



## Education Policy Brief

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# Parent Involvement

**Research in the area of parent involvement indicates that parent involvement is of critical importance to student achievement (and behavior) and has benefits for parents, teachers, and schools as well as students. Involvement can take a variety of forms such as creating a positive learning environment in the home, volunteering or serving as a decision maker in the school, and fostering a stronger relationship between the school, the family, and the community. Research shows that schools' efforts in promoting parent involvement are more important than household income and parents' level of education in determining whether parents are involved in the school. Effective communication, positive teacher practices, and a strong commitment from the school district are essential for maintaining high quality parent involvement programs.**

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## INTRODUCTION:

Research in the area of parent involvement indicates that family factors are of critical importance in the academic achievement of students.<sup>i</sup> Since the release of the Coleman Report in 1966, hundreds of studies have reported that the more involved parents are in their children's learning, the greater the impact on achievement. These studies also show that children whose parents provide help to them at home and stay in touch with the school score higher than children of similar ability and family background whose parents are not involved. These benefits are not limited to early childhood. Strong effects also result when parents remain involved throughout their child's adolescence and into the high school years.<sup>ii</sup>

## RESEARCH FINDINGS:

### Definition of Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is the active, ongoing participation of a child's parent(s) or guardian(s) in his or her child's education. Involvement can take a variety of forms from maintaining a two-way flow of communication between the home and the school, creating a positive learning environment in the home, strengthening parenting skills, and parents volunteering or serving as decision-makers within the school.<sup>iii</sup>

### The Importance of Parent Involvement

In addition to its benefits to students, parent involvement also results in numerous benefits to parents, teachers, and schools. For example, the research on parent involvement reveals that involved parents can enhance their knowledge of child development, discover new ideas for helping their children learn, and develop positive rapport with the school. Benefits for the school include better parent and community relationships, better work environments, and improved teacher morale.<sup>iv</sup>

### Strategies to Increase Parent Involvement

Schools can make a difference in promoting parent involvement. School's efforts are more important than parents' income and education levels in determining whether they become engaged in the school.<sup>v</sup> The most common strategies used by schools to involve parents include: 1) creating a positive learning environment at home, 2) providing parents with the opportunity to take an active role in the school, 3) building a stronger relationship between the school, the family, and the larger community<sup>vi</sup>.

***Creating a Positive Learning Environment at Home:*** The goal of these programs is to help parents understand the role they can play in creating a positive learning environment in the home. Parents are encouraged to set high expectations for their children, express positive attitudes to their children about the importance of education, assist their children with homework, read to their children, and provide children with a quiet place to study.<sup>vii</sup> Effectively involving parents as educators at home with their children is one of the best ways to improve academic achievement and students' attitudes toward school.

***Involving Parents in the School:*** Many schools also attempt to strengthen the home-school relationship by providing parents with an active role in the school, such as working as a

volunteer or serving as a decision maker.<sup>viii</sup> In order to use parent volunteers effectively, the skills and talents of the volunteers should be matched with the needs of the school. In addition, when parents serve as decision makers it is important that they work as true representatives of other parents (e.g., gathering information from and providing information to those they represent).

***Building a Stronger Relationship between the School, the Family, and the Larger Community:***

Several researchers state that involving parents and the community in education is critically important for improving student achievement and raising educational aspirations. The first step in cultivating such a relationship is to assess the current needs of students and families. Once the partnership is in place, all students and families should be informed of the available community programs and services to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.

***Essential Elements for Success***

While no specific parent involvement strategy stands out from the research as superior to all others, effective communication, teacher practices, and district-level support are all essential components for success.

***Effective Communication:*** Communication is the cornerstone of every effective parent involvement program. Communication must be clear, ongoing, two-way, free from educational jargon, and presented in multiple languages if necessary. Researchers have found that when teachers have frequent and effective communication with parents, parents' overall evaluation of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported involvement in activities were higher.<sup>ix</sup>

***Teacher Practices:*** Research indicates that teachers' practices are more important than the education level or marital status of the parents in determining whether parents become involved in education.<sup>x</sup> However, school efforts to promote parent involvement will succeed only if teachers are adequately prepared to support these efforts. Research has shown that teachers who are skilled in the use of parent involvement practices are often rated higher in overall teaching ability and interpersonal skills.<sup>xi</sup>

***District-Level Commitment:*** Support for family and community involvement begins with the school district. Local school districts are responsible for determining the scope and direction of the parent involvement program, providing resources (i.e., materials, space, equipment, personnel), training participants (i.e., teachers, coordinators, and parents), securing funding, providing time, creating incentives for parent and teacher participation, evaluating programs, and creating a welcoming school climate (i.e., convenient hours, accessible personnel, welcoming visiting procedures).<sup>xii</sup>

**DELAWARE SITUATION:**

According to the 2000 Statewide Poll on the Condition of Public Education<sup>xiii</sup>, most parents (86%) reported that their child's school makes it easy to be involved. However, parents were more likely to define their involvement as activities related to creating a positive learning environment at home than rather than being actively involved at their child's school. Typically, involvement at the school involved activities related specifically to their child rather than the school in general. For instance,

while almost three-fourths of parents reported meeting with their child's teacher about their child (74%), only about one-third had attended a PTA meeting in the last year (35%).

The data from this study also show that effective communication is crucial to effective parent involvement. When asked what schools could do to encourage parents to become more involved in their child's school, the most commonly cited response was better communication (33%). In addition, the number one reason why Delaware parents stated that they feel welcome (or not) in their child's school is the quality of communication from the school (47%).

Delaware parents reported that schools typically do an excellent job of providing parents with information about their son or daughter, including preparing progress reports on student performance between report cards. Information is also available about the school in general, such as making parents aware of opportunities to volunteer. However, strategies that empower parents to take a more active role in their child's learning may deserve more attention (these might include helping parents understand what is reasonable to expect from their child at specific ages and giving parents guidance on how to get kids excited about learning).

#### **RESEARCH SUMMARY:**

The research is clear -- parent involvement improves student achievement, increases the likelihood that school programs are successfully implemented, and results in a variety of benefits to teachers and schools. To engage parents and involve them in student learning, schools and districts must work to effectively communicate with parents, ensure a high quality teaching staff trained in parent involvement strategies, and provide adequate support for existing and new programs that include the family. Partnering with parents is an important step for improving the educational outcomes for students.

#### **POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:**

- How committed are Delaware schools to involving parents?
- What parent involvement strategies are currently being used?
- How effective are the parent involvement programs in engaging different subpopulations of parents (i.e., low-income, minority, etc.)?
- How well are teachers prepared (through higher education, professional development opportunities, etc.) to involve parents?
- To what extent are teachers in Delaware effectively using parent involvement strategies?
- To what extent is communication between families and schools ongoing and two-way?
- What can be done to create a network to improve the quality of parental involvement in schools statewide?

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