Involvement

Legislation has been put into place that legally mandates educators to establish relationships with parents. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, consists of a series of important pieces of education legislation that emphasizes strengthening parent-school-community partnerships and promoting parent involvement in learning. This act, which was passed by Congress and signed by President William Clinton in 1994, increases support for activities that encourage parent involvement in school activities and in their children's schoolwork (Education Commission of the States, 2000). The Goals 2000 Act mandates that parents are represented on state and local school improvement designing plans as well as serve as participants in grass root outreach efforts to improve schools and student learning (Stedman, 1994).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) also strengthened the role of parents as well as encouraged parents and educators to collaborate on educational goals and objectives for students with disabilities. School officials must now aggressively seek parental consent for special education evaluation and reevaluation, Individual Educa-

tional Program (IEP) meetings, and manifestation determination hearings. Furthermore, IDEA mandates that (a) identification and placement decisions be made that involve parents as decision-makers (Felber, 1997), (b) parents and children's rights to due process are protected (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1998), and (c) "individual families, as well as individual children, have unique strengths and needs that should be considered in developing intervention plans" (Sussell, Carr, & Hartman, 1996, p. 54).

Achievement/Behavior

Parents are the child's first teachers and as such, they play an integral role in developing the child's orientation toward achievement and behavior (Slaughter & Epps, 1987). John Briar, an elementary school principal, states, "[T]he bulk of each child's education, counseling, health care, and norm enforcement comes from families" (as cited in Deanes, 1994, p. 33). Substantial evidence shows that family involvement helps to improve student outcomes such as grades, test scores, attendance, and behavior (Bever, 1994; Clark, 1983; Guttman & Wagner, 1995; Nweze, 1993; Weitock, 1991).

Research also shows that students do better when their parents are involved at any extent. Children who have parents actively involved with their school perform better academically and behave better than those whose parents are more passive in their participation (Weitock, 1991). Not only do children perform better academically and behaviorally when parents are involved, teachers' behaviors have been affected as well. Bever (1994) found that when parents become involved, teachers normally exhibited positive attitude changes as well as improved their personal work habits.

Empowerment

Empowerment is defined by Dunst and Trivette (1987) as the perception that parents have the necessary capability and skill to make a significant difference in their child's life. Thompson et al. (1997) defines empowerment as a relationship to a personal perception as individuals that are confident they have the information and problem solving skills necessary to deal with challenging situations. In essence, parents can become empowered when they participate in their child's educational process.

Teachers can aid in this parental empowerment by asking parents for their assistance, views, and suggestions as a means to better prepare their child and ensure academic success. Parental support also enables a child to adjust and be flexible. It provides the children with the structure they need to encourage them to work hard, study as expected, turn off the TV during homework time, and do what is expected in the classroom (Paul, 1995). In addition, when parental presence is extended to the classroom, it permits other students to enjoy the proximity and experiences of interacting with adults from a variety of backgrounds (Flood et al., 1995).

Parents make a difference in the school-based lives of their children, but only when their role is meaningful, empowered, and sustained (Reed & Sautter, 1990). Many support systems are available to empower parents and aid them in the participation of their child's educational career. For example, the family systems model best utilizes parent empowerment by helping parents make informed decisions, take control over environmental events, and focus interventions on family strengths (Dunst, 1985). Proactive social supports (Mowder, 1994) and providing a variety of opportunities for parents to collaborate in the teaching of their children can also aid in the building and strengthening of the empowerment of families. These supports and opportunities include but are not limited to, homework activities, class projects, classroom volunteer work, field trips, and fundraising. The Accelerated School Program, conducted in both California and Missouri,

is another program designed to increase parents' awareness of how they can support their children (Reed & Sautter, 1990). The goal of this particular program is to enable parents to become more active in their children's education and it supports parents by providing them with academic training and knowledge of their child's educational environment.

Whether it is a routine task or a task that seems to be insurmountable, collaboration among parents, teachers, and other school personnel promises positive outcomes. Where there is empowerment, there is positive student and parent response as well as improvement in motivation and self-confidence.

BARRIERS AFFECTING LOW URBAN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Several factors affect low parental involvement. These include family structure/socioeconomic status, parents' schedule, educational level, and the expectations of administrators and teachers.

Family Structure/Socioeconomic Status

The nuclear family structure of father, mother, and children has seen a drastic decrease. An increasing number of families are headed by a single parent especially in urban settings (Lippman, et al., 1996). This phenomenon has occurred as a result of surges in the number of divorces, separation, and unwed and/or teenage parents. Fewer school-aged children come from two parents, single-wage-earner families (Swick & Graves, 1993). In fact, most low-income urban children live in a growing number of single parent, female-headed households (Lippman et al., 1996; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

Consequently, many teachers believe that parents with low incomes do not value education highly and have little to contribute to the education of their children (Davies, 1988). These parents have been described as difficult to reach and that phones, if present in these homes, were often disconnected (Weitock, 1991). They may also be unable to attend meetings, conferences, plays, and other school activities because they do not own an automobile or may face difficulties with securing transportation. Their absence may lead teachers to make the erroneous conclusion that the parent does not care about their children's education. However, this may not be the case. Contrary to popular belief, many urban parents are just as interested in their children's education as any parent from any other socioeconomic class.

Unfortunately, urban parents are often alienated from the schools and see no opportunity to be included in their child's educational process. Often they feel as if they lack the knowledge and ability to work effectively with school faculty who are sometimes viewed as unapproachable, hostile bureaucracies (Harris & Heid, 1989). In addition, some educators hold the belief that poverty leads to deficiencies in acquiring academic skills and many poor urban students are often forced to deal with adverse conditions, which in turn lowers their self-esteem as they begin to internalize the notion that they cannot achieve.

In an effort to avoid the parental alienation of the urban parent population, schools must recognize personal preferences, value the different roles volunteers can play, and provide a variety of ways for parents to become involved (Decker et al., 1996; Epstein, 1995). Educators must also keep in mind that just because a child resides with one parent does not mean that the child is poor or the family is uninvolved. Although many studies indicate that income and the number of parents in the home determine academic achievement, research from Clark (1983) shows that regardless of income, single-headed or two parent homes, students can still achieve. For the academic achievement of urban students to increase, parental involvement is vital preparation for their children's academic success.

Parents' Schedule

The parents' work schedule may also affect their level of involvement (Weitock, 1991). Approximately two-thirds of working parents with children under the age of 18 reported that they do not have enough time to meet their children's needs and many rely on the television to occupy their children's time (Families and Work Institute, 1994). Flood et al. (1995) state that most parents care deeply about their children's education, but their involvement can be limited for a variety of reasons including: (a) busy schedules, (b) they have babies or younger children at home, (c) both parents work, or (d) the belief that teaching is the teacher's job.

Educators must realize that the familial life is very busy and although education may be on the top of the educator's priority list, many parents prioritize quality time with their family differently. They may not have the time to embark on suggestions that may place further time constraints on them.

Educational Level

The educational level of the parent can also inhibit parental involvement. According to the 1998 U.S. Census, approximately 84% of the White American population and 76% of the African American population over the age of 25 completed four years of high school. However, a study conducted by the Children's Defense Fund in 2000 revealed that those living in poverty are twice as likely to dropout of high school and, despite the record low poverty rate for African Americans in 1999, it was still almost three times the poverty rate for White non-Hispanic Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Further, a metropolitan area life survey found that inner-city parents with low income and educational level and function as single parents are less satisfied with their opportunities for parent involvement than are parents who have attended college and have higher incomes (Rioux & Berla, 1993). Despairingly, some teachers and school administrators equate the parents' level of education to the amount of time parents will invest in their child's educational career and do not give low-income and less educated parents the opportunity to participate.

Many parents are aware of the disparity between themselves and the school staff and choose to stay away. The faculty and staff may also fail to involve parents with their perceived inadequate level of expertise coupled with the parents' own past negative educational experiences may further intimidate parents. Consequently, it becomes difficult to build an educational partnership. Accordingly, educators must reach out to these parents and demonstrate a visible concern for their children.

Expectation of Administrators and Teachers

Teachers' attitudes as well as a hostile insensitive school environment also contribute to the amount of parent involvement that takes place within the classroom and school building. Teachers who hold low expectations or believe that parents do not care about their children and do not want to be involved in their education may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and directly contribute to the lack of parental involvement and to student failure.

Parent involvement is an important factor in teacher expectations. Some teachers lower their expectations based on the race of the child, the income of the child's family, the gender of the child, and the child's appearance (Oakes, 1988). If a child's academic achievement is based on the teacher's expectations, parents must become involved in order to ensure that the teacher's expectations remain high. Interacting with parents extends the school's

capacity to understand and appreciate the values and culture of the families and to meet the educational needs of children they serve more effectively (Winters, 1993). Doing so will increase academic achievement of the students (Good & Brophy, 2000). Similarly, Hollifield's (1995) examination of parental involvement conducted through the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning at John Hopkins University revealed that parent involvement depends more on how school administrators and teachers seek to engage parents (i.e., what was done in an effort to encourage involvement) than on the status of parents (i.e., rich, poor, single, or married).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

For students to perform to the best of their ability both academically and behaviorally, they must be in school on a consistent basis and receive support from their parents and guardians. Consistent parental involvement is key to achieving this goal. The following recommendations will improve and increase parent involvement:

1. *Urge parents and/or guardians to remain or become active in their child's educational process.* Reiterate to them that they serve as their child's primary educators. Their presence during the child's educational career contributes to better behavior, which could lead to more school pride, higher self-esteem, and better grades.
2. *Make sure that each child is properly educated and attends school regularly.* Administrators, teachers, and parents should work together and reach a common goal to ensure that the child will receive a quality education and make the child aware of the importance and value of a good education.
3. *Develop a case history of the family in an effort to determine what is hindering their involvement* (Kunjufu, 1989). Once a cause has been determined, incorporate a strategy to bridge the gap and make the parent feel more comfortable in the school setting.
4. *Establish a rapport with parents.* Contact parents before problems arise. Do not limit communication with parents to only that of problems with the child. This may help to eliminate the negative connotation that parents have towards schools, especially if they feel as if school personnel only contact them with negative news.
5. *Provide parents with more authority.* Use the team-oriented approach described by Comer (1988). This approach allows parents to feel welcomed, to participate in meaningful ways, and to reinforce academic achievement at home while administrative and mental health teams implement and monitor the program at school.
6. *Follow the lead of the Chapter I program.* The Chapter I program, which was developed to improve the educational opportunities of children by integrating childhood and adulthood education, is based on the notion that children will develop quickly as well as be more productive when the parents are both involved and are growing and developing themselves. It is designed to assist parent development through family-orientation programs such as in-school parent centers, ongoing home visits, and collaborative projects with family service agencies and has a parent coordinator and a parent room on the school site. This program has been successfully implemented in the Philadelphia school system, where consistent gains in students' test scores, grades, and attendance has been reported (Davidoff & Pierson, 1991). Other urban school districts can rally the funds to put such programs into place to enhance the relationship between home and school.
7. *Ask parents about their interest in the school.* Too often, the school chooses what the parents should hear although the parents may have little or no interest in what is

- being presented. Give parents what they are interested in and provide them with interesting speakers so that their enthusiasm and excitement will remain at peak levels.
8. *Ask the parents who attend meetings to spread the word to other parents.* This strategy could grasp the interest of parents who normally do not participate and increase the amount of parental involvement at all levels.
 9. *Use parents as teaching partners* (Flood et al., 1995; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995). Allow parents to stimulate student discussions about topics that are important to daily learning goals. Parents can help their children apply what they are learning in school to everyday happenings. Also, encourage parents to serve as tutors in the classroom. Parents that do so can serve as mentors to one another and in turn may be able to help those parents who did not do well in their own schooling with basic skills.
 10. *Do not judge or criticize parents.* Even though the level of parent involvement may be low, do not lower students' expectations of themselves. Instead, focus on tutorial or recreational activities to help develop the children that you serve.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and administrators have a responsibility to aggressively seek parental involvement. Parents in concert with school personnel can work to improve the academic performance of their children. Several studies suggest that as parent involvement increases, academic achievement increases and behavior problems decrease (Frazier, 1997; Guttman & Wagner, 1995; Nweze, 1993). School-wide programs need to be developed to increase the number of involved parents so that students' are able to experience the level of success they deserve.

Parents can no longer be ignored. Parents are the primary educators in their child's life and school officials must acknowledge this. Teachers and administrators must also realize that several barriers contribute to the low level of involvement of urban parents (e.g., family structure/socioeconomic status; parents' schedule; educational level; and the expectations of administrators and teachers)—all of which can be overcome. Moreover, despite these barriers, African American parents are still interested in their child's success. In fact, the active participation of urban African American parents is essential in reversing the current disappointing school performance of low-income urban African American children. Unfortunately, many educators fail to involve parents and then blame the parents for having a lack of interest and commitment. This type of attitude contributes to some parents' feelings of alienation especially when they are rarely given an opportunity to participate in their child's academic life.

Although urban families may exhibit lower levels of involvement than others do, they still maintain high expectations for their children. They have the desire to be actively involved both physically and financially in their child's educational experience. But due to several limitations, they may be unable to provide their child with various opportunities. Instead, many choose to concentrate more on survival and less on educational development and sadly, some parents hold low achievement expectations of their own children. However, programs like the Accelerated School Program provides aid to parents as well as attempts to raise the expectations about what their children are capable of doing. Educators can also play an important role by assisting parents in learning how to provide their children with appropriate experiences needed for future success such as supplying them with information on how to establish consistent study time for their children and how to advocate more effectively for their children (Trotman, 2002).

Parents can indeed play an effective role in schools and their presence can enhance the levels of success that teachers and their students can experience. Administrators, teachers, and parents should become one cohesive group. Once this is done, the goal of achievement will be met for everyone.

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