

Beyond school councils: Engaging parents to help their children succeed at school

**A toolkit for principals, teachers and
parents about doing what matters most**

The tools:

- **Parent tip sheet**
- **Teacher tip sheet**
- **Principal tip sheet**
- **Research Report:** *Doing what matters most – how parents can help their children succeed at school*
- **Instructions:** How principals, parents and teachers can use the tools in this kit

Translated versions of all materials available
for free at www.peopleforeducation.ca





Tips for Parents

Parent involvement that makes a difference

In August 2011, People for Education released a report, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*, which reviewed thirty years of research from Canada, the United States and England.

The four key things that parents can do to help ensure their children's success are outlined here:

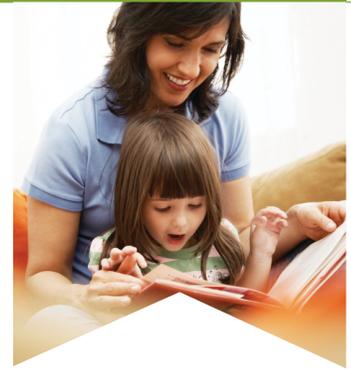
1. Have high expectations for your children.

Let your children know that you think it is important that they do well in school. High parental expectations have the greatest impact on student achievement. When parents consistently express belief in their children's potential and tell their kids that they expect them to succeed academically, students do better.

2. Talk about school.

Talk with your children about what's happening at school – activities, programs and what they are learning. Surprisingly, this has a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, being at home after school for your kids, or limiting the time they are allowed to watch TV or go out during the week.

According to our kids, we may not be doing such a great job in this area. In student surveys conducted by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) report they talk to a parent or guardian "every day or almost every day" about their school activities. By grade 6, that percentage drops to 38%.



3. Help your children develop a positive attitude toward learning and good work habits.

The research shows that the greatest influence you can have on your kids' chances for success in school lie in how you influence their attitudes, their sense of personal competence, and their work habits, including persistence, seeking help, and planning.

So rather than trying to directly "teach" your children, focus on helping them handle distractions and crises of confidence, praise them for effort and persistence and demonstrate a positive attitude about school as a whole. Bit by bit, these are the attributes that will build solid foundations for ongoing success.

"The evidence is clear. Parents make a difference. And the way they contribute most to their children's education is through what they do at home. Being a parent can be challenging, but the good news is that you don't have to be 'volunteer of the year' or an expert on the war of 1812 to help your child succeed at school."

4. Read together (in any language)

Reading is one of the foundations of all education, and you can make a big difference by reading and talking about books and stories with your children. Reading with children is the best way to turn them on to reading. But this doesn't mean that you should be forcing them to sound out words. Instead of focussing on teaching your children the mechanics of reading, teach them to **love** reading. Make reading fun and enjoyable!

Once again, our kids are telling us that there is room for improvement when it comes to time spent reading together. The EQAO student survey found that only 21% of children in grade 3 report reading together with a parent or guardian "every day or almost every day".

The evidence is clear.

Parents make a difference. And the way they contribute most to their children's education is through what they do at home. Being a parent can be challenging, but the good news is that you don't have to be 'volunteer of the year' or an expert on the war of 1812 to help your child succeed at school.

Parent involvement in school activities

Whether it is attending a school concert, cheering on a school team, or participating in community events and meetings planned by your school council, parent involvement in school activities can foster a sense of community within the school. It can build stronger relationships between teachers and parents, and provide an opportunity for parents to connect with and support each other.

School-based activities may not have a direct impact on student achievement, but they can be a fun and engaging way to build a stronger school community. When you can, take advantage of the opportunity to participate in school events to show your support for your children's school.

For more information:

www.peopleforeducation.ca

Read People for Education's report on parent involvement, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*. It provides a background on all the research behind this tip sheet. You can also join our online community to connect with other parents, and go online and get your questions about education in Ontario answered.

www.eqao.com

To find out more about the questionnaires that students, teachers, and principals complete every year as part of the EQAO testing, or see the survey results, visit the Education Quality and Accountability Office website.

tvoparents.tvop.org

TVOParents has a wide range of useful resources for parents, including videos in many languages, interviews with experts and up to date research.





Tips for Teachers

Parent involvement that makes a difference



In August 2011, People for Education released a report, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*, which reviewed thirty years of research from Canada, the United States and England.

The four key things that parents can do to help ensure their children's success are outlined here, along with some tips that teachers can use to support parents' efforts in each area:

1. Having high expectations of kids.

The research shows unequivocally that high parental expectations have the greatest impact on student achievement. When parents consistently communicate their belief in their children's potential and communicate that they expect them to be able to succeed academically, students do better.

To support parents in having high expectations for their children, you can:

- Let them know about the research proving that high expectations make a difference, give them the parent tip sheet about it, and talk to them about their child's strengths and potential.
- Build on what parents are doing at home by having and communicating high expectations for every student in your class.

2. Talking about school at home.

A major study of 25,000 U.S. schoolchildren showed "home discussion"—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, being at home after school, or limiting kids' TV time or time they are out during the week.

To help parents talk with their children about school, give them something to talk about:

- Send home assignments that "force" students to talk to an adult in their home. For example, give students an assignment that requires them to ask their parents questions (such as writing about their family history), or assign TV watching as homework, but ask students to watch the program with a parent/guardian and discuss the show afterwards.
- Communicate frequently and use a variety of tools (newsletters, phone calls, electronic methods). Tell parents about major projects, topics and activities that students are engaged in. New evidence shows that electronic communication (email, blogs, a website) is associated with higher participation and better two-way communication.

3. Helping students develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits.

As students grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement are out of parents' control. Parents can't teach their children everything they need to know, but they can play a critical role in students' chances for success by helping to shape their attitudes, their sense of personal competence and their work habits including persistence, seeking help, and planning.

To support parents in this vital role, you can:

- Assure parents that they do not have to 'teach' their children. Instead, parents should focus on helping children learn to handle distractions, negotiate crises of confidence, plan ahead, ask for help from the teacher, and build a positive attitude about school as a whole.

The evidence is clear. Parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or reading them a story, than by “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging, or racing off to a meeting at the school.

- Provide helpful tips to both parents and students about using their agendas effectively, planning for large assignments, preparing for exams, etc.

4. Reading with children.

Parents make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children. The skills that children learn at school are vital, but the motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills children develop through conversation and reading together with adults at home are crucial foundations for successful literacy.

To encourage parents to read with their children, you can:

- Make sure they have something enjoyable to read! Send books home and encourage families to use both the school and public libraries.
- Encourage parents to instil a love of reading by making it fun and enjoyable, instead of focussing on the mechanics of reading (sounding out words, etc.) or homework assignments connected to reading.

School practices make a difference.

The good news: Teachers can influence what parents do at home.

But educators need to be cautious about adopting parent involvement strategies that seem to give parents homework, because the research clearly shows that the most effective parent involvement is centred on parents' interaction with their children as parents, rather than parents “teaching” their children.

It goes without saying that it is vital to treat all parents with respect. When parents are treated respectfully by the school, it is easier for them to instil a positive attitude towards schooling in their children. And just as teachers try not to make assumptions about, or pre-judge their students, it is important not to make assumptions about parents based on things like their participation in school events or their socio-economic status.

For more information:

Visit www.peopleforeducation.ca to read *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*. You will also find resources to help you communicate with parents, the full bibliography for the report, tip sheets in 15 languages, education research, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Teachers' Federations

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has information about engaging parents in its “Research for Teachers” (www.etfo.ca).

Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) has a resource called “Positive, Professional Parent Teacher Relationships” (www.oecta.on.ca).

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) has information for parents on its website (www.osstf.on.ca).

Research Sites

The SEDL National Centre for Family and Community Connections with Schools (<http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-syntheses.html>) and the Harvard Family Research Project (<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement>) have excellent, free research materials online.





Tips for Principals

Parent involvement that makes a difference



In August 2011, People for Education released a report, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*, which reviewed thirty years of research from Canada, the United States and England.

The four key things that parents can do to help ensure their children's success are outlined here, along with some tips that principals can use to support parents' efforts in each area:

1. Having high expectations of kids.

The research shows unequivocally that high parental expectations have the greatest impact on student achievement. When parents consistently communicate their belief in their children's potential and communicate that they expect them to be able to succeed academically, students do better.

To improve students' chances for success in your school:

- When talking to parents, remind them about the importance of high expectations and give them People for Education's parent tip sheet.
- Suggest your school council share this information with the parent community in school newsletters.

2. Talking about school at home.

A major study of 25,000 U.S. schoolchildren showed "home discussion"—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, being at home after school, or limiting kids' TV time or time they are out during the week.

To help parents talk with their children about school, give them something to talk about!

- Communicate frequently with parents at home, letting them know about things like new initiatives at the school, the latest research and changes to staffing.

- Encourage staff to make presentations at school council meetings about their work.
- Encourage staff and the school council to use a variety of tools to communicate with parents. New evidence shows that electronic communication is associated with higher participation and better two-way communication.
- Currently only 5% of Ontario school councils report they have all the families in the school on email lists. You can help by asking permission to share parents' email addresses with the school council.

3. Helping students develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits.

As students grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement are out of parents' control. Parents can't teach their children everything they need to know, but they can play a critical role in students' chances for success by helping to "shape" their attitudes, their sense of personal competence and their work habits including persistence, seeking help, and planning.

To support parents in this vital role, you can:

- Assure parents that they do not have to 'teach' their children. Instead, parents should focus on helping children learn to handle distractions, negotiate crises of confidence, plan ahead, ask for help from the teacher, and build a positive attitude about school as a whole.
- People for Education has tip sheets for teachers and parents summarizing the research on effective parent involvement – feel free to copy and use or distribute to parents or teachers.

The evidence is clear. Parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or reading them a story, than by “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging, or racing off to a meeting at the school.

4. Reading with children.

Parents make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children. The skills that children learn at school are vital, but the motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills children develop through conversation and reading together with adults at home are crucial foundations for successful literacy.

To encourage parents to read with their children, you can:

- Make sure your school library is open before and after school, and at lunch, and encourage families to use both the school and public libraries.
- Support classroom based book lending programs.

School practices make a difference

The good news: Schools *can* influence what parents do at home.

But educators need to be cautious about adopting parent involvement strategies that focus primarily on things like school council participation, volunteering in the school, or giving parents “homework.”

It goes without saying that it is vital to treat all parents with respect. When parents are treated respectfully by the school, it is easier for them to instil a positive attitude towards schooling in their children. And just as teachers try not to make assumptions about, or pre-judge their students, it is important not to make assumptions about parents based on things like their

participation in school events or their socio-economic status.

Use existing data to track parent involvement at home for school improvement

You can use data from EQAO student and teacher survey results for your school to set some new goals centred around supporting parents’ involvement with their kids at home. With your staff and school council, consider setting goals that include:

- Raising the percentage of kids in your school who report they talk to their parents about school almost every day.
- Raising the percentage of kids in your school who report they read at home with their parents.

According to EQAO’s most recent student surveys, less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) report they talk to a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day” about their school activities. By grade 6, that percentage drops to 38%. Only 21% of children in grade 3 report reading together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day.”

For more information:

Visit www.peopleforeducation.ca to read People for Education’s report on parent involvement, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*. You will also find resources to help you communicate with parents, the full bibliography for the report, tip sheets in 15 languages, education research, and answers to frequently asked questions.

The Ontario Principals’ Council, the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario and the Association des directions et direction adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes have jointly developed a handbook on implementing the provincial Parent Engagement and Equity and Inclusion Strategies: <http://www.principals.ca/documents/ParentEngagementHandbook.pdf>

High quality research online:

The SEDL National Centre for Family and Community Connections with Schools (<http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-syntheses.html>) and the Harvard Family have excellent, free research materials online.





Doing What Matters Most

How parents can help their children succeed at school

Parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or asking questions about a TV show they watched together than by “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging, or racing off to a meeting at the school.

But many Ontario students say their parents aren't doing that.

Research on effective parent involvement

There is thirty years of research showing that parents' involvement in their children's education has a significant impact on children's academic and developmental goals (Epstein, 2001; Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006). But how parents are involved matters — and the involvement that makes the biggest difference to students' chances for success in school isn't what many would expect.

Researchers divide parent involvement into two basic categories:

- **Home-based activities** and attitudes, such as having high expectations, talking together about school, building work habits and a positive approach to learning, or reading together.
- **School-based activities**, such as communicating with teachers, attending meetings about your child, volunteering in the classroom or school council work.

A review of the research shows that it is the home-based activities and attitudes that are more closely linked to students' academic achievement, but even then, it is the *kind* of home-based activities that matters most.

QUICK FACTS

- Only 21% of Ontario children in grade 3 report that they read together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day”.
- Only 38% of grade 6 students say they talk to a parent or guardian daily or almost every day about school activities.

HOME-BASED ACTIVITIES

More important than limiting TV time, or even monitoring homework, there are four things that lead the pack when it comes to making a difference:

- Parents having high (but reasonable) expectations of their children
- Parents talking with their children, particularly about school
- Parents helping their children develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits
- Parents reading to or with their children

1. High expectations

A series of systematic review articles found high parental expectations (followed by reading with children and talking about school) had the greatest impact on student achievement (Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). When parents consistently communicate their belief in their children's potential and communicate that they expect them to be able to succeed academically, students do better.

2. Talking about school

A major study of 25,000 U.S. schoolchildren showed “home discussion”—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than a wide range of other parent actions. Simply talking with kids about school was shown to have more of an effect than contact between parents and the school and parental volunteering. Talking also had more of an impact than various forms of parental “supervision,” such as monitoring kids' homework, parents being at home after school, or limiting TV time or the time students were allowed to go out during the week (Ho & Willms, 1996).

The same study also provides evidence that confronts stereotypes that some racial groups, or working class families, place less emphasis on schooling or think that education is the school's responsibility (see also Henderson & Mapp, 2002 for similar findings). In fact, levels of home discussion are relatively consistent across ethnic-groups, socio-economic status, and family structure, and between schools.

This finding underscores the importance of education policy that focuses on supporting home-based discussion. Policy that focuses on home discussion is more likely to be useful to all parents, rather than only those parents who choose to be involved at school. A focus on school-based involvement may reach only a select minority of parents because, as Ho and Willms found, there are substantial class, racial, and family structure differences in levels of participation on school councils and parent volunteering at school.

In fact, focusing on parents' participation with their children at home may begin to help address the current ‘achievement gap’ between high-, and

TIPS FOR PARENTS

Help students succeed by talking about school, having high expectations and building positive attitudes.

Parent-teacher interviews

Parent-teacher meetings are a vital part of the bridge between home and school. At the meetings parents can share information about their children and their goals, learn about their progress, and teachers can provide concrete strategies to support students at home.

Report cards

Report cards help parents understand their children's progress at school. Read report cards carefully and focus as much or more on the “learning skills and work habits” as on the marks. The information about students' learning skills and work habits help identify areas where parents can have an influence. Report cards offer a great opportunity for parents to talk to their children about school.

Concerts, sports events and festivals

Even though concerts, track meets and holiday festivals may not seem directly related to academic achievement, parents' attendance at them shows children that their parents think school is important, and importantly for students, demonstrates parents' engagement in their children's education.

low-performing students, which is often related to socio-economic status and race.

The experts agree that schools could be more effective in their communications with parents about the importance of their participation with their children's education at home. Ho and Willms conclude that "relatively few schools have strong influences on the learning climate in the home. We expect that big gains in achievement could be realized through programs that give parents concrete information about parenting styles, teaching methods, and school curricula" (1996, p.138).

But home-based involvement doesn't necessarily involve hands-on help with homework. Students' homework in older grades is related to achievement. But a major research synthesis on parent involvement in homework found, in fact, its effect is "negligible to nonexistent, except among the youngest students" (Patall, Cooper & Civey, 2008, p.1095).

3. Attitudes and work habits

As children grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement are out of parents' control. Parents can't teach their children everything they need to know, but they can play a critical role in students' chances for success by helping to shape their attitudes, their sense of personal competence and their work habits including persistence, seeking help, and planning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch & Darling).

This means that rather than trying to directly "teach" their children, the more important work of parents can be found in helping kids handle distractions, negotiating crises of confidence, praise for effort and persistence or constructively handling conflict while being positive about school as a whole. Bit by bit, this effort builds a solid foundation for success.

"... rather than trying to directly 'teach' their children, the more important work of parents can be found in helping kids handle distractions, negotiating crises of confidence, praise for effort and persistence or constructively handling conflict while being positive about school as a whole. Bit by bit, this effort builds a solid foundation for success."

4. Reading together

Reading is one of the main foundations of all education. And parents' can make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children.

While the letter-sound correspondence that children learn at school is vital, the motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills children develop through conversation and reading together with their parents creates the crucial foundations for successful literacy in primary years and beyond (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

Reading and talking in a child's home language builds these skills as effectively as reading and talking in the language of the school (August & Hakuta, 1997).

THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS, AND WHAT PARENTS AND SCHOOLS DO

Every year, the province's Educational Quality and Accountability office surveys all the children in grade 3 and 6 (252,218 students in 2009-10), all their teachers (15,804), and all their principals (3466) to provide background information on the education system and individual students (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2010, pp. 6-16, 22-31).

According to the children, their parents don't regularly talk to them about school or read with them.

Talking about school

- Less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) talk to a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day” about their school activities.
- 26% of grade 3 students say they never, or only once or twice a month, talk about school activities with a parent or guardian.
- 38% of grade 6 students say they talk to a parent or guardian almost every day about school activities.
- 29% of grade 6 students report that they never, or only once or twice a month, talk about school activities with their parents or guardians.

Reading together

- Only 21% of children in grade 3 report that they read together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day”.
- 55% of grade 3 students report either that they never read with a parent or guardian, or that they do so only once or twice a month.
- By grade 6, only 4% report that they read together every day or almost every day (but 38% of grade 6 students report that they read stories or novels by themselves, and 47% report they read email, text or instant messages).

EQAO SURVEY OF 252,218 STUDENTS IN GRADE 3 AND 6 – 2009–2010

How often do you and a parent, a guardian or another adult who lives with you do the following?	Grade 3	Grade 6
a. We talk about the activities I do in school.		
Never	9%	9%
1 or 2 times a month	17%	20%
1 to 3 times a week	26%	31%
Every day or almost every day	46%	38%
No/Ambiguous response	2%	2%
b. We read together.		
Never	28%	58%
1 or 2 times a month	27%	25%
1 to 3 times a week	22%	10%
Every day or almost every day	21%	4%
No/Ambiguous response	2%	3%

Teachers and principals report communications gaps

Almost all teachers surveyed communicate with most parents at least two or three times a year about learning goals, assessment strategies and how to support learning at home.

But there are persistently lower levels of communication in grade 6 than grade 3 – most notably, 59% of grade 3 teachers “share information about what to do at home to support learning with the majority of parents / guardians” at least once a month, and only 36% of grade 6 teachers shared this information. On average, 57% of Grade 3 and 6 teachers shared information about individual children’s progress at least once a month.

Most elementary school principals report that parents are supportive of their children’s teachers (89%), and that the school has collaborative relationships with parents to help meet learning goals (72%).

But the devil is in the details.

While 86% say they keep all parents informed about school activities, only 32% say they feel successful helping all parents understand student learning goals and outcomes.

The results suggest a continued emphasis on school-based parent involvement—getting people into the school and participating in activities—which research shows is less closely linked to achievement. This emphasis is particularly problematic in light of the evidence that school-based parent involvement (volunteering, going to council meetings) is most relevant to white, upper-middle class two parent families (Ho & Willms, see above). Ontario research confirms school councils are not generally representative of the parent community (Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Corter, Harris & Pelletier).

EQAO SURVEY OF 15,804 TEACHERS IN GRADE 3 AND 6 – 2009–2010

How often did you share the following with the majority of the parents and guardians of your students this year?	Grade 3	Grade 6
a. Learning goals for the class		
Never	3%	5%
Once	8%	13%
2-3 times	31%	42%
About once a month	47%	30%
About once every 2 weeks	4%	4%
At least once a week	4%	3%
No response/ Ambiguous response	2%	2%
b. Suggestions for what to do at home to support learning		
Never	1%	2%
Once	2%	7%
2-3 times	34%	51%
About once a month	42%	29%
About once every 2 weeks	9%	5%
At least once a week	9%	4%
No response/ Ambiguous response	2%	2%

School councils offer important opportunities for community-building, decision-making, communication and building social networks and a stronger constituency for public education (see e.g. Epstein, 1995). But an over-emphasis on school-based involvement may also increase stress on very busy parents—which isn’t good for anyone (see e.g. Lerner et al., 2002; Corter & Pelletier, 2005).

Careful policy work is required to make help home-based parent participation in education visible and make it “count” for teachers and principals (e.g., Flessa, 2008).

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

The good news is that school practices can make a difference, but it’s less about *programs* and more about communication, collaboration and building relationships (Mattingly et al., 2002).

There is a strong body of research finding that there are some core elements that create effective working relationships with parents. And those relationships do have a positive impact on students.

Collaborative relationships and trust

Collaborative relationships with teachers and others at the school are linked to improved attendance, better student engagement, more positive relationships (Harris & Goodall, 2007).

Achievement improves, when communication *builds trust* between teachers, students and parents (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Trust and communication make it easier for kids to move between home and school with a positive attitude about both, which supports resilience and achievement (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). But for those collaborative relationships to be established effectively and be relevant for *all* parents, schools should take the lead.

EQAO SURVEY OF 3,466 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS – 2009–2010

How successful was your school in accomplishing the following this year?	
a. Helping all parents and guardians understand student learning goals and outcomes	
We struggled with this	12%
Somewhat successful	56%
Successful	29%
Very Successful	3%
No response/ Ambiguous response	1%
b. Keeping all parents and guardians informed about school activities	
We struggled with this	1%
Somewhat successful	14%
Successful	51%
Very Successful	33%
No response/ Ambiguous response	1%

Invitations

One of the factors that affect parents' decisions to participate more in their children's schooling is within control of the school. Parents need to be invited—both in general and specific ways. Those invitations can come directly from the teachers or the school, or indirectly through the students. A general invitation comes by creating an inviting school climate, and through teachers' welcoming, facilitative attitude. Specific invitations include communications from teachers that suggest parents get involved in particular activities with their children.

When teachers suggest a specific activity for parents to do with their children at home, [see box] levels of parent involvement increase (see e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Anderson & Minke, 2007; Epstein, 1991; Reed, Joens, Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2000). Invitations from teachers are particularly important for parents who are less confident in their ability to help their children in the school system, and for older children where parents may not realize they have a role to play.

Two-way communication

Direct communication, seeking information from parents about what they want and need for their child's success, helps build strong school-family connections. A shared understanding about what the child will learn this year and how their learning will be assessed helps parents support their children and helps maintain communication all year (Patel, Corter & Pelletier, 2008).

Effective outreach makes a difference in school-wide achievement. Schools that actively tackle challenges such as communicating with parents who cannot make it into the school, or who speak different languages, have better overall achievement (Sheldon, 2003). It means educators—particularly teachers—on the front line, need to look for a menu of different ways of communicating with and hearing from parents (Mapp & Hong, 2010). Regular email updates or a blog may work tremendously well for many working parents (at least 77% of Ontario households have internet at home); but phone calls or face-to-face contact with an interpreter may also be a better way reach others.

TEACHER INVITATIONS

Parent involvement guru Joyce Epstein suggested a number of techniques for involving parents in “learning through discussion” at home:

- Ask parents to get their child to talk about what he or she did that day in the classroom (sending home suggested questions can really help!)
- Give an assignment that requires the children to ask their parents questions, for example, ask children to write about their parents' experience
- Ask parents to watch a television program with their child and to discuss the show afterwards.
- Invite parents to come observe the classroom for part of the day, and make time to explain what you are doing and why.

“...educators—particularly teachers—on the front line, need to look for a menu of different ways of communicating with and hearing from parents .”

— Mapp & Hong, 2010

CONCLUSION

The research on effective parent involvement emphasizes the importance of parents' attitudes, and their activities in the home to support children's success in school.

Parents influence their children's success through high expectations, talking to their children about school, and generally working to create a positive attitude about learning and strong work habits. These things, along with enjoyable activities such as reading together, and even watching television together and talking about what they've seen, have more of an impact on students' chances for success than the more "school-like" activities that parents often feel they should undertake, such as helping with homework.

Ontario research suggests that this message is not well-known to parents: large numbers of children report they don't talk to their parents about school, nor do they read with their parents. Teachers' and principals' self-reports about communication with parents suggest that home-school communication with most parents is fairly infrequent, and often focused on activities at the school rather than on communicating what parents could be doing at home.

While there is no quick fix or program that will ensure effective parent involvement that boosts the success of all children, more could be done to communicate with parents how they can support their children's education. Policy that includes outreach to all parents about what they do at home may reach beyond those parents who are involved at the school. This form of outreach may help to at least partially address the current achievement gap between high-and low-performing students.

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Beyond school councils: Engaging parents to help their children succeed at school

A toolkit for principals, teachers and parents about doing what matters most

Toolkit instructions

All materials in the toolkit are available to be downloaded, copied and shared: see www.peopleforeducation.ca

Parents:

Please share this toolkit with your principal, your classroom teacher and with the other parents in your school. You can include the tips in your school newsletter or on your school council website, or ask your principal to send the information home.

If you have more questions about the research behind the tip sheet, the report is included at the back.

The parent tip sheet is also available in available in French, simplified Chinese, Tamil, Punjabi and Spanish.

Teachers:

Consider using the parent tip sheet as part of your routine communications with parents. It's also available in French, Spanish, simplified Chinese, Tamil, and Punjabi. You can distribute it at Parent Teacher interviews, the beginning of the school year, or any time when parents are in the school.

The teacher tip sheet is also available in French.

Principals:

You may want to use the information about effective parent involvement as part of your school improvement planning with staff or with your school council. You can share the teacher tip sheet with your teaching staff, and encourage them to distribute the parent tip sheet to the parents in their classes.

The principal tip sheet is also available in French.

