

Empowering Parents in the Special Education Process

By Dr. Marquis Grant

Advocacy for children is very important. Parents are a child's first and best advocates, bringing special knowledge and expertise to the academic environment, which should be encouraged and respected (Oregon Council for Developmental Disabilities, 2005). Yet, when it comes to the nuances of education, parents often perceive themselves to be outsiders when it comes to their child's academics. Research supports Family and parent engagement as being paramount in the academic success of students (Johns, 2013). In fact, data shows that 86% of the general public believes that school improvement depends heavily on support from parents. Lack of parental involvement is the biggest problem facing public schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2001). As a child matriculates through his educational careers, parent support declines considerably from each year to the next; by the time a student reaches high school, parent involvement is typically non-existent. But if parents have a central role in influencing their children's progress in school, research has shown that schools in turn have an important part to play in determining levels of parent involvement (Michigan Department of Education, 2001). Recent research indicates that family resistance to school involvement can be reversed. (McDermott and Rothenberg, 2000).

When children have been identified as having a disability, their parents face an even greater challenge in making sure their children receive the most appropriate education to meet their needs (Klose, 2010). Every phase of Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act (IDEIA) services mandates parent participation. (Oregon Council for Developmental Disabilities, 2005). In the past, parental support was considered a critical component of education, and teachers relied on that support of their efforts and expectations for children's learning. (McDermott and Rothenberg, 2000). Based on Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and IDEIA, it is clear that parents are to legally be "afforded substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children." *Title I, Sec. 1001 (12) (US Department of Education, 2004).*

However, parents do not always take advantage of opportunities to contribute to their child's learning and there are various reasons for their absences; but, rather than waiting to receive a complaint or, even worse, an unforeseen lawsuit, it is better for educators to find ways to increase parent involvement. Creating partnerships with families not only gives educators a greater support system but it also lessens the likelihood that parents will have significant issues with their children's educational experiences.

Why Are Parents Absent?

There are many reasons that parents may not be involved with their children, according to a National Education Association (2008) policy brief. Some of these reasons include:

- Demanding schedules

Classroom Management Series

- Communication difficulties between home and school due to language or cultural differences
- A parent's own negative experiences as a student
- Intimidation due to parent's own lack of knowledge, education, and resources.
- Frustration over school-based policies they do not understand or like
- Schools or teachers only call when the child is displaying problematic behavior or poor academic performance.
- Information from the school is not intelligible due to educational gobbledegook that makes no sense to them or barriers in language.
- Perceived lack of empathy for single parents, or non-traditional family units
- Lack of transportation or childcare for younger siblings

Taking the First Steps

Many educators already feel overwhelmed by the dozens of tasks and responsibilities they have already. Building connections or partnerships with parents likely adds even more undertakings to a seemingly impossible list of every day duties. However, if educators want to see any real progress, there must be some true dialogue about how to get parents back into schools. Why wait until that first complaint or even (particularly in the case of students with IEPs) that first lawsuit to realize serious problems exist.

Communication with parents should begin early. Educators should be proactive in reaching out to parents long before the first IEP meeting or negative behavior takes place. Creating positive avenues of support in the beginning of the school year will likely result in more positive than negative experiences as the year progresses. Teachers generally rely on other teachers when it comes to getting information about students. Usually everyone knows those kids who have presented challenges year-to-year. However, children perform differently for some as opposed to others, so being proactive may be advantageous in making the school year comfortable for all involved.

Sending home student profile sheets are useful for *all* students, but it is essential for a student with a disability. Gathering as much information and planning as early as possible will keep teachers from burning out early on. For instance, if a student has triggers that he may encounter during the day, parents and caregivers can provide that information prior to the start of school and even offer recommendations about how to avoid or prevent those triggers. Creating an action plan based on the profile sheet will allow an educator to more adequately meet the student's needs in every aspect of academics and behaviors and plan for those (hopefully) rare meltdowns. Take a child with autism, for example, who may not like math and has been known to throw tantrums whenever the teacher says take out your math book. Having a plan of how to transition the student into the subject and strategies to use in the event of a meltdown will make things go a lot smoother and eventually decrease and eliminate the behaviors altogether.

It is also important to realize that parents may need support at home. That's the bottom-line truth, *it is what it is* statement. How many times have we heard "I've tried everything" or "We just don't know what to do anymore". Not only is it a sad state of affairs but it can make a situation even more daunting when you come to the realization that a student is unilaterally out of control. Establishing rituals and routines that connect a student's home and school environments allows for more active participation from both sides in regards to increasing student motivation, engagement and performance across settings. Likewise, don't be afraid to elicit support from other professionals, like the school guidance counselor, who may be able to suggest more resources to assist you and the family in meeting a student's needs.

The Village Theory

As the old proverb goes, it takes a whole village to raise a child. Several models exist that can be used to assist in the facilitation of home-to-school partnerships. For example, The Chicago Parent Centers have been successful in increasing academic success and social outcomes, particularly for those students whose parents took part in the program each year until their children graduated from high school (NEA, 2008). Several states have implemented mandates and recommendations that are geared towards the building of school relationships with parents and the community. The US Department of Education funded the PACER program as a parent training and information center. Whatever the chosen model, it is critical that such relationships are included in school and district improvement plans if educators want to improve the outcomes of all children. Within this context, opportunities must be created in order for parents and families to fully participate in a meaningful way in the special education process (Oregon Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2005).

Epstein's Framework

Epstein identified six types for empowering parents in the education process (Michigan Department of Education, 2001):

Parenting	Parenting skills are promoted, supported and respected. Parents should not be criticized for what they “should know” or what we perceive that they are not doing adequately.
Communication	Dialogue between home and school should not only be consistent, but it should not be reserved simply for making negative reports to parents. Early, positive communication will show parents that you are interested in the student’s success in good times as well as bad.
Volunteering	Parents support should be welcomed and actively sought.
Home-Based Learning	Supporting the parent-teacher partnership by acknowledging that parents require levels of support. They need help parents in understanding the educational process. They need to know their role in supporting student achievement. Home-school connections are crucial to student achievement.
School Decision-Making and Advocacy	Parent partnerships should be encouraged and facilitated. Parents should be involved in all aspects of decision-making as it pertains to the academic outcomes of their children.
Community Collaboration	Resources within the community are extremely valuable in strengthening relationships between schools, families, and students.

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About the Author

Dr. Marquis Grant has been an educator for the past nine years, primarily in the areas of reading and special education. After her middle son was diagnosed with ASD, she became committed to raising awareness about parent involvement in the education process as an integral piece to the puzzle. Dr. Grant has increased her committed to providing diverse, meaningful experiences to ALL learners in the academic setting. She has conducted workshops, including "Differentiating Instruction in the Classroom" and has written articles addressing many of the hot issues in education, including, "Inclusion Does Not Always Mean Included."