

Parent-School Involvement during the Early Adolescent Years

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Adolescence is one of the most fascinating periods of development. Other than infancy, there is no other time in life when the individual experiences such rapid and dramatic change. This rapid change opens the door for both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, there is growing concern about the fate of our adolescents. A myriad of reports have emerged in the last few years pointing to the problems associated with this developmental period -- increasing incidence of school failure, growing dropout rates, especially in the large urban school districts, increasing involvement of youth in delinquent and very dangerous activities, increasing violence among youth, and increasing incidence of other indicators of poor adjustment. The recent report *Turning Points*, for example, concluded that at least one-quarter of American adolescents are already in serious danger while another quarter are at risk for major problems.¹ On the other hand, adolescence is also the time when many youth begin a successful and exciting transition from childhood into adulthood. It is a time when children blossom into interesting and healthy young adults if they are provided with supportive and developmentally appropriate social contexts in which to explore themselves and the world around them.

Many reports have suggested that schools could play a critical role in helping to keep (or to put) adolescents on a healthy, rather than risky, developmental trajectory. Adolescents spend more waking time in school than anywhere else, including with their families. They also need close relationships with nonfamilial adults to help them sort through independence and identity issues, especially since achieving increasing independence from one's parents is a primary task of this developmental period. In our society, teachers are likely to be the primary nonfamilial adults in many adolescents' lives. Not surprisingly, then, evidence from a variety of disciplines indicates that teachers can have a major positive impact and may even play a protective role in the lives of adolescents. This is particularly true if they work in concert with

the adolescents' parents and other community organizations. This article focuses on the ways teachers could work more effectively with parents to facilitate healthy adolescent development. First, it discusses the general importance of greater parental involvement with children's education. Then it discusses barriers to parent involvement and summarizes specific ways teachers could try to involve parents during their children's adolescent years.

IMPORTANCE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Researchers have known for some time that parents play a critical role in their children's academic achievement as well as in their socioemotional development.² It is only recently, however, that researchers have begun to look at the role schools might play in facilitating parents' positive role in children's academic achievement. Critical to this role is the relationship that develops between parents and schools, and between communities and schools. Although this is a relatively new research area, there is increasing evidence that the quality of the links between parents and schools does influence children's and adolescents' school success.³ In fact, evidence suggests that active parental involvement in the schools is a critical factor in a child's educational success at all grade levels.⁴ Good parent-school links also have positive effects on parents and teachers.⁵ Thus, it appears that parental involvement is important for students, teachers, and parents alike.

Yet mounting evidence suggests that parents are not as involved as either they or the schools would like. Findings from several studies make it clear that parents want to be more involved with their children's education and would like more information and help from the schools in order to meet this goal.⁶ Teachers also report being dissatisfied with current levels of parent involvement.⁷ Furthermore, the situation gets worse as children move from elementary school into secondary school. Even though parent involvement is minimal in elementary school, it declines substantially as children move into secondary school.⁸

The message, then, seems clear: Both teachers and parents think that family involvement in the school is important and can have positive effects. So why is it that parents are not more involved with the schools? Lack of family involvement can stem from various parent characteristics and experiences, such as lack of time, energy, and/or economic resources; lack of knowledge; feelings of incompetence; failure to understand the role parents can play; or a long history of negative interactions with the schools that have left parents suspicious of, and disaffected from, the schools. *Even more important*, lack of family involvement can stem from various school and teacher practices and characteristics, such as poor reporting practices, hostility toward the parents,

in the model. The second column (boxes F and G) includes more specific beliefs and attitudes of teachers and parents. The model assumes that these beliefs and attitudes affect each other as well as the two boxes in the third column, namely, specific teacher practices (Box H) and specific parent practices (Box I). Finally, it is assumed that the variables listed in boxes F, G, H, and I all affect the child outcomes listed in the last column in Box J. The model summarizes a wide range of possible relationships among the many listed influences. For example, the impact of the exogenous variables listed in boxes A, B, C, D, and E on teachers' practices related to involving parents (Box H) are proposed to be mediated by various teachers' beliefs systems (Box F) such as their stereotypes about different parents' abilities and willingness to help their children in the various academic subjects. Some of the child-outcome variables listed in Box I are identical (or very similar) to the child characteristics in Box C. This overlap is intentional and captures the cyclical nature of the relationships outlined in the model. Today's child outcomes become tomorrow's child characteristics and so the cycle continues over time. A more detailed discussion of some of the most important of these many influences follows.

PARENT/FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Numerous studies have documented the relation between parent involvement in their children's education and such family characteristics as family income, parents' education level, ethnic background, marital status, parents' age and sex, number of children, and parent's working status. For example, parents who are better educated are more involved in school and at home than parents who are less well educated; parents with fewer children are also more involved at home but family size does not seem to affect amount of involvement at the school; and parents who work outside the home are less likely to be involved at school, but parents' working status does not seem to affect the level of involvement at home.¹³

The following parent/family characteristics are likely to be important:

1. *Social and psychological resources available to the parent*—that is, social networks, social demands on parents' time, parents' general mental and physical health, neighborhood resources and dangers, and parents' general coping strategies.
2. *Parents' efficacy beliefs*—that is, the parents' confidence that they can help their child with schoolwork, parents' view of how their competence to help their children with schoolwork changes as the children enter higher school grades and encounter more specialized subject areas, and parents' confidence that they can have an impact on the school by participating in school governance.

3. *Parents' perceptions of their child*—that is, parents' confidence in their child's academic abilities, parents' perceptions of the child's receptivity to help, parents' educational and occupation expectations and aspirations for the child, and parents' view of the options actually available for their child in the present and the future.
4. *Parents' assumptions about both their role in their children's education and the role of educational achievement for their child*—that is, what role the parents would like to play in their children's education, how they think this role should change as their children get older, how important they believe participation in school governance is, and what they believe are the benefits to their children of doing well in school and having parents who are highly involved at their school.
5. *Parents' attitude toward the school*—that is, what role they believe the school wants them to play, how receptive they think the school is to their involvement both at home and at school, the extent to which they think the school is sympathetic to their child and to their situation, their previous history of negative and positive experiences at school, their belief that teachers call them in only to give them bad news about their child or to blame them for problems their children are having at school versus a belief that the teachers and other school personnel want to work with them to help their children.
6. *Parents' ethnic identity*—that is, the extent to which ethnicity is a critical aspect of the parents' identity and socialization goals, the relationship between the parents' conceptualization of their ethnic identity and their attitudes toward parent involvement and school achievement, their beliefs about the likelihood that they and their children will be treated unfairly because of their ethnicity, and the extent to which they think the school supports them in helping their children learn about their ethnic heritage.
7. *Parents' general socialization practices*—that is, how the parents usually handle discipline and issues of control versus autonomy, and how the parents usually "manage" the experiences of their children.
8. *Parents' history of involvement in their children's education*—that is, the impact of parents' experiences with their children's elementary schools and teachers on the parents' interest in being involved with their children's middle grade teachers. Virtually no one has studied this long-term impact of parents' early experiences with their children's school.

COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

Evidence also suggests that neighborhood characteristics such as cohesion, social disorganization, social networking, resources and opportunities, and the presence of undesirable and dangerous opportunities affect family in-

volvement.¹⁴ Factors such as these are likely to be associated with both different parent beliefs and practices and different opportunity structures in the child's environment. For example, Eccles et al. have been studying the relation of family management strategies to neighborhood characteristics as part of their involvement with the MacArthur Network on Successful Adolescence in High Risk Environments. These investigators are especially interested in how families try to provide both good experiences and protection for their children when the families live in high-risk neighborhoods—neighborhoods with few resources and many potential risks and hazards. To study this issue, they are conducting two survey interview studies (one of approximately 500 families living in high- to moderate-risk neighborhoods in inner-city Philadelphia and the other of approximately 1,400 families living in a wide range of neighborhoods in Prince George's County, Maryland). Initial results suggest that families actively involved with their children's development and in their children's schooling use different strategies depending on the resources available in their neighborhoods: As one would expect, families living in high-risk, low-resource neighborhoods rely more on in-home management strategies both to help their child develop talents and skills and to protect their child from the dangers in the neighborhood; families in these neighborhoods also focus more attention on protecting their children from danger than on helping their children develop specific talents. In contrast, families in less risky neighborhoods focus more on helping their children develop specific talents and are more likely to use neighborhood resources, such as organized youth programs, to accomplish this goal, in part because such resources are more readily available and accessible in their neighborhoods. Equally interesting, there are families in all types of neighborhoods that are highly involved in their children's education and schooling. There are also very disengaged families in all types of neighborhoods—in fact, just as many of the disengaged families lived in low-risk, relatively affluent neighborhoods as in the high-risk.¹⁵

Such neighborhood characteristics have also been shown to influence the extent to which parents can successfully translate their general beliefs, goals, and values into effective specific practices and perceptions. Evidence from several studies suggests that it is harder to do a good job of parenting if one lives in a high-risk neighborhood or if one is financially stressed.¹⁶ Not only do parents in such circumstances have limited resources available to implement whatever strategies they think might be effective, they also have to cope with more external stressors than do white middle-class families living in stable, resource-rich neighborhoods. Being confronted with these stressors may lead parents to adopt a less effective parenting style because they do not have the energy or the time to use a more demanding but more effective strategy. For example, several investigators have found that economic stress

in the family (e.g., loss of one's job or major financial change) has a negative effect on the quality of parenting.¹⁷ To the extent that schools could help relieve some of this stress, they could facilitate greater parent involvement.

Far less work has investigated the dynamic processes by which these global social factors actually affect parent involvement and children's school outcomes, but it is clear that there is substantial variation in parental involvement within any of these social categories, and that teachers can successfully involve even the hardest-to-reach parents.¹⁸ To do this, however, schools and teachers need to take the difficulties these families face into account in designing appropriate strategies for increasing parent involvement. More research is badly needed to identify the characteristics of parents and schools associated with effective parent involvement in underrepresented ethnic groups and high-risk neighborhoods, and especially for adolescent children.

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS

Numerous studies indicate that parents' involvement in their children's school achievement is affected by the characteristics of their children. We know, for example, that the child's sex and age influence the extent of parent involvement.¹⁹ Age is especially relevant for this discussion. As noted earlier, parent involvement drops off rather dramatically as children move into junior high school or middle school. Why? It is likely that some of this decrease reflects the stereotypic belief that parents should begin to disengage from their adolescents as they move into secondary school. Parents may feel that young adolescents both desire and need independence, and thus feel that their involvement in their children's education is not as important as it was earlier. They may also feel that the children do not want them to come to school, as evidenced by a common adolescent plea not to have their parents chaperone school activities. Although there may be an element of truth in this belief, it is too extreme. Adolescents may indeed want greater autonomy, but they still need to know that their parents support their educational endeavors. They need a safe haven in which to explore their independence, a safe haven in which both parents and schools are actively involved. It is important that schools do what they can to strengthen the role available to parents during these years.

The decrease in parent involvement as children move into secondary school may also result from a decrease in parents' feelings of efficacy as their children grow older. It may be that parents feel less able to help their children with schoolwork as the schoolwork becomes more advanced and technical, in part because they are, in fact, less knowledgeable in some of the subject areas. No longer are children working on basic reading and spelling skills, or drilling on math facts. Parents may not know the material being

taught in more advanced and specialized courses. Parents may also feel that the methods used in teaching various subjects (e.g., math) are very different from the methods used when they were in school; as a consequence, they may worry that will mislead or confuse their children if they try to help. Finally, research has shown that parents believe they have more influence over their children in general, as well as in terms of specific behaviors, when the children are in the elementary grades than they will when their children reach adolescence.²⁰ There are things schools could do to help parents be more effective tutors and mentors for their adolescent children. Examples of promising approaches to this problem are presented later.

At a more general level, it seems likely that the child's previous academic experiences and the child's personality also affect parent involvement. For example, parents may be more likely to try to help a child who is having trouble than a child who is doing very well, especially if that child has done well in the past; alternatively, parents of high-achieving children may be more likely to participate in school governance and school activities than parents of lower-achieving children; parents should also be more likely to continue trying to help a child with whom they get along than a child with whom they have many conflicts. Finally, it seems likely that the parents' experiences with helping the other children in the family will also have an impact on the parents' involvement in the education of subsequent children as they pass through the school system.

SCHOOL AND TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES

From an intervention perspective, it is important to think about the school and teacher characteristics that influence parent involvement. As noted earlier, work by Epstein and her colleagues suggests that school factors are *the* primary influence on parent involvement. In fact, the strongest predictors of parent involvement in several studies are the specific school programs and teacher practices being used (or not used) to encourage parent involvement: When parents feel that schools are doing things to involve them, they themselves are more involved in their children's education.²¹

Two school characteristics are especially important to the point of view offered in this article: the physical and organizational structure of secondary schools, and the beliefs and attitudes of school personnel. Level of schooling is a key variable affecting parent involvement.²² Change in the physical and organizational structure is one of the primary differences parents and students confront as children move from elementary school into secondary school. Junior high schools and middle schools are much bigger; they serve a wider range of communities and social/ethnic groups; they are typically much more bureaucratic in their governance and management systems; and they are typ-

ically departmentalized—resulting in less personal contact between specific teachers and both students and families. Changes such as these could result in the increase we find in parents' feelings of alienation from the school. These changes are most certainly associated with greater feelings of alienation on the part of the adolescents themselves. Parents who are involved in their neighborhood elementary schools may see this involvement as part of their connection with their community and friends. The "home" elementary school may seem like an extension of the family, particularly in neighborhoods where the population is relatively stable. Parents and teachers get to know each other over the years their children are in the school. As children leave their home schools and several elementary schools merge into one middle school, there is likely to be a decrease in the extent to which the families feel connected to the school. Junior high schools and middle schools expand the physical community, without expanding the emotional sense of community. The sense of belonging and investment may decrease, and as a result, parents may feel less able and less inclined either to be involved or to try to affect change in the educational experiences of their children. Additionally, children typically spend six or seven years in an elementary school and only two or three in a middle school. The attachment that has formed over the elementary years when parent help seems more essential has less time to form and may seem less necessary in the early secondary school grades.

Alternatively, school personnel may inhibit parent involvement by their own beliefs and attitudes about parent involvement. Like parents, teachers and school personnel at this level may think it is better for the adolescent to have less parental involvement. They may also think it is too much trouble to involve parents at this level because parents are busy or disinterested or "ignorant." As a result of these beliefs, school personnel at this level have been found to actively discourage parent involvement in the classroom and the school.²³ This appears to be especially true in low-income and minority neighborhoods where parents may be seen as part of the problem in educating their children, rather than as a resource.²⁴ The negative interactions that these parents are likely to have with the schools, combined with potentially negative recollections of their own educational experiences, serve as a major barrier to parent involvement in ethnic communities and high-risk inner-city school districts. The following teacher and school characteristics are likely to be important predictors of the school's response to parent involvement: (a) beliefs about the appropriate amount and type of parent involvement, (b) beliefs about influences on parents' levels of participation, particularly their beliefs as to why parents are not more involved, (c) sense of efficacy about their ability to affect the parents' level of participation, (d) knowledge of specific strategies for getting parents more involved, (e) plans for implementing these strategies, and (f) support for implementing specific plans.

INCREASING PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND PROVIDING MEANINGFUL AGE-APPROPRIATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE EARLY ADOLESCENT YEARS

This section outlines general and specific ways to involve parents of early adolescents in their children's education. There are several general approaches schools can use to increase parent involvement. First, schools can offer parents more meaningful roles in school governance. Comer suggests that parents need to understand and agree with school goals in order to reinforce them at home.²⁵ If parents are meaningfully involved in the basic planning and governance of the school, they are more likely to be invested in school goals, and will therefore be more likely to maintain a strong positive connection with the school. This is such an important part of school climate that Comer has made increasing parent involvement a key dimension of his intervention program. To meet this goal, this program calls for parents to be included on the School Based Management Team. This feature of the Comer program ensures that parents are directly involved in the development of the Comprehensive School Plan. The program also calls for the creation of the Parent Program Team, charged with the responsibility of developing a comprehensive parent-participation program designed to increase the involvement of the parents as volunteers in the classroom and the school building, as well as in after-school "social" activities. Comer assumes that these kinds of activities will eventually lead to greater involvement of parents in their children's education both at home and at school, which, in turn, should lead to better outcomes for the children.

Keeping parents informed is a second method to enhance family connections to the school in the middle years. Communication should begin prior to the child's making the secondary school transition in order to preempt the forces that lead to a decline in parents' involvement at this point in their children's schooling. Furthermore, it is essential that schools go beyond the more traditional approaches to communication, such as conferences and open houses, to an approach that sets up a personal relationship between particular teachers and each parent. For example, the school could assign an advisor to each student/family; this advisor could then serve as the contact person for both the student and his or her parents, and could make sure parents are given ample information about the school in general and about their adolescent in particular. This relationship could also provide the entree for parents into the school, and thus establish an environment that feels both safe and encouraging for parent involvement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there must be opportunities for parents to support the educational process at school and in the home in ways that work and are helpful for the developmental stage of their early adoles-

cent children. As stated above, research has demonstrated that parents are most involved when schools actively try to encourage their involvement.²⁶ It follows, then, that planning programs that demonstrate important and appropriate ways to be involved with their early adolescents' educational experiences should help ensure continued parent involvement as the children progress from the elementary to the middle grades.

Below are more specific suggestions structured around the following typology of parent involvement, suggested by Epstein and her colleagues: (1) basic obligations of families to provide for the safety and health of their children; (2) basic obligations of schools to communicate with families about school programs and the individual progress of their children; (3) parental involvement at school; (4) parental involvement in learning activities at home; (5) parental involvement in decision making at school, and (6) collaboration and exchange with community organizations. Most school-based programs focused on parent-school involvement include at least one of these types of involvement.²⁷ A discussion of this typology and the potential application in school settings for early adolescent children follows.

1. *Basic obligations of families to provide for the safety and health of their children:* We know that both healthy social development and school achievement depend on the home environment. Schools can play a role in helping parents provide a good environment at home. School-family programs that teach parenting skills and effective monitoring strategies like providing the child with a specific space to do homework and working out a homework schedule at home are an example of efforts to facilitate this type of involvement. Unfortunately, the nature of many existing programs makes it much more likely that they will be found in the elementary grades, but this does not need to be the case. There are important developmental changes taking place in children as they move into and through the secondary school years, and families need information on how to cope effectively with these changes.

Many of the things parents worry about in their adolescents' behavior are quite normal and can be handled fairly easily with age-appropriate interventions. Parents need to know about these changes and about effective means of handling the changes they are seeing in their children's behavior. In addition, several health issues (such as AIDS; sexually transmitted diseases; eating disorders; increased levels of depression; ingestion of health-compromising chemicals like nicotine, alcohol, drugs, and steroids; and increased exposure to violence) become more relevant during the early adolescent period. Many parents are quite anxious about their ability to handle these issues. Schools could offer educational programs to provide parents with guidance in dealing with these issues, including how to identify potential danger signs and find appropriate help in their communities — programs on topics such as teaching children about the importance of safe sex and good nutrition, and about the dangers associated with the use of substances such

as cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, and steroids; as well as programs that help parents organize their own time to help their children with study and time-management skills. These "programs" could be in the form of organized presentations, discussion groups held at school or in the community, or lending libraries that make videotapes (e.g., Claude Olney's "Where There's a Will, There's an A") and books (e.g., The Home and School Institute's *Survival Guide for Busy Parents*) easily accessible to parents with demanding work and family schedules.

Schools could also help parents find safe places for their adolescents to spend time away from home. Schools are community buildings that could be used as program sites by youth organizations and social service agencies. Streets in many communities are very dangerous places and parents are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfill their obligation to protect their adolescents from dangerous situations without locking them up in the house—a strategy that is neither very practical for adolescent children, nor congruent with adolescents' need for autonomy and developing their identity outside of their family. Schools could help families and communities deal with this problem and at the same time build better connections between the school and the community/family. The use of the school building for extracurricular activities might also result in the student's having more positive feelings about the school.

2. *Basic obligations of schools to communicate with families about school programs and the individual progress of their children:* Parent-teacher conferences, curriculum nights, open houses, phone contacts, report cards, and standardized test results are typical examples of this type of parent-school connection. This communication begins in the earliest grades and usually continues through high school, although the nature and frequency of the contacts may change as the child goes through the school system. As students move to the middle grades and have more than one core teacher, "capsule" nights are often used to provide parents with information about each class and an opportunity to meet each teacher. Such programs involve attending a miniaturized version of the child's daily schedule, for example, fifteen minutes in each classroom, and are generally held in the evening to accommodate working parents. Unfortunately, such programs do not provide much opportunity for parents and teachers to get to know each other and to talk about specific children. Different types of programs are needed to facilitate more direct and personalized parent-teacher communication.

It is also important at this time to increase the amount of information given to parents about curricular choices that may be related to eventual career/occupation choices. As children move into junior high school or middle school, they begin to make course choices that have both short- and long-term implications for their future options. Often neither the full range of choices nor the implications of various choices are made clear to parents. For

example, in one of the school districts we have studied, we were told that the parents make the decision regarding which math class their child is placed into in the seventh grade. When the parents in this school district were interviewed, the majority did not know they had a choice because the sixth-grade teacher typically sent home a form that was already filled in with the teacher's recommendation regarding the child's math placement; the parents also did not know the long-term consequences of being placed in the various seventh-grade math courses. Apparently, the school had not communicated their policy clearly enough for the parents to really make this important decision. Nonetheless, early course choices in subjects like math and science can play a major role in shaping the curricular track students find themselves on in high school. If parents do not fully understand this connection, they cannot effectively play the role of advocate for their children.

Further, it is incumbent on the schools to increase personalized communication with the families, especially when there is an increase in the number of teachers with whom the early adolescent student interacts. Some school districts have attempted to do this by "teaming" teachers, thereby encouraging discussion among the student's core teachers. Typically, such districts also assign one of the team members to be an "advisory" teacher (i.e., the one who communicates most directly with the student and his or her family) for each student in order to increase the likelihood of good communication between school and family.

There is a need for coordination across teachers at this grade level to ensure effective monitoring of the child and to alert the parents to any danger signs or special talents that may be identified. There is also a need for teachers to help parents help their children make wise and informed choices about future educational and occupational goals. Because teachers both see many adolescents and interact with each student regularly, teachers are well positioned to identify an individual student's talents and intellectual strengths. In turn, teachers are uniquely situated to help both students and parents think about each adolescent's unique talents and aptitudes in terms of future educational and occupational choices. Parents often do not know very much about the relation between particular academic skills and future job options, particularly if they themselves do not excel in the same subject areas as their adolescents, or if they hold stereotypic beliefs about what their children might be good at or might like. For example, females are less likely than males to consider going into applied mathematics (e.g., engineering) and physical science; consequently, girls are less likely to take advanced math and physical science courses in secondary school. Females appear to be selecting themselves out of these intellectual domains, and they do so at great cost to themselves. Avoiding these courses in high school makes it difficult to take many college majors and courses, including some they might be interested in pursuing—for example, nursing, economics, or ecological sciences.

It also significantly decreases the opportunity to major in engineering or the physical sciences. Parents often do not understand these implications, and parents may not notice that a daughter is exceptionally good in math and science.²⁸ Bright females typically do quite well in all of their courses and may not give their parents any reason to believe that they are unusually good in math and science. In addition, parents may not understand that there are many good jobs in these fields and that females are more likely to be paid an equitable salary in these fields than in many other occupational fields. Teachers can provide parents with this type of specific information relevant to a child's future. They can also let parents know about special programs for which their child is eligible. Providing this type of information to parents increases the number of female and minority students who enroll math and science in high school and consider occupations requiring these courses and requiring a college education.²⁹ Information such as this is especially important for families in high-risk neighborhoods and for families who have recently immigrated to this country or to the state or city in which they are currently living.

3. *Parental involvement at school:* Parents and other family members may assist teachers in the classroom in a variety of capacities, including tutoring, teaching special skills, and providing clerical or supervisory help. Unfortunately, this type of involvement is most likely to decrease as the child enters the middle grades. It is still very important, especially in the inner city. As noted above, parents are desperate to find safe places for their adolescents to gather. There is also a pressing need for tutorial programs, for tutors, and for places to house tutorial programs for adolescents. Finally, as noted above, adolescents in particular need exposure to many different types of adult models as they try to form their own identities — models of different occupational choices, models of effective problem solving, models of different ethnic traditions, models of community involvement and good citizenship, models of overcoming adversity and resisting the lure of illegal activities, and models of healthy life-styles. Parents can provide all of these. For example, they can bring their own talents and family histories into the school by speaking at assemblies on life histories or careers, by offering a mini-course or workshop in an area of their expertise, or by assisting in specialized areas such as teaching computer skills, coaching a team, or planning and coordinating field trips and other outings. Such programs are increasingly relevant as adolescents begin to make plans for their lives.

Parents can also help to bring in other community resources and to coordinate finding placements in the community for adolescents to spend time engaged in meaningful adult activities. The Carnegie report *Turning Points* stresses the importance of increasing the school-community connection particularly for early adolescents.³⁰ This report recommends greater opportunities for community placement in volunteer service organization and in job

settings. Schools, understandably, resist this suggestion because creating and monitoring such opportunities is a time-consuming task—but it is exactly this kind of task that parents are especially well situated to take on. It is also possible to involve parents in the school in other roles. For example, schools could provide parents with the opportunity to watch their child's performance in activities such as sports, music, and drama and to participate in more traditional activities like fund-raising.

4. *Parental involvement in learning activities at home:* Family members are often requested to work with their own children on learning tasks that will facilitate and promote the child's class work. This may be done at the state level, for example by producing guides for parents such as the "Calendar of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics Skills" developed by the Michigan State Board of Education, or at the district level by individual schools and teachers. Schools often provide information at the beginning of the semester, or on a more regular basis, on learning goals and ways in which parents can be helpful to their children in achieving these goals. This practice generally begins in early elementary school and continues through secondary school, although the kind of information provided and the tasks that are targeted for help usually change across grade levels. As children get older, teachers often send home "contracts" at the beginning of a term (e.g., letters that detail their expectations, their grading system, and/or assignments) that both students and parents are asked to sign. But teachers seem less likely to ask for parent help with specific skills such as reading or learning math facts as children get older. This may be due to perceptions held by both teachers and parents that students should have mastered basic skills by this point, and that parents are less able to help now than they were before. Neither of these perceptions is necessarily true; consequently, there is still a need for parents to be involved in these types of activities. In addition, however, they can be helped to play an active role with more specialized course material. Given the concerns that many teachers raise about parents' expertise and ability to help their children with homework as the subject matter being taught becomes more technical, it would be helpful for schools to consider ways to provide parents with some supplementary educational training so that parents can both be more helpful and feel more confident in their ability to help. "Family Math" and "Family Computers" (programs developed at the Lawrence Hall of Science) are two exemplar programs with this goal: Both seek to provide supplementary educational experiences for students and parents, both are run at school by teachers in the evenings and on weekends, both have generated great enthusiasm among parent and teacher groups, and both are relatively inexpensive to introduce and sustain in a school system.

Teachers could also increase parent involvement in learning activities at home by developing assignments that provide a meaningful role for parents to play. During adolescence children are increasingly interested in things like

their cultural heritage, their parents' experience while growing up, and their community's history. They are also interested in how people make important life decisions and how people learn from their mistakes. Teachers could take advantage of these interests by giving assignments that involve interviewing one's parents and other community members, or accompanying one's parents on important activities like work or volunteer activities. Assignments such as these might accentuate the areas in which parents have special expertise and information rather than highlighting the areas in which their knowledge is dated or limited.

5. *Parental involvement in decision making at school:* Parent-Teacher Associations or Organizations (PTA or PTO) are the most common ways for parents to be involved in governance or advisory processes. Again, this type of involvement usually begins in elementary school and sometimes continues into the secondary school years, although it tends to decrease as children move from elementary school into secondary school. In the upper grades, an augmented group that includes students (e.g., PTSA/PTSO) may replace the other governance model in an attempt to get students and their parents (re)invested in the school. In response to districtwide changes or mandates from accrediting bodies, school-improvement teams comprised of school staff and parents have been formed in some areas to address specific programmatic concerns, and to develop and implement changes. Forming advocacy groups for special interests such as the rights of special-education students is another way parents can influence the process of decision making in schools. There is now a lot of interest in increasing this type of parent involvement. Many intervention programs call for active parent participation in school governance and some school districts have mandated the shift of control from school personnel to parent boards (e.g., the Chicago School District). The results of these experiments are not yet known but their existence clearly indicates the need for increased parent involvement in school management at all levels.

6. *Collaboration and exchange with community organizations:* Agencies and businesses may join with the schools to support children's educational experiences. For younger children, this may take the form of child-care services, or activity groups at recreational facilities. Mental and physical health services offered by a school-linked or school-based clinic such as those provided by Healthstart (an agency in St. Paul, Minnesota) may be an example of this kind of community collaboration in the later grades. Insights into careers offered through experiences provided by community and business personnel would be increasingly important and interesting as the student progresses through school. Some schools have formed partnerships with local businesses, which then provide some financial backing for special projects as well as offer students a look at different aspects of the work world. This notion

of the school-community link is therefore especially relevant to the middle grades. Parents can play a central role in helping to create and maintain these links.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to accomplish three goals: First, to document the importance of parent involvement in their children's schooling, particularly during the early adolescent years; second, to discuss the various influences on parental involvement and the many barriers to parent involvement during the adolescent years; and third, to provide some concrete recommendations for ways to increase parent involvement, particularly during the adolescent years. It began by noting the critical role parents and teachers can play if they work together to support healthy adolescent development. Unfortunately, the collaborative relationship between parents and schools seems to decrease rather than increase as children move into their adolescent years, and into secondary schools. This downward trend can be reversed. There are effective ways to involve parents in a collaborative relationship with the schools even during the secondary school years. Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that parent involvement is just as important, if not more important, during these years. This is particularly true in high-risk communities. Adolescents are at particular risk in these communities, and we are losing many of them to the dangers of the street culture. Increased family/community/school cooperation is essential if we are to reverse this trend. Early adolescence may well be our last best chance to promote healthy development—a chance that can be realized only through parent-school collaboration.

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