



Perspectives

# Open the doors: Partnering with parents in a standards-based education system

At first glance parental involvement in children's education seems to be the least controversial concept in education reform – just try to find someone who admits to being against it. Thirty years of research confirms that family involvement is a powerful influence on children's achievement. As a result it became a national education goal.

The problem has been that it is also a vague concept, covering a range of ideas from bake sales to school-based management. The emphasis of much of the rhetoric has been on indicating what parents can do to help their children. This of course is important and cannot be overstated.

This study, however, aims to put the spotlight not on parents, but on the entire educational establishment: schools, districts, the state education agency. It will dispel several myths that pervade education and examine real strategies that might help to effectively engage parents in their children's education. If families are to work as partners in education, they must be provided the opportunities and support they need to become involved. Educators and administrators spend years in training – too often parents are expected to work it all out for themselves.

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*Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children.*  
Goals 2000: Educate America Act

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**Myth: Some parents don't care about their children's learning**

Myth number one is that some parents, particularly in disadvantaged groups, don't care about their children's education. With very few exceptions, all parents want to be good parents and want their children to do well at school, though their definitions of what that means may vary. Parents look to schools to help their children succeed, even if they are hesitant to make contact with the school themselves.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that lower-income parents and parents with less education participate less often in school-based activities than do better-educated parents with higher income levels. Effective parent involvement, however, takes many forms and does not necessarily require parents' presence at workshops, meetings or school. Surveys of parents and public school teachers reveal disagreements on many topics, but both groups agree that raising a well-behaved child who wants to learn is the most important role a parent can fill.

The term *parent* in this study is to be interpreted widely. It refers to any person who has care of a child: parent, stepparent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, older sibling or other guardian.

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### **Myth: Parents know how to support learning**

The second myth is that parents, particularly in the more educated groups, know independently how to support their children's learning. Surveys repeatedly show that most parents, regardless of their background, want guidance on ways to help their children learn better.

Most parents are not especially well-informed consumers, even of their own child's progress. Very few know much about how their child's skills compare to those of youngsters nationwide, much less to the skills of children abroad. Relatively few parents have the experience to say precisely what their child needs to learn, or when, and how he or she should learn it. Parents, even well-educated ones, look to teachers and schools to provide guidance on this, and they generally accept what teachers tell them.

Education provides an important service to society, perhaps the most important one. Students and their parents are the clients of this service. If other service industries treated their clients with the contempt with which the educational establishment has treated some parents, there would be an uproar.

### **Myth: Parents are already involved in education**

The third myth is that parents are already sufficiently engaged in education. Compared with other societies, American parents are certainly involved. They attend football games, coach soccer and volunteer in the school shop.

This study, however, will examine ways of giving parents a real and meaningful role. It will look at the educational establishment's role in enabling parents to become genuinely engaged in their children's learning.

Schools, districts and states that are most successful in engaging parents look beyond traditional definitions of parental involvement – participation in a parent-teacher organization or signing quarterly report cards – to a broader concept of parents as full partners in education. Successful programs involve parents in school planning and governance activities and as class-

### **First-year teacher shows the way**

First-year teacher Katy Goldman (Pine, Arizona) believes that children learn best when given the opportunity to taste, feel, see, hear, manipulate, discover, sing and dance their way through learning.

But the parents of her students were suspicious of her methods and clamored for a change in approach. Goldman could have given in, turning her back on her strongly held beliefs, or she could have ignored the parents' concerns altogether, promoting bad relations. Instead, she navigated the tougher but more rewarding course. She showed parents how effective her pedagogical strategies could be and ultimately won their support, which has proven invaluable.

She began a weekly newsletter to inform parents about learning events in the classroom. She also invited parents into the classroom. "This created a sense of well-being since they knew I had nothing to hide. Watching the children's excitement and "aha" looks of accomplishment said it all," Goldman remembers. The long-term benefits of Goldman's efforts became clear over time: parental support for her teaching methods, which yielded a cadre of classroom volunteers and an improved, solidly reinforced learning environment.

Source: *A survivor's guide to new teachers*, U.S. Department of Education

room volunteers. Some also provide coordinated, essential noneducational services for families, like advice on health care, to help them support academic development.

### **Myth: Teachers' time is infinite**

There is a difference between parents contributing to their children's education and interfering in the work of professionals. Most principals are only too familiar with the parent who has to come to school to sort out every little problem personally.

Everyone concerned must be quite clear about the purpose of working with parents. Whatever guise it takes, it is about improving the quality of education. Teachers are not guidance counselors, child care providers or social workers. They are educators.

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*Many parents lack academic skills themselves, so when they get inside the school we make them feel very disadvantaged ... It's hard to get parents to come to the school to meet with teachers or the principals, open up, and take the personal risk of saying, "I don't know what you're taking about?"*

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Teacher, Roosevelt High School,  
Dallas, Texas

Greater parental engagement should not mean more work for the educators. It should mean that the professional work they do becomes more productive.

## **Make parents welcome**

Research shows that parents' perceptions of how much their involvement is welcomed is far more important than other factors like race or socioeconomic status in determining parental involvement. Developing effective partnerships with families requires the creation of an environment that welcomes parents and encourages them to raise questions and voice their concerns as well as to participate appropriately in decision-making. Developing partnerships also requires that parents are provided with the information and training they need to become involved. Educators need to reach out to parents with invitations – both formal and informal – to participate in their children's learning.

## **Title 1: Federal legislation supports parental engagement**

Over the past decade, there have been a number of developments which have raised the profile of parental engagement and made it an issue for policy-makers. The first was Title 1 of the Improving

America's Schools Act of 1994. This is the largest federal program supporting elementary and secondary education. Minnesota receives \$88 million dollars annually in Title 1 funding.

The priority given to parental involvement in Title 1 is testimony to the importance placed on it by the federal government. Created to bridge the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged children and other children, it is designed to provide opportunities for disadvantaged children to acquire knowledge and skills contained in challenging standards developed for all children.

Title 1 places an even greater emphasis on family involvement than did its predecessor, Chapter 1, a sign of the growing recognition of the powerful influence parents have on achievement. Chapter 1 defined parent involvement as the "building of partnerships between home and school." Title 1 is much more specific, requiring that schools and districts adopt specific strategies to develop school-family partnerships that include:

- Policy involvement by parents at the school and district level
- Shared school-family responsibility for high academic performance
- Development of school and parent capacity for productive collaboration

Title 1 requires that parents receive information and training in a variety of areas related to their children's education, including the state's standards for what all children should be expected to know and be able to do. Parents must also be informed about the state's assessment procedures for measuring performance and progress. In addition, parent representatives must be involved in Title 1 planning and decision-making, including the development of the school improvement plan. The law requires that parents receive assistance and support, including literacy assistance if necessary, to assume these roles and to work with their children at home.

As schools were required to adopt such policies for children who qualified for Title 1 funding, they have increasingly realized the extent to which these policies benefit all children, whatever their background. In

### One parent describes her frustration

In her article, *One parent's Odyssey: Or, how the schools take the winds out of our sails*, Mary R. Blanton, a lawyer and mother of four, describes her unsuccessful attempt to work with other parents to help facilitate changes at her children's school.

*I find this recent Odyssey into the real world of educational reform extremely discouraging. Here are a large number of parents who want to be a vital part of their children's education being told, albeit politely, not to bother, butt out, stick to bake sales, don't get really involved in the education side of things. There is little parents can do to influence the kind of entrenched resistance I have encountered. We have scant leverage or clout... why should parents, faced with the Scylla and Charybdis of schoolhouse intransigence and district level monopoly of authority, even bother to begin the journey toward real school reform? It is so much easier to plan parties, sell wrapping paper, and pray that your child will happen on a decent education somewhere along the way.*

addition, whole-school policies are much more effective than those which only target specific groups. Since 1996, schools with a poverty level of at least 50 percent of students may use their Title 1 funds, combined with other federal education funds, to upgrade whole-school programs.

dynamics of K-12 education more dramatically than any other initiative in recent history. Parents have traditionally relied largely on their own experience to find ways to support learning. It is no longer so easy to do this.

Minnesota's implementation of standards is part of a national movement. But the issue of parental engagement may be even more critical here because of Minnesota's innovative and challenging approach to standards – a combination of standardized basic skills tests and the hands-on performance tasks of the Profile of Learning. This has been further complicated for parents by the legislation passed in 2000 which allows districts to make individual decisions, not only on how many standards will be required, but which ones and in which curricular areas.

The Minnesota approach to standards has the potential to raise achievement for children of all backgrounds and learning styles. Three things will help realize that potential.

■ Parents need to understand the two different parts of Minnesota's standards – the basic skills tests and the Profile of Learning. They need to understand the different rationale behind each element and the way in which they complement each other.

■ Parents and students need to be brought to an understanding of the importance of the process of learning and the ways in which profile elements are designed to enhance it.

### Golden rules for teachers working with parents

- Define who the "parent" is in each individual case.
- Be absolutely clear when working with parents about how and why you want to involve them.
- Parents should perceive a real purpose to any meeting.
- Real communication is a two-way process.
- Parental challenge or concerns must be addressed. Often further discussion and information quickly resolves problems.

## Standards have made a difference

Another factor driving the movement toward greater engagement of parents is the introduction of standards. Parental involvement has always been an issue in education, but it is of particular relevance at this time because the movement to a standards-based system has changed the

■ Parents need to embrace the standards and be helped to understand how their engagement with the process of learning can support their children.

The philosophy behind Minnesota's Profile of Learning is not only sound, but laudable. This is rarely discussed, however, and the emphasis is placed on *what* children are expected to do, not *why* it is important for them to understand it.

Parents, teachers and administrators are coping with unfamiliar procedures and guidelines. What can educational leadership do so smooth the way through the inevitable rough spots that will occur? And how can leaders avoid the misunderstandings that can undermine public confidence in standards reform?

A serious commitment to forging broad public and professional consensus should be a critical component of all standard-setting efforts. Parents are crucial to that process. But the idea of establishing agreement on expectations for student learning is new for American schools. Educators today are keenly aware of the problems that result when goals that require change are not widely shared.

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*The fact that people are talking about how to implement standards is a good sign. But in some cases this seems to be a one-way conversation and that's a mistake. The ultimate success of this effort depends on our teachers and principals and it requires us to go the extra mile to make sure that parents understand and support their efforts. State leaders and educators need to listen hard to legitimate concerns. Involve the entire community and avoid the "here's the test" top-down approach to putting assessments in place.*

Richard Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education

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Standards should strengthen the partnership between school and parents.

■ They can give teachers and parents the common language they need to be an effective team.

■ They can make sure everyone knows what children are expected to learn.

■ They can help the team of teachers, students and families work towards the same goals.

When the goals are clear, teachers can apply the most effective teaching strategies, and parents can continue the learning at home in simple and enjoyable ways. Standards provide a measure of performance that assesses student work against what all students should know and be able to do, instead of comparing students with each other.

## Parents nationwide support standards

Some opinion research has shown parents to be ambivalent on the issue of standards, but overall it has shown high levels of support. According to Jean Johnson, senior vice president of Public Agenda, a non-profit, nonpartisan research organization, in question after question and survey after survey, Americans endorse the concept of asking students to learn more. They want public schools to take steps to make sure that this learning takes place.

That does not mean, however, that they do not have concerns or that those concerns can be ignored. Parents do not feel they have enough information and are not confident that standards are being implemented effectively. While they may not understand the more sophisticated measurements of performance tasks, such as those of Minnesota's Profile of Learning, they are distrustful of a process in which a single test determines whether a student can graduate. Parents say they want multiple measures of student performance that yield valid, fair and reliable information for teachers and parents. The challenge for state governments is to harness parents' fundamental support of the standards movement, while at the same time identifying legitimate concerns and dealing with them.

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*The public's belief in raising standards does not mean that leaders can shift into automatic pilot to bypass the sound principles of sound policy-making. Standards and Accountability: where the public stands, Jean Johnson, Public Agenda*

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## Communicate with parents

A middle school teacher in New York saw that meeting the "speaking and listening" performance standard was a great challenge for her Asian-American students.

She also recognized that the parents of her students needed to be aware of the standards to give support to their children in achieving them. She was able to identify a cultural mismatch between the speaking and listening standard and how students had been raised.

The dilemma was described this way:

*The New York standard on speaking and listening requires students to participate in group conversations and meet several criteria, including voicing opinions that may be in conflict with those of others. In this particular classroom, however, many students believed that vocal disagreements with others constituted disrespectful behavior. One student wrote, "Our parents tell us not to argue. If I disagree with someone's answer, they might get their feelings hurt."*

*They also got little opportunity to practice at home. For centuries, Chinese families have not talked at meals. They find it surprising that American families do.*

Parents were unaware of the standards because they had never been explained to them in a way they could understand. Once this had happened, and the teacher offered suggestions on how parents could help their children become more vocal, student participation in group conversation immediately increased. Their ability to meet the criteria continued to increase dramatically throughout the year.

Source: "The test doesn't tell all," Ellen Myers and Frances O'Connell Rust, *Education Week*

## Association of American Publishers' research shows support for standards

Sixty-three percent of parents surveyed by the Association of American Publishers in 2000 said standardized tests provide benefits to parents. Among the benefits respondents cited most often were:

- Knowing how well their children are doing in class
- Seeing the areas their children need to work on, so that parents can help them
- Knowing how their children stand in relation to others

Of those surveyed, 74 percent said they get information about their children's progress in school from standardized scores. And 80 percent said the information provided by such tests is very or somewhat important to measuring progress against high stakes assessments.

Sixty-six percent of those surveyed said that they would like to receive standardized test results for their children in every grade. In a follow-up question, half those parents indicated such tests should be given twice a year to measure progress.

In addition, 87 percent of parents said they would pay attention to rankings of schools and districts if published and 77 percent said that standardized tests are an informative basis for such rankings.

## Public Agenda research claims little parental backlash against standards

A new national survey by Public Agenda, released September 2000, discovered that only 2 percent of parents who know their school district is implementing higher academic standards want to stop and go back to the way things were before the standards were put in place. Fifty-three percent want to continue with the effort as planned and 30 percent want to continue but with some adjustment.

The survey asked 803 parents nationwide whether they would stick with higher standards – and the consequences – even if their own children were held accountable. Eighty-one percent approve of having a policy that would require summer school

for students who can't meet the standards. Asked how they would feel if their own child was advised to attend summer school, 85 percent say their approval would persist. Sixty-six percent would approve even if it meant their own child would be held back a grade.

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*Based on this research – and surveys by other organizations, reports of the "death" of the standards movement have been largely exaggerated.*  
Deborah Wadsworth, President, Public Agenda

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Parents surveyed by Public Agenda say that standardized tests perform a variety of important functions.

- 71 percent support testing during elementary years as a way to help identify struggling students early so they can get help.
- 75 percent agree that students pay more attention and study harder if they know they must pass a test to get promoted or to graduate.
- 76 percent agree that requiring schools to publicize their standardized test scores is a good wake-up call and a good way to hold schools accountable.
- 55 percent think that because standardized tests measure important skills and knowledge there is nothing wrong with spending a significant portion of class time preparing students for these tests.

Standards advocates should not take parental support for granted. Only 55 percent of parents say that the public schools in their districts are making an effort to put higher standards in place, even though they have been mandated.

Many parents also acknowledge they don't know how many standardized tests their own child is required to take, how difficult they are or how much class time is spent preparing for them.

Where most parents would draw a line is when decisions about a child's future rest solely on a single test. Seventy-eight percent agree that it's wrong to use the results of just one test to decide whether a student gets promoted or graduates.

## Standards debate is not over yet

The educational establishment should be grateful for this support for standards. But even among standards advocates a common question is, what will happen when tougher new tests and more rigorous accountability measures really come into play? Will some parents begin to have doubts? Will some begin to complain? The answer is undoubtedly yes.

No serious policy change is ever universally popular and even the most level-headed parents may become upset if their child's progress is questioned. The challenge for educators and decision-makers is to plan for at least some level of disenchantment and regret, since it will be almost impossible to avoid. This will be much less painful, however, if parents' concerns are addressed in a timely manner.

## Shared responsibilities

The educational establishment operates on three levels – the school, the district and the state. All must play a part if parents are to be effectively engaged in the entire process. Parents' first priority will always be their own child and as far as they are concerned the school is the front line. This is natural and right. Parents are able to establish personal relationships with their children's teachers; they know the name, they know the face. Parents will naturally turn to the teacher for information, advice and support. Having chosen a school, most parents express satisfaction with it and want to support it, unless things go dramatically wrong.

The direct responsibility for engaging parents therefore falls on schools. They need to find ways to establish meaningful relationships with parents on a day-to-day basis.

Most parents also recognize the district as a local entity that they can rely on to give them information relevant to their child. Most parents prefer not to have to approach the district because they have rarely established the same type of relationship they have with the school. The district is the place they will go if they feel the school has let them down or if their

concern is something beyond the scope of the school's responsibilities.

This does not mean, however, that state government has no role to play in encouraging parental engagement. Until recently, parents may have viewed the state as a distant body that makes laws but has little influence on their child. There was, therefore, little need for parents to have access to the state agency overseeing education and education policy.

The introduction of standards has changed that. Now state regulations are having a direct impact on education. Decisions made in the Capitol are affecting whether or not students need to attend summer school or if they can graduate from high school. State governments must also change their policies to become more accountable and more accessible to parents.

There needs to be clear and consistent communication among parents, school, districts, and the state. Schools and districts should be the conduit through which parents receive most of their information and become engaged in their children's learning. The key role for state government is to support and empower schools so that they can do this effectively.

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*Some people seem to think that (government) offering ideas on how to have fun with your children and help them learn at the same time is 'nannying.' It is not – it is about supporting and helping parents and families to support and help their children. It is about social and educational development. For parents – and remember that I am one too – knowing what is going on at school and in your child's head, and how to complement it at home, builds confidence and commitment. It also helps to raise expectations of what they and their children can achieve.*

David Blunkett, British Secretary of State for Education

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In addition, national and state governments are increasingly taking a more proactive role in giving parents informa-

tion and advice. If state legislation dictates certain requirements for graduation, it is incumbent on state government to devise clear and specific policies that give parents information, a means of access and a right of appeal.

## Teachers are the front line

The single most important role for state government is to support its teachers in a real and meaningful way. Teachers are the government's greatest allies in setting and implementing policies for education.

For most parents, classroom teachers serve as the interpreters, even the ambassadors of reform. As the front line they are the key players in family involvement. If teachers believe that standards are important and well thought out, and if they are given ownership of the policies, they can sustain and nourish parental support. If teachers are convinced that standards policies are unfair or destructive, they can undercut parental support with extraordinary speed.

## Professional development needs must be addressed

It is through teachers that families are connected to all the education services that children receive. Teachers need professional development, with the ability and authority to make decisions about services to address family needs. They also need structures for social and emotional support. Professional development activities may include sessions on making telephone calls, home visits and other contact strategies, students' home culture and diversity, communication skills, and involving parents as leaders and decision-makers in schools.

Parents and school staff, even in Title 1 schools, receive little training on how to work with each other. According to research carried out by the U.S. Department of Education in 1997, 48 percent of principals in K-12 Title 1 schools report that lack of staff training in working with parents is a great or moderate barrier to parent involvement.

A 1998 report from the National Parent Teacher Association indicates that even with the preponderance of research establishing the connection between effective parent involvement and student achievement, few teachers receive good preparation in how to partner with parents.

Recent surveys of current practice in teacher preparation reveal that:

- Most preparation for working with parents occurs in early childhood or special education courses
- No state requires a course in working with parents for teacher licensing
- Only a handful of states require preparation in partnering with parents as part of a course
- No state requires parental involvement coursework for recertification or renewal of a license

In recent years teachers have been given the additional responsibility, often without additional training, of helping parents interpret test results. Surveys from Public Agenda and the Association of American Publishers reveal these interesting observations about parents' understanding of test scores:

- 58 percent of parents said they had discussed results with teachers
- 21 percent of parents said they thought teachers used test results to design future teaching to help students improve
- 80 percent of parents said they would like to receive a simple but comprehensive explanation of how to interpret test scores.

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*It's not the tests, it's the information, knowledge about and use of tests that we really need to focus on. Teachers need more help understanding and using test results and communicating those results to parents. All too often, the reality is the teacher gets handed the score report just as coldly as the parent does.*

Maureen Di Marco, Vice President of Educational and Governmental Affairs for Houghton Mifflin Co. and Secretary of Education under former California Gov. Pete Wilson

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## State government's role

Experts and decision-makers often must navigate through a labyrinth of complex details needed to make policy work in real life. To sustain public support for change, however, particularly change that touches families and daily lives, leaders need to take time periodically to restate the basic rationale, to remind people of the beliefs and values that underlie reform.

State government is the primary source of information about standards and graduation requirements. Without information, misconceptions and distrust can flourish. Initiatives to bridge the information gap between parents and those who provide education are at the heart of all successful education reform.

Parents require fundamental information explained in appropriate language. Parents want to know what their children are expected to learn and they need to know how well they are doing. They also need to understand why their child is being asked to perform certain tasks; why the tasks are important. Parents will not understand if they are not given information.

Research shows that successful schools, districts and states believe in passing on as much information to parents as possible, at considerable cost in time and effort. They do this because they know that open, honest information engenders the trust upon which any effective partnership is based. The information gap between parents and educators is therefore the first thing that needs to be addressed.

There are a number of ways in which state governments can provide information directly to parents. Those states that have invested in good quality, easily accessible brochures explaining their standards have found the investment worthwhile.

The Internet has the potential to become a powerful tool for conveying information to parents and many districts and schools are already exploiting it very effectively. Most state education departments have Web sites, but they differ tremendously in quality. Many try to be "all things to all

people" and by attempting too much possibly achieve very little. Partners in the education process require slightly different information and they require it in different ways. A growing number of states, including Texas, North and South Carolina, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia and Wisconsin have designated specific parts of their Web sites to provide information for parents. This allows them to convey, free from jargon, the information of most use to parents.

## A multitude of languages

The diversification of the student population over the past few decades has had a profound effect on schools in Minnesota. The trend is not new but its accelerated pace and overall impact on the education system are. It is the job of the educational establishment to recognize all the dimensions of this challenge.

Students with limited English proficiency are well supported in their classrooms but the barriers to learning extend into the home, where parents do not always have the same opportunities to learn English. Providing information in their own language will go some way to addressing the needs of these families. While it would not be possible to provide information in

all the languages spoken in Minnesota's schools, it should be possible to provide it in those most commonly used.

## Information on school performance

The state must also accept responsibility for supplying comparative information on the performance of individual schools. It is relatively easy to produce test scores using raw data. This is a valuable first step, but in reality it tells parents very little. It usually shows that suburban schools with a large number of children from higher income families have high test scores, and urban schools with high proportions of children with limited English proficiency have lower test scores. This just reinforces stereotypes such as the Lake Wobegone effect, "where all children are above average," or the politician who berates teachers with the complaint that, "half the children in this country are below average." This is not the kind of information that parents deserve.

Useful information on the performance of schools will look not just at students' raw scores, but their backgrounds and prior levels of achievement. Provided students have been at the school for a reasonable amount of time, this will show the

### Examples of Web sites for parents

**North Carolina** Schools Web site has a specific section for parents that deals with a range of issues which include:

- How to enroll your child in school
- Graduation requirements
- Volunteer opportunities
- Parent tips and check-list
- Handbook on parents' rights
- Early childhood
- Safe schools
- Web resources for parents
- Preparing your child for college

Source: [www.ncpublicschools.org](http://www.ncpublicschools.org)

One of the best examples of a government-sponsored Web site was launched in January 2000 by the **United Kingdom** Government's Department for Education and Employment. This comprehensive and informative site deals with 110 issues as diverse as gifted and talented children, bullying, museums and art galleries, attendance, drugs, education for children in foster care and safe use of the Internet. A large section of the site is devoted to the national curriculum and its nationwide assessments. It also gives information on all schools in the country and comparative test scores; the whole site is available in 10 languages. The site presents a living, vital image with regular special events. In September 2000, for instance, it held a "Parents On-line Week," which illustrated the educational benefits of the Internet and learning partnerships between parents and children.

Source: [www.dfes.gov.uk/parents](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/parents)

difference the school has made to achievement. In other words, has the school done the best job possible to give its students a quality education? Has it made a genuine difference in performance? Can it be trusted to give students the education to which they are entitled?

### Just for the Kids – and parents

Teasing out value-added information for individual schools is a difficult and complex process. But it can be done. The Texas-based nonprofit organization, *Just for the Kids*, has been working with the Texas state education department to help transform the fuzzy concept of school accountability into useful facts and figures. *Just for the Kids* recognizes that children come to school with different strengths and needs and this must be taken into account. It provides charts showing a school's performance compared to the top schools in the state with students from similar backgrounds, factoring in English proficiency and economic status. The charted gaps in performance show where there are opportunities for improvement. The work has revealed that some schools are doing an outstanding job in difficult circumstances, while some schools with more advantaged students are much too complacent. It is this kind of information that gives parents and educators alike the knowledge to demand positive change in public schools.

Source: [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org)

## Opening the right doors to parents

Testing is not new in American education. What is new are statewide standardized tests. Some of these are system accountability tests, designed to ascertain how well schools are performing. Others are high stakes tests, which determine eligibility for graduation. Educators claim they want parents to be actively engaged in a process that is crucial to their children's future, yet the system makes it difficult for them to be so.

There has been a tendency to create an aura of secrecy around the whole testing process, which should be open and accessible. Parents will be more engaged if some of the mystique is removed.

States and countries where standardized testing is well established reach out to parents in a variety of ways.

- Parents can be given appropriate information on how to help youngsters develop study skills to prepare for their tests.
- They can be informed how to interpret test results to identify the areas in which their children may need further assistance.
- Parents can be given not just raw scores but some interpretation of what the numbers mean and the context in which they are given.

In other states and countries it is common practice for test papers to become public documents once the test is over. This enables parents to see what was expected of their children and discuss their responses with them. It stimulates public involvement and permits public debate on test quality, rigor or degree of difficulty. The creation of tests is the job of the professionals, but public debate is a way of making sure the process gets evaluated, tweaked and improved.

Minnesota has chosen not to make its tests public because new tests would be required for each cycle and it costs in excess of \$200,000 to develop each test. If testing is a key to raising standards, then such an investment is surely worthwhile.

The logistical problems involved in returning scored tests to schools can be overcome. This is potentially the most effective part of the process, since it gives students, parents and teachers the information they need to understand why a student has performed at a certain level and to effect improvements. Going through a scored test with the teachers can be a salutary experience for both student and parent, but an incredibly useful one.

### Parents should have a right of appeal

With the amount of testing currently being undertaken in Minnesota, errors will occur. This is regrettable but inevitable. It is

essential, therefore, that there are clear policies and procedures for appeal, and that this is effectively communicated to parents.

In the United Kingdom, for instance, where there has been a culture of standardized testing for many decades, parents may request different levels of re-evaluation, depending on the type of test and the nature of the concern.

- A clerical check will detect any clerical or computer errors. This check should reveal errors in multiple choice tests.
- Parents can ask for tests that require written answers to be scored again by a different person.
- Even if there is no change to the final grade, parents may request a report, which will explain why marks have been awarded.

Applications are made through the child's school, which means that at this stressful time, parents are dealing with people they know. There are standard forms and strict timelines, both for the receipt of applications and for the response. There is a cost attached for parents, which prevents frivolous applications, but this is refunded if an error is found.

### Some grading systems are more accessible than others

**Kentucky** grades its standards on a four-point scale using the designations Distinguished, Proficient, Apprentice and Novice to describe the levels of performance. This gives parents some benchmarks that help them understand the levels of achievement. It is also non-condemnatory for students not doing well.

National curriculum assessment in the **United Kingdom** comes from standardized tests at three key stages in a student's career and from teachers' own assessments. Both types of assessment are scored against an eight-point scale that students are expected to proceed up from grades one to nine. Parents can therefore see quite clearly if progress is being made and also the rate of development.

Minnesota is still in the early stages of standardized testing and has yet to devise a procedure for appeal. Parents will feel more comfortable with the system once they know an appeal procedure is in place.

## Schools must take the lead

Most of the real work of engaging parents will be done in schools and there is much good practice throughout Minnesota. This study can only touch on the many strategies that schools can use. Its aim is to look at the fundamental principles underlying good school-family partnerships, as the curriculum becomes standards-based and schools are held more accountable by their constituencies.

Parents can engage with schools by:

- Supporting learning at home
- Participating in school decision-making

Both are equally important, but while all parents should be enabled to support learning at home, it will be more difficult for many to engage in school decision-making.

Schools, districts and state government do need feedback from all parents as part of a system of checks and balances. This is particularly true in areas of disadvantage and among families of different cultures. If the educational establishment does not succeed in engaging all parents, only the articulate few will claim to speak for the majority.

Under the leadership of their principals, schools possess the primary responsibility for initiating school-family partnerships. Schools can invest heavily in professional development that supports family involvement, create time for staff to work with parents, supply necessary resources, design innovative strategies to meet the needs of diverse families and provide useful information to families on how they can contribute to their children's learning.

Developing a successful school-family partnership must be a whole-school endeavor, not just the work of a single person or program. Traditional school organizational practices often discourage family members from getting involved. Schools that are most successful are prepared to reconsider all their established

methods of doing business and to restructure in ways that will make them less hierarchical, more personal and more accessible to parents. It requires effort on the part of all school staff (administrators, teachers, and support staff) to create a school environment that welcomes parents and encourages them to voice their concerns, as well as to participate in decision making. Developing partnerships also requires that school staff provide parents with the information and training they need and that they reach out to parents with invitations to participate in their children's learning.

Restructuring schools to create a more personalized environment for students and their families is an especially important issue for secondary schools, where parents face special barriers to becoming involved and where parental involvement does in fact fall off rapidly.

Schools that succeed in involving large numbers of parents and other family members in the education of their children invest energy in finding solutions to problems, not excuses. Lack of time and resources is the most common excuse. In order to build strong partnerships, families and school members need time to get to know one another, plan how to work together to increase student learning, and carry out their plans. Jobs and families leave little free time for many parents. Teacher time too is at a premium.

### It's the law

Minnesota law requires employers to give employees 16 hours of leave during the school year to attend their children's conferences or classroom activities. The law does not guarantee that time off will be paid and parents are expected to make every effort to disrupt their workplace operations as little as possible.

According to the Children, Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota, many parents are unaware of this law.

## Reaching everyone

Some families will be more difficult to engage than others. Many are influenced by their own negative experiences of school. Language and cultural differences, as well as differences in educational attainment separating families and school staff, can make communication and family participation in school activities difficult. Strategies to address these differences include reaching out to parents with little formal education, addressing language differences through bilingual services and promoting cultural understanding to build trust between home and school.

Respecting cultural diversity may be the biggest challenge to achieving parental engagement. As Minnesota becomes more ethnically diverse, the new immigrant population is spreading into many new communities, in rural Minnesota as well as the Twin Cities area. Home-school liaison is crucial to integrating students into school environments that may be as alien to them as the English language. Individual schools and many smaller districts may not have the financial resources or capacity to help these students and their families build a bridge between their past experiences and current challenges. This may need to be a budget consideration at the state level.

The countries of the European Community have found success in presenting new cultures as an added resource, rather than something strange and alien. In this way aspects of different cultures become an enhancement of the curriculum for all children, which in turn makes parents more comfortable with their children's new schools. Art, music and drama are particularly effective vehicles for delivering a multi-cultural curriculum, while the scheduling of major festivals from other countries into the school calendar gives a public validation to families' cultures.

## Working with parents

Parents are a sounding board for planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating effective practices. For many successful schools, the first step is to assess families' interests and needs. If schools ask parents to share interests, needs, ideas, and goals for family involvement, families and staff

members can work together to make family engagement a centerpiece of educational reform. By contrast, families that hesitate to become involved in schools often complain that administrators and teachers develop parent involvement strategies based on what they think parents need, not on what parents say they want.

One of the excuses often given for failing to involve parents is that they won't understand the issues. The most successful schools, however, including many in receipt of Title 1 funding, break down this barrier by offering training opportunities for parents. A study of 20 Title 1 schools carried out by the U.S. Department of Education found that all offer parents training and information through regularly held workshops. Parent training activities focus on one or more of four key areas of parental involvement: parenting, learning at home, volunteering and decision-making in schools.

Schools can also help build parenting skills by assisting parents in reaching their own academic and vocational goals. In collaboration with local community colleges, programs connect parents to adult education programs to receive a General Educational Development credential, college credit or develop job-related skills. Other programs inform parents how to develop study skills to prepare for required tests; parents also learn how to interpret test results to identify areas in which their children may need further assistance.

Successful schools view children's success as a shared responsibility in which all the partners play important roles in supporting children's learning. Even though everyone shares accountability, each partner must assume individual responsibility. In order for that to happen, the different roles for parents and educators need to be clearly defined.

## Compacts between home and school

Compacts are an effective way of delineating the various roles of school, parents and students. They are an essential element of the Title 1 legislation in the U.S. and from September 1999 have

been mandated for all elementary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom.

The compact is a document that clarifies what families and schools can do to help children reach high standards. It is a written commitment, indicating how all members of a school community agree to share responsibility for student learning. It serves as a clear reminder to take action at school and at home so that children can learn what is required of them. With the potential to create consensus and action, the compact defines the mutual responsibilities everyone has for improving education.

If a compact is working well, each of the partners, including parents, should be able to answer these questions or know how to access the information easily.

- What skills and knowledge will the students be expected to master this year?
- How will students be evaluated?
- What can families do to stay more involved in their children's academic progress?

□ How does the school accommodate differences in learning?

□ How are students prepared for learning after high school?

## A new role for parents

Actively involving parents in school decision-making is the most radical element of recent initiatives. It can also be a most effective tool in the drive to raise achievement but must be carefully handled.

Most parents can see the value of working with schools on issues related directly to their own child. Both parents and educators, however, can be suspicious of the trend to develop parents as leaders and equal partners in education. According to Public Agenda, few parents are eager to take on responsibility for hiring, curriculum and budgets because it is outside their realm of experience. Teachers who have participated in such experiments giving parents more authority are in favor of the concept.

## SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE REACH OUT TO PARENTS

**Atenville Elementary School** is located in a rural coal-mining community in southern **West Virginia**. The community struggles with high unemployment and poverty and is geographically isolated from county social service agencies. Eighty-three percent of the school's population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Parents at the school stressed to parent leaders and school staff on a community-wide steering committee that they were concerned about the difficult transition for students as they moved from elementary schools to seventh grade at the local high school. As a result, a sub-committee on transitions was added to the steering committee. It recommended block scheduling, similar to the scheduling that students encounter in high school, for fourth- through sixth-graders. The proposal was accepted and now students receive instruction in four blocks: language arts, math, science and social studies. All state-required subjects are integrated into these areas.

**Roosevelt High school** in **Dallas, Texas**, has developed three-hour, twice-weekly classes for parents, focusing on adult literacy, computer literacy, English as a second language and parenting skills. Future plans include having parents of high achieving students taking advanced placement courses help train other parents to complete the steps needed to get their children into college.

**Greenville County** public schools in **Emporia, Virginia**, are a model for making parent resource centers more accessible to rural parents. The Mobile Parent Resource Center is a 34-foot customized bus that travels to four sites a day, remaining at least two hours at each site. It houses two classrooms equipped with adjustable tables, chairs, bulletin boards, chalkboards, televisions, a video recorder, cassette players and lap-top computers. Both reading and non-reading parents are trained there as tutors to work with their children. Six area businesses allow the parent resource center to visit their work-sites so that employees who are parents can visit before or after work or during breaks.

Schools need to create organizational structures for parent involvement, such as parent and volunteer committees. Parents can also serve on other school decision-making boards, such as site-based management councils and school improvement teams, providing they receive training to help them do so. Together parents and staff members can share ideas and develop school reform initiatives.

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*The most challenging aspect of getting parents involved is to help them understand that they don't always need to be at school for a particular problem, but they can also be part of a constituency that develops a broad based plan to improve the school.*

Alliance school organizer, Texas

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Site-based councils are made up of parents, administrators, teachers and sometimes students. Their roles vary from school to school. Some help decide budget issues or give input on hiring decisions. Others are more oriented toward sharing information and less toward setting policy. Whatever the parameters, the site council enables parents and staff members to share ideas and develop school reform initiatives.

### Site council boom

If parental interest is any gauge, the idea to help set policy is catching on quickly in some St. Paul public schools. When Capitol Hill Magnet School held elections for its site council in 1999, 27 people ran for the seven parent positions available. Although not every St. Paul school has seen that amount of interest, site councils are now a requirement in the district. A \$2.3 million grant from the McKnight Foundation is being used to offer training related to site-based councils, such as how to recruit members and hold effective meetings.

Source: *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

## Conclusion

If statewide standards are to improve education statewide, then those standards and their assessments need to be communicated effectively to the entire education constituency. Research has shown that where there is parental access and involvement in the decision-making process, educational standards have improved measurably. Schools, districts and state governments must create an effective machinery and lines of communication so that information can be conveyed in the most efficient and appropriate manner. It is up to the professionals to open up these lines of communication. If the educational establishment is truly seeking to engage

parental support in the drive to raise achievement, then parents must be given ownership of the process and involvement in the debate.

If principals and teachers are at the front line of the educational process, then state government must take them on board as major players. Any legislation designed to raise achievement must be sold to the professionals, who will in turn sell it to the parents, because that is where the contact is made. If government believes any legislation is important enough to put in statute, it must put in place the building blocks that will support it. Engaging parents and giving schools and districts the capacity to do that is one of the key building blocks for educational reform.

### EXAMPLES FROM OTHER STATES

The state of **Alabama** declared Columbus Day on October 9, 2000, a statewide parenting day: *Just as Christopher Columbus discovered new worlds, state education officials are encouraging parental involvement in the education of Alabama's schoolchildren, by discovering their children's schools.*

Schools throughout the state were expected to welcome parents and guardians to make them aware of the positive impact of direct parental involvement on a child's future. State education officials stressed that Discover Your Schools Day required the involvement of parents as well as that of the business community. Businesses from across Alabama were urged to support the statewide parenting day by giving their employees time off to visit their children's schools.

More than 100 of Alabama's 128 school systems participated in Discover Your Schools Day, which gave parents a chance to hear about some of the state Department of Education's major statewide and local initiatives.

**Texas** has supported parental engagement through the Alliance Schools' Initiative, which is a partnership between the Texas Interfaith Education Fund and the Texas State Education Agency. This program was set up to develop strong community-based constituencies of parents, teachers and community leaders as a strategy to increase student achievement in low income areas throughout the state. Alliance schools receive competitive grants from the Texas Education Agency to support their restructuring and reform efforts for promoting staff and parent development and for implementing strategies to increase student achievement.

In 1994 the State Superintendent of **Wisconsin** developed an advisory council to listen to parents views about:

- What's best for Wisconsin children, their learning and their needs for the future
- School issues, state policies and new program initiatives
- Enhancing parent involvement in education at all levels
- How schools can become more family friendly
- How to mobilize grassroots parental support for K-12 education

## Cultural differences can be addressed sensitively

For many Mexican-American parents, lack of involvement in their children's education is erroneously seen as lack of interest, but significant research has presented evidence that this is not so. The reasons for limited involvement include beliefs that the roles of home and school are sharply delineated. Mexican-American parents see their role as being responsible for providing basic needs as well as instilling respect and proper behavior. They see the school's role as instilling knowledge. They believe that one should not interfere with the job of the other.

Add to that a negative view of the school system, past negative experiences with education, language barriers, and a view of education as a bureaucracy controlled by non-Hispanics and it is easy to understand why Mexican-American families may find it difficult to become involved in school activities.

Sustaining family involvement requires a commitment to open, continuous two-way communication with Mexican-American families. Parental involvement should be made easy and interesting, at a pace that is comfortable for parents. Outreach efforts can and will work, but they must be done in a culturally sensitive manner that accepts the family's strengths. Partnerships with families require all participants to share responsibility for educational outcomes. This perspective represents a major shift from merely delivering services to students, to taking active, integrated roles that validate the cultural and social experiences of families

The report below advises that educators must discard the old deficit model of working with families and instead operate on an enrichment model founded on the belief that parents truly want the best for their children. Not only must educators tell parents that they are equally as important as the school, they must tell students how important their homes and communities are.

This philosophy holds true for all partnerships between schools and families.

Source: "Forging partnerships between Mexican American parents and the schools", Nancy Feyl Chavkin, Dora Lara Gonzalez, *ERIC Digest*

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*Open the doors: Partnering with parents in a standards-based education system* was prepared by Sandra Stalker and is available on the Minnesota Planning Internet site at [www.mnplan.state.mn.us](http://www.mnplan.state.mn.us).

Upon request, this document will be made available in an alternate format, such as Braille, large print or audio tape. For TTY, contact Minnesota Relay Service at 800-627-3529 and ask for Minnesota Planning. For additional printed copies, contact:



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