

Introduction

OPENING THE DOOR TO FAMILIES

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hen my oldest child entered kindergarten twenty years ago, I remember pulling an envelope from his school out of our mailbox one warm August day. The letter not only welcomed him but also welcomed my husband and me “as partners” in his education. We were pleased by the acknowledgment.

But as a teacher myself, I was also aware of how much easier it is to name such a partnership than to live in one. “Partners.” The word lingered in my mind. I thought about other kinds of partnerships that I was familiar with, both business and personal. Partnering with someone involves a serious commitment. What kind of partnership exactly was this going to be? I wondered. What would the balance of power be in it? What were the roles and responsibilities of each member? What would happen when conflicts arose?

As a teacher, I had often asked myself the same questions about school-home partnerships. Now, however, I was for the first time on the parent end of the relationship. The difference in perspective was enlightening. As a teacher, I knew that at the heart of all my questions about the school-home partnership was the question of trust. For this partnership to go well, great trust is required: Teachers must trust parents, and parents must trust teachers. But as a parent, I was now experiencing firsthand just how profoundly parents are asked to trust. They’re asked to trust not only a particular teacher in a particular year, but also the institution of school—all the teachers and all the years of school that their child will experience. Between kindergarten and fifth grade, a standard elementary school span, a child spends over a thousand days in school. What an influence the people and the culture of the school will have!

Introduction

My son's kindergarten year passed. In both his and his younger sister's elementary years, there were many wonderful teachers who took care to build good relationships with our family. Though I cannot claim that I found answers to all my questions about school-home partnerships—they are, after all, big questions without simple answers—our family did experience many instances of respectful, fruitful collaboration with teachers. It's now twenty years later. These intervening two decades have provided me with many experiences, observations, and conversations as a parent and educator with parents and educators. I have gained some insights into the issue of teachers and parents working together, and I also have new questions. Some of these have to do with the growing diversity of our population, which has made the terrain more varied, more interesting, and more challenging than ever.

**The critical
role of
teachers**

Yet while my list of questions has grown, so has my conviction about the vital importance of the school-family partnership. Children flourish best when there is respect and cooperation among the adults who care for them at home and at school. The value to students of open communication and a good working relationship between school and home is clear. Experience and common sense suggest it; research confirms it. (See box on page 7.)

The critical role of teachers

In the work of cultivating a positive relationship between home and school, teachers play a critical role. Their actions and words, how well they listen to parents, and how genuinely they respect families deeply affect how much trust there will be between parent and teacher. Not only that, but as families' most immediate contact with the school, teachers can make a significant difference in how much families trust the institution of school. I don't mean to imply that it's up to individual teachers to tend to relationships between families and the school as a whole. That work is shared by school principals, home liaisons, and other staff. What I am asserting is that individual teachers have great power in influencing families' feelings about school as an institution. The rewards of a good teacher-parent working relationship can often be felt well beyond the classroom walls.

Yet if the rewards are great, so can be the challenges for both teachers and parents. Unlike most adult partnership arrangements, there is little choice involved in the pairing of teachers and parents. These partnerships are usually announced via class lists—lists informed by geography, date of birth, the alphabet, gender ratios, and assorted other factors. And, parents and teachers both come with a set of

experiences and assumptions about learning and children and homes and schooling. Those sets may be very aligned or quite divergent.

Fortunately, no matter what differences exist, both parents and teachers bring deep caring and commitment to the growth and success of the children. Once children enter school, their education and development become a joint project of home and school, and both teachers and parents have critical areas of expertise to contribute. Teachers know child development, curriculum, and methods that help children learn. They are experienced at helping children work and share in groups. Parents are experts on their particular children—how they naturally take in information, what energizes and delights them, what they do when they stumble, how they show that they are upset, and what comforts them when they are worried.

The five “eyes”

Introduction

So how can teachers help ensure that this joint project is successful? In my early days as a teacher I asked a mentor of mine how to increase teacher-parent collaboration in a school project. Though she had learned it from her days as a fundraiser, her answer offers wisdom for any situation where shared investment is a goal. “Remember the five eyes,” she said.

The five eyes. It sounded profound—at least a little mythical. I nodded. Should I confess that I had no idea what she was talking about? I ran through the mythical creatures I could summon up in my mind’s one eye. Cyclops? Gorgon? Medusa? “The five eyes,” I said thoughtfully, stalling for time.

“You know: Identify, Inform, Invite, Involve, Invest.” Aha. She was talking I’s, not eyes. She went on. “First you have to identify the common interest, then you have to make sure they have information about it, invite them to be a part of it in meaningful ways, involve them when they accept that invitation. Do all that, and there’ll be investment.”

The strategies in this book

In *Parents and Teachers Working Together* the authors offer a wealth of strategies that identify common goals among parent, teacher, and child; that inform parents; that invite them into the life of the classroom and the school; and that involve them in ways which encourage investment in successful collaboration.

Three things stand out about the strategies in this book. First, they are practical. There are specific, do-able suggestions for ways to inform parents, from weekly work folders sent home to postcards mailed a few times a year. There are

ideas for how to ask parents for information, such as through holding goal-naming conferences and leaving spaces for parents' comments in papers sent home. There are sample letters and forms, as well as sample language to use when talking with parents.

Second, the strategies offered are two-directional. By that I mean they're not just about how teachers can get information to parents; they're also about how teachers can hear *from* parents about their hopes and concerns, receiving *from* them their insights and wisdom. The strategies also aren't just about how teachers can get parents to support the curriculum or support classroom life; they're about how parents' interests, skills, and insights can infuse the curriculum and classroom life. We often hear that parents should have an *active* role in their children's education. This book gives specific ideas for turning that ideal into reality.

Third, this book allows teachers to go at their own pace and to pick and choose. The strategies offered work well together but do not have to be implemented all at once to be effective. In fact, for most of us, launching too many new projects at once is just overwhelming. Far better to try a couple of changes, evaluate how they're working, and refine them before adding more. Some readers may decide that a certain strategy simply doesn't work for their particular situation. They may want to change it significantly or abandon it altogether.

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Security work

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There's a lot of attention these days—sadly and rightly so—on issues of the physical security of schools. In some cases sentries are posted to screen visitors, keeping the school community safe by ensuring that only the “right” people enter.

Teachers also stand, literally and metaphorically, at our classroom and school-house doors. But instead of blocking intruders, they open their doors often and widely, greeting and welcoming their students and their families. They teach their children to greet one another in many languages and invite parents into the classroom greeting activities as well. They make sure that the pictures on the walls and the books on the shelves reflect the situations of the children they teach. They send emails and newsletters and invite parents to observe and to participate. The atmosphere that is created by their engagement with parents in so many ways—in both everyday and crisis interactions—is security work as well. It's work that makes school safe, joyful, and full of learning.

Yes, teachers do occupy a position at the doorways to children's education. And it's such a critical post.

What Research Says about Parent Involvement

- Regardless of family income or background, students whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school. (Henderson and Mapp 2002)
- The most accurate predictors of student achievement in school are not family income or social status, but the extent to which the family creates a home environment that encourages learning, communicates high yet reasonable expectations for the child's achievement, and becomes involved in the child's education at school. (National PTA 2000, 11-12)
- When parents are involved at school, the performance of all the children at school, not just their own, tends to improve. (Henderson and Berla 1995, 14-16)
- The more comprehensive and well planned the partnership between school and home, the higher the student achievement. (Henderson and Berla 1995, 14-16)