

Motivating Parent Involvement: What Can the Middle Level Educators Do?

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Educators need to take a proactive role in soliciting and facilitating parent involvement and need to provide the context enabling staff, families, and community members to maintain an active role in middle grades. This conceptual paper will a) review the challenges with parent participation, b) investigate what motivates middle level parents to get involved, and c) describe how educators can capitalize on the motivation research in order to get greater involvement from parents.

One of the most important factors of a child's success in school is the extent to which his or her parents are actively involved in the child's education. Since 1965 when Title I of the ESEA required parent participation, some form of parental involvement has been essentially mandated in most federal reforms (St. John, Griffith, Allen-Haynes, 1997). More recently family involvement has been at the forefront of legislation with the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, students perform better in school, stay in school longer, improve attendance, improve student behavior, improve attitude towards school and like school more (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Desimone, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). With this growing body of research regarding the benefits of involvement of family members in school, it is difficult to understand why educators have difficulty enlisting and sustaining the efforts of parents and families as valuable resources in education (Meyers & Monson, 1992).

No Child Left Behind Leaving No Doubt

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation requires that districts must invite parents to

become partners and to take a greater role in their children's education. Sections 1111 and 1118 of the NCLB law strengthen the previous Title I provisions and clearly mandate parent participation. All schools receiving Title I monies must have a parent-involvement policy, which is co-authored by parents, and encompasses policy development, shared responsibility for student achievement and the capacity for staff and parents to collaboratively engage in the work of Title I (Henderson, 2002). In addition, the act stipulates that every Title I school must develop a compact with parents delineating a plan including responsibilities and procedures to provide high quality curriculum and improve student achievement. NCLB defines parent involvement to include "regular, two-way, and meaningful communication" and to ensure parents play an "integral role" in assisting their children (Moles, 2005). What do the mandates of NCLB mean to middle level educators who are accountable to early adolescent learners and their families? What are the barriers, motivations and implications for greater involvement of teachers and parents in school improvement efforts for student achievement? How might educators assist parents to participate in legitimate and effective decision-making relative to middle level educational programming?

This article will review research describing the challenges with parent participation, what motivates middle level parents to get involved in school activities, and how middle level educators can capitalize on the motivation research.

Challenges of Family Involvement at the Middle Level

Research specific to the middle level did not appear until the mid-1980s and unfortunately, bears out the fact that historically the amount of parent and family involvement declines as students progress through the middle and secondary grades (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Dauber & Epstein, 1993). More specifically, the level of parent involvement drops off at about the fourth grade, at a time when the students are moving to a period in their lives when course work is growing more complex and their career goals are becoming more relevant (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992).

Reasons for declining parental involvement at the middle level vary. The structure and character of middle schools, the changing academics and the social demands all create a more complex environment in which the parent must navigate in order to participate (Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative, 1992).

Middle level parents are not always familiar with the philosophy or practices of the middle level school (Mulhall, Mertens, & Flowers, 2001) and are intimidated with the lack of understanding for structure and governance. School buildings and enrollments increase in size; curriculum becomes more sophisticated, and the student's day is fragmented, with more teachers, subjects, and extracurricular activities (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). Because students are in the middle level environment for two or three years compared to the elementary level where students spend up to six or seven years in a

building, parents and teachers have a more difficult time building relationships.

Teachers have greater numbers of students in a single day and communication patterns between home and school change, becoming less frequent. Students are beginning to establish a sense of independence and autonomy and do not want parents around school, but want parents around home when they need them (Beghetto, 2001). Some parents feel that their knowledge level and skill level with the work at the middle school are not compatible with assisting in their child's education either at home or at school and feelings of inadequacy prevent participation. Some parents, who want to come to school and volunteer their time and talents, do not have the transportation to do so. Other parents, who are unable to get to school, feel that their contributions are not valued when not delivered on-site (Nakagawa, 2000). Occurrences of parent groups or social/cultural cliques at school or in the community keep some groups of parents from feeling comfortable enough to participate (Pena, 2000). Group norms regarding parent involvement can either promote or diminish the level of involvement. Parents need appropriate social and cultural networks for support and encouragement from every sector of the community to be more involved in their children's education.

Middle level parent involvement has traditionally consisted of sponsoring field trips, attending athletic and fine arts performances, and raising funds (Halsey, 2004), but research suggests that schools can reverse the decline in parent involvement by developing a more positive, comprehensively planned involvement program (Eccles & Harold, 1993, Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). Middle level educators need to assist parents and children to get involved in a variety of ways both in school and at home that are developmentally

appropriate for adolescents and meaningful and timely for parents.

Involvement at Home

Research regarding parent involvement at home with adolescents is becoming increasingly important, and school personnel need to focus on how to get parents involved at home. In a study by Shumow and Lomax (2002) parental monitoring of both adolescent student academic behavior and their social-emotional behavior appeared to be very important relative to student achievement. Such monitoring at the adolescent stage, however, replaced the more direct parental supervision that characterizes parenting of preadolescent children (Catsambis, 2001; Shumow & Lomax, 2002). When parents monitor their children's work at home and communicate with their children about school and future endeavors, they make significant differences in their children's education.

Research consistently has found (Ho & Willms, 1996; Trivette and Anderson, 1995) that parental involvement at home had a powerful influence on student educational success when involvement focused on parent-student communication about educational expectations and aspirations. These researchers suggest that parents of middle level students, who talk to their students about educational expectations, aspirations, students' progress in school, various school activities, program planning and goal setting make a difference in the students' learning. Involvement such as volunteering, attending PTA meetings and other school activities produced less significant affects for this age student relative to student achievement. Fan and Chen (2001) concur with these findings. Their results from a meta-analysis study found that parent involvement such as parents' home supervision (e.g. monitoring television viewing, homework completion) had the weakest relationship with the adolescent students' academic work, while parents' aspirations and expectations for

their children's academic achievement appeared to have the strongest relationship with students' achievement. Findings of a related study by Trusty (1999) suggest that educational expectations of parents in the eighth grade have direct and long-lasting effects for students in high school. Students in twelfth grade, whose parents discussed their aspirations and expectations while at the middle level, overall had better test scores, better course credit completion, and a higher enrollment in academic curricula. Catsambis (2001) concluded that parents continue to be a most valuable resource for adolescents' choices of coursework and high school enrollments. In addition, she states, "Parents' high educational expectations and active encouragement to prepare for college are by far the most important family practices at this state of schooling" (p. 168). What happens at home is salient to students' long-term educational development (Trusty, 1999).

The question for educators then becomes: If there is a connection between parent involvement at home or at school and academic achievement, what motivates parents to participate?

Parent Motivation

Studies have found that parent perceptions about participation determine how involved they become (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005); Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). These researchers have revealed that initially parents are motivated to get involved for several reasons including parental role construction and their sense of self-efficacy. Another key factor for parent involvement is the perception regarding invitations for their involvement from their child and from the teachers.

Role Construction

Role construction includes parents' beliefs about the importance of their parental

obligation in helping with their child's education. It encompasses their beliefs about child development and child rearing and is influenced significantly by their culture, class and other groups with which they associate. Parents' beliefs about child-rearing and child development have been studied in relation to school outcomes; research suggests that when parents are concerned about the development of their children, their behaviors are reflected in their level and type of involvement with their child's education. The groups to which parents belong will have expectations about appropriate parent behavior. When these group expectations are positive relative to involvement in the child's education, parents are more likely to become involved.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, another significant factor in parent involvement, is the belief that parents are capable of helping their children to be productive or capable of being involved in decision-making relative to the educational programming. If parents feel that they do not have the knowledge and skills to be involved with their children's education, it is unlikely that they will choose to fully participate. Parents will intervene in their child's education, set goals for themselves and their children based on their own self-appraisal and estimation of their capabilities.

Persons with low efficacy in a given area will experience low motivation to become involved at any level or with any type of involvement. Persons with a higher sense of efficacy will believe in their own capabilities and believe in the result of their positive involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Shumow & Lomax, 2002). Eccles and Harold (1993) found that parents of elementary and middle level children were more comfortable and more

involved with helping their children in reading and mathematics when they felt they had the ability to influence their children's performance.

Invitations from Children

Invitations for assistance from children and teachers are very strong motivators for parents. Although research is sparse in the area of child invitation for parental involvement, there are some important indicators for this construct. The frequency of child invitations may be affected by a variety of factors such as: the child's age, the changes in academic work and parent's belief about the ability to assist the child, the parent's need for assistance in supervising work, the child's proclivity in requesting assistance, the child's personality and learning style, and the child's developmental changes. Regardless of the factors, parents tend to be more involved if they perceive their children want them to be.

Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) found differences in parent involvement with activities at home and at school with grades 7, 8, and 9, but noted student invitations as the most powerful influence of all types of parent involvement. Although role construction and self-efficacy played an important part in their level of involvement especially for grade 7 and 9 parents, parents became involved at home because their children extended specific academic and social invitations. When the middle level parents believed it was their responsibility to monitor the academic progress of their child and to keep abreast of the child's activities, they became more involved.

Invitations from Teachers

Teacher attitudes and their invitations to parents (Eccles & Harold, 1993) are also critical in parents' decisions relative to involvement. Findings (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler 2005; Patrikakou and Weissberg, 1998) suggest that teacher

invitations promote a positive, inviting climate and produce greater involvement while reducing perceived barriers. "Invitations generated by positive school climate are significant because they suggest strongly that parents are welcome at school and that their involvement is important, expected, and supported" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 110). The extent to which parents are invited to participate in the educational process will have a paramount influence on their initial decision to participate. "This influence may be particularly important if a parent's role construction or sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school does not encourage involvement" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 31.). Teachers frequently invite parental participation, but on their terms and in a more limited scope including parent conferences, homework assistance, classroom volunteers, and fund raising for school. Teachers often see parents' values as barriers to students' academic accomplishments (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Some teachers consider parents as part of the problem of educating the adolescents rather than as a potentially important educational resource (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1996). The sheer magnitude of teachers' duties and responsibilities tend to dissuade many teachers from initiating a parental involvement program or inviting parents to participate on any level. Teachers also report feeling overwhelmed by the problems in the lives of students and their families (Meyers & Monson, 1992) and school involvement initiatives may be hampered because of past failures in attempting to involve parents. Teachers want parents to respect their expertise and are bothered when parents question their competence and desire greater decision-making access. In addition, teachers may have expectations for parents that are unachievable (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) and place blame on parents' behavior, creating a larger disconnect between them and teachers. These attitudes espoused by

educators often translate into the way the relationships are developed and the way they continue to evolve. Attitudes and behaviors of educators, however unintentional, can alienate parents and family members.

Parents will get involved if educators acknowledge the challenges, extend specific invitations, promote a trusting relationship and provide the support for their level of involvement. Schools need to explicitly invite parents to become a part of their child's education. Educators need to assist parents in becoming more familiar and more comfortable with the curriculum and structure so that parents feel they can make a difference in the educational programming of their children. If parents believe that their role and responsibility is to help their children, both parent efficacy and explicit invitations for further involvement greatly support the decision for participation (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Teacher Recommendations

Teachers and parents often do not view the significance of parent involvement in the same way. Educators make assumptions about which types of parent participation activities at home or at school are associated with school success and they judge parents' interest and support based on their level of involvement. Many parents are not able to participate in typically school-centered activities for their children. The way people define participation is critical. Involvement is not how frequently parents are at school, but is what parents are doing to promote and support their child's academic development (Williams, 1998). Positive attitudes are positively correlated with more success in involving "hard to reach" parents (Meyers & Monson, 1992).

Teachers, who successfully implemented involvement programs, pursued the hard-to-get parent and tended to avoid making stereotypical judgments about the

capabilities and willingness to participate of single, socio-economically disadvantaged, or less educated parents (Meyers & Monson, 1992). Teachers persuaded students and parents not only that they care, but also that they were competent to foster student learning. In using a “personal touch,” teachers need to nurture a caring and positive attitude toward involvement of parents-as partners and students (Nakagawa, 2000).

The actions that teachers take to involve parents and students have great benefits for the students and their families and for them. Teachers need to be open in sharing teaching techniques and philosophies. They need to arrange for meetings and conferences outside of the school and outside of the school day as an important step in reaching these parents and in securing their participation at a variety of levels. Teachers need to involve parents in decision-making that affects their children. They need to offer specific help to parents in working with the students at home and to encourage parents to discuss their aspirations and expectations with their children. Teachers need to assign interactive homework while giving appropriate assistance to parents on homework monitoring. Teachers need to extend invitations to parents to volunteer at home or at school and provide training necessary for parents to feel confident and successful. Teachers need to have frequent and positive contact with parents and expect parents to communicate with them regarding home successes. They must provide parents with information on the middle level organization and philosophy: characteristics, structure (house, team, and unit), functions and complexities. Information relative to middle level curriculum, instruction and assessment must be offered so that parents and students can be included in decisions about curriculum, instruction, course selection, individual enhancement activities and student progress (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). When children and teachers invite

parents to participate, children should expect that parents are able to respond appropriately.

If schools are serious about soliciting parent involvement, it appears that teachers need to work with parents and with adolescents in securing parental participation. The middle level students also need to be empowered and part of the decision-making process; they need to be sensitized to the importance of their parents’ involvement and given opportunities to extend invitations to their parents to become active in their education.

Leadership is Critical for Parent Involvement

Teachers are not the only members of the school who must actively seek parent partnerships. Middle level principals are essential in involving the stakeholders in every type of involvement and in ensuring the integrity of NCLB implementation at the middle school level. Teachers, however, have reported poor administrative support for their efforts in parent involvement and have received little training in effective parent involvement strategies (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). Leadership is key to the strength of the family-school partnership. The literature suggests that the more committed, visible and active principals are in supporting parent-teacher relationships, and the more likely schools are to develop strong programs of parent and community involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Additional recommendations are listed below which will help schools become more proactive in motivating and soliciting parent participation.

1. Provide sufficient line items in the district and building budgets for school-family involvement. Budgetary items would include: training/professional development time and additional costs, technology needs, materials and other resources.
2. Provide faculty with time to share

research and best practices regarding the benefits of a variety of parent involvement strategies. Use the research in the design for a comprehensive plan as well as in the development of policies and the family-school compacts.

3. Discuss research regarding self-efficacy and group efficacy and the impact on student achievement as it applies to teachers, parents and students.

4. Provide teacher training and develop capacity in various kinds of parent involvement, parent and community languages, cultures and home situations, conflict resolution and effective communication, and working families.

5. Encourage teacher, student and parent conversations. Train staff for at-home conversations between parents and students relative to the importance of family involvement, family expectations, educational achievement and aspirations.

6. In alignment with NCLB, encourage teachers and parents in the design of the involvement policy. Publish and post the policy. Seek parents' assistance in developing compacts for learning. Publish and post the compacts.

7. Design parent involvement goals and specific action plans for the parent involvement program providing clearly outlined activities parents can do to improve academic performance of their child.

8. In collaboration with a broad representative group of parents and teachers, rigorously evaluate the involvement program, its expectations and future goals.

9. Develop grants that support the goal of parental involvement.

10. Plan workshops with parent volunteers on topics pertinent to adolescents and Middle Level education such as: philosophy, structure and curriculum; transitioning plans to high school; high school structure, courses, graduation requirements, and financial aid; homework strategies; grading and discipline. Provide information on standards, curriculum,

instruction, and assessment including data analysis.

11. Provide training/mentoring for: parenting of adolescents; drugs, dating, and social mores; communication skills with children and educators; collaboration strategies and for partnering techniques for parents, staff members and students.

12. Develop a childcare program for parents with young children and help form car pools so parents can attend school activities and committee work.

13. Develop training sessions in technology and English language acquisition for parents. Provide translation services and diverse methods for communicating with families with limited English proficiency.

14. Design a volunteer program with a parent as coordinator and using a variety of at home and at school activities.

15. Provide time on a regular basis to listen to the parents, their needs, their concerns, and their interests.

16. Create a parent resource center where parents can visit with other parents, read educational materials, and work on volunteer tasks.

17. Initiate a community-parent network involving community agencies and organizations that would provide a variety of services to parents.

18. Explore with parents ways to bring them into school: education stories, cultural appreciation events, guest speakers.

19. Help connect family to the community. Encourage businesses and social service organizations into the school to meet the parents and to provide families with a variety of services.

Educators who communicate the important role parents play in their child's life clearly set the tone for involvement. Parent involvement alone will not make for successful students, but research overwhelmingly suggests that parental involvement in the adolescents' academic lives, at home or at school, is indeed a powerful influence on students' education.

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