

# **THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN FOSTERING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

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The literature on effective schools identified eight to ten factors that are measures of school effectiveness. One of these factors relates the successful academic achievement of children in the effective school to the amount of parental involvement. The focus of this article is the role of the principal as catalyst linking the school and the home, making parental involvement a reality. A rationale for parental involvement is given and activities are outlined which involve parents in education both within the school and within the home.

Principals generally support the concept of parental involvement in education. Their comments and practices however, indicate that they are cognizant of numerous risks inherent when parents are directly involved in education. Activities which involve parents within the school are often limited so as to clearly define the parameters of parental involvement.

In some schools parents are not permitted to enter the classrooms nor to replace the teacher by helping children with reading or mathematics activities. Parents may work with children outside the classroom in spaces provided for this purpose. Other schools limit parental involvement to serving on fundraising committees or as members of PTA groups responsible for organizing fieldtrips or school festivals.

The rationale for parental involvement in education comes from a variety of perspectives. The literature on effective schools provides considerable evidence that parental involvement results in improvement in children's schooling and improvement in self-esteem of both the children and their parents within the educational environment. When parents are involved with their child's school, they feel more confident to discuss with the administration and the teachers issues related to the educational achievement of their child.

Current public discussion and debate suggest that education is a public activity so that parents have a democratic right to be informed about their child's school, and also the right to question and participate in decisions relating to school policy and practice. Parents who are uninformed about educational issues do not know by what criteria to judge their child's school.

Within the recommendations for educational change in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador is a recommendation which identifies the role of the principal in fostering parental involvement in education. In the government document "Adjusting the course, Restructuring the School System for Excellence in Newfoundland and Labrador (1994), the writers highlight the need for improvement in "on site" management of schools and the important role the principal must play in school leadership as it affects the increased level of involvement of parents in education to the advantage of children "Increasing the level of parent involvement in their children's learning is considered to be one of the most important means of engendering higher levels of achievement" (p.17). The recommendation is that "... school principals and staffs will be expected to play important roles in enhancing parental involvement" (p.17).

This recommendation has major implications for school principals as they consider what role they will play and how they will select the strategies which best achieve such participation. There is much in the literature to support the link between parental involvement, school effectiveness and the role of the principal.

Peter Mortimer (1988) uses the primary school as the setting to examine the importance of leadership, school goals, curriculum design, student assessment and parental involvement as they affect student achievement. According to Mortimore, the variation between schools can be accounted for by differences in school policies and practices. These, he contends, are within the control of the principal.

The school principal plays an integral role in the overall management of the school. The principal is the leader who has a personal vision of where the school is going, an image of the school as it should be and the expertise, energy and force of character to make the vision a reality. Mortimore (1988) maintains that it is the principal who communicates this vision to the community.

A contemporary definition of parental involvement must assume a much broader perspective than it has in the past. It extends beyond the traditional view of parents as passive recipients of information from the principal's office to include parents as active participants in the decision making processes of the school. Meaningful and effective parental involvement programs perceive parents as partners with teachers and school administrators in the planning and implementing of educational programs for children.

While there is no one "perfect" parent involvement program, there are elements common to all programs which can furnish a useful starting point for developing stronger links between home and school. Epstein's research (1991) offers a framework to help school principals organize their parental involvement programs.

Epstein discusses parental involvement activities under five themes: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home and representing other parents. Parenting includes those activities which help all families establish home environments to support learning. The school provides suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level. The school also offers workshops, videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting and child-rearing issues for parents with children at each grade level.

Under communicating, she discusses how different schools seek newer ways to communicate with parents. She emphasizes the wide use of teacher conducted conferences with every parent at least once a year. She also discusses weekly or monthly folders of student work which are sent home, reviewed and commented on by parents before they are returned.

She identifies school volunteer programs which exist to allow parents to help and support students both within and outside the classroom. Parent Rooms are created within schools as spaces where parents can meet and where resources for parents are kept and distributed. Parent talents and timetables are surveyed and recorded and made available to the entire staff of a school. These provide a starting point to involve new parents at school.

The fourth category in Epstein's framework is "learning at home". In this area she lists those practices which provide ideas to parents on how to help children at home. Schools send information to parents on skills in each subject at each grade level. Regular homework schedules are sent home that require students to discuss school work at home with their parents. Calendars with daily topics for discussion by parents and students are distributed so that parents know what topics are currently being discussed at school.

The final type of parental involvement is "representing other parents". The practice to recruit and train other parents as leaders ensures that participation and leadership in PTAs or other parent organizations, including parent advisory councils or committees, are encouraged.

Parents both chair and serve on curriculum, safety and personnel committees and are encouraged to have input into policies that affect children's education. Epstein's research shows that when