



Chapter 1

Introduction

Why Bother to Read This Book?

In this book, we argue that partnerships among schools, families, and community groups are not a luxury—they are a necessity. In passing the No Child Left Behind law, Congress and the president made a promise to our children that all will have an equal opportunity to get a high-quality education and master high academic standards. That means *all* our children—no matter what language they speak, how much their families earn, what disabilities they may have, what God they worship (if any), or what holidays they celebrate.

Quality public education may be national and state policy, but it is not yet a civil right. There remain tremendous disparities in funding, facilities, and instructional resources across our sixteen thousand school districts, and this inequity underlies the poor outcomes that the law attempts to address. Consequently, our public schools need all the help they can get—from parents, family members, community residents, local organizations, and anyone else whom we can engage in children's learning.

Demands for reform continue to mount. Federal and state action has produced a strong move toward higher standards of achievement, increased

testing, and accountability to the public for results. There is considerable backlash, however, especially against using high-stakes standardized tests to hold schools liable for poor performance and to prevent students with low scores from graduating.

While some see progress, many corporate and foundation leaders are impatient with the pace of change. Educators and policy makers are arguing over whether funding is adequate to meet all the new federal mandates. Public support appears to be growing for vouchers and competition from the private sector as the main tools for reform. We think that parents and community members, working as partners with educators, can accomplish change within the public sector—but this will take a new model of working together, one that goes way beyond the bake sale.

There are five reasons why you should read this book.

1. Partnership and student academic achievement are closely linked. Many years of research show that involving families and the community contributes to children’s academic and social success.

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.¹

This statement summarizes the conclusion of *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, the most recent and comprehensive review of the research. Here are some key findings:

- ◆ Students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.
- ◆ When families take an active interest in what they’re learning, students display more positive attitudes toward school and behave better both in and out of school.

- ◆ Children do best if parents can play a variety of roles in their learning: helping at home, volunteering at school, planning their children's future, and taking part in key decisions about the school program.
- ◆ Middle and high school students whose families remain involved in these ways make better transitions, maintain the quality of their work, develop realistic plans for the future, and are less likely to drop out.
- ◆ Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when families and school staff join forces to bridge the gap between home and school cultures.

From early childhood through high school, families make key contributions to student learning. School improvement programs are much more effective when schools enlist families in the process. Regardless of income level or education background, all families can—and do—support their children's success.

When parents become involved at school, they tend to become more active in the community. Well-planned family learning and support activities tend to increase self-confidence, so parents and family members go on to pursue a high school diploma, additional job training, and higher education. Knowledge is power. Well-informed parents can be more effective and productive partners.

The more the relationship between families and the school is a real partnership, the more student achievement increases. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains. When families are engaged in positive ways, rather than labeled as problems, schools can be transformed from places where only certain students prosper to ones where all children do well.

Community groups make important contributions, too. One key difference between high- and low-achieving children is how (and with whom) they spend their time outside school. Community groups offer important resources for students and families, and schools can provide a critical link to these resources.

Be warned: positive results are not automatic. They are more likely to be achieved when school, family, and community partnership programs are well planned and carefully executed. How to do this is what this book is all about.

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2. Partnerships help build and sustain public support for the schools. In this era of market-driven education reforms, including vouchers and charter schools, public schools are seeking increased support. The traditional approach is public relations. We think that three other partnership strategies offer more direct benefits, both to schools and to the community:

1. Conducting active programs to engage the public, including parents and families
2. Working with community organizations to help students and families and to improve educational quality
3. Promoting greater citizen participation in our democracy

Schools that embrace the partnership idea in practice enjoy higher levels of respect and trust in the community, as well as among school staff and families. Partnership schools tend to have better teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by families. They also have more support from families, better reputations in the community, and more success at implementing school reform initiatives.

TIP:

Public engagement is a way to build support for public schools that gets beyond PR.

Public Agenda, a nonprofit polling and research organization, emphasizes:

- ◆ Extensive outreach to make sure that activities include regular people—people who do not hold leadership positions and whose voices are not commonly heard
- ◆ Discussions geared to average citizens instead of just experts
- ◆ A civil exchange of ideas among participants without grandstanding or polemics
- ◆ Tolerance for people with different points of view²



Collaborative approaches can contribute to strengthening the human, social, and economic foundation of neighborhoods. One goal of school-community initiatives is to develop a neighborhood's ability to identify its own issues and marshal sufficient resources to solve problems. This kind of community capacity can help not only to improve the safety and economic vitality of neighborhoods but also, as it evolves, to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the schools.³

Community agencies and institutions benefit, too. When they collaborate with schools, they can reach more easily the people they want to serve and gain access to school services and expertise. In the process, they can increase public support for their work—and even save money by eliminating overlapping services.

Families are more stable and healthy if they can meet basic needs for housing, food, transportation, and employment. When schools team up with community organizations, families can gain access to a range of social services. Then they are in a better position to take advantage of other opportunities, such as counseling, additional education, and job training. Many studies have documented the resulting benefits for families and children, including:

- ◆ Increased knowledge of child development
- ◆ Greater confidence in their role as their child's first teacher
- ◆ More frequent attendance at school meetings and a stronger sense of responsibility for children's schooling
- ◆ Improved literacy and other skills
- ◆ Better communication with schools and teachers

3. Families and the community can help schools overcome the challenges they face. The challenges for America's public schools are great and growing, and many schools are making heroic efforts to address them. Serious gaps in achievement persist between more affluent children and those from low-income families. New waves of immigration from Central America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East are bringing to many schools more children and families whose English is limited and who are not familiar with our school system or society.

During the 1990s, between 14 million and 16 million people entered the country, far more than in any decade in the nation's history. This pace was

sustained during 2000–2004, with the foreign-born population increasing by over 1 million per year. By 2000, immigrants represented one in nine of all U.S. residents, and their children represented one in five of all children under eighteen. While these children are at first concentrated in the great gateway cities, they are rapidly dispersing across the country.⁴

As poverty rates rise and manufacturing jobs decline, families and communities face multiple economic and social problems. These have a direct impact on the schools. For example, the number of highly mobile families has increased. Of the more than 290 million people in the United States, 43 million move each year. In many communities, the shortage of affordable housing has put numerous families on the street. Homelessness affects children’s health, their mental stability, and their work in school.

RESEARCH BRIEF:
Children in poverty

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, more than 73 million children (birth to age eighteen) live in the United States. About 40 percent of them live in low-income families.

- ◆ Low-income means being unable to provide basic necessities. Most families of four must reach twice the federal poverty level (\$40,000) before they can provide their children with adequate housing, food, and health care.
- ◆ Twenty-nine million children in this country are growing up in low-income families.
- ◆ More than 81 percent of them have at least one working parent whose income is not sufficient to provide basic necessities.
- ◆ Eighteen percent of children—13.5 million—live in families that are at or under the federal poverty level.
- ◆ The number of children in poverty has been rising steadily since 2000.⁵

The findings of a new, rigorous study on the actual dropout rate between ninth and twelfth grades are summed up in its title: *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*. In predominantly black and Latino urban districts, high school graduation rates are well under 50 percent.⁶ Where do the students who drop out go? According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about half of prison inmates are dropouts, and a high proportion of these have been in special education programs.⁷

RESEARCH BRIEF:

Chicago Parent Centers dramatically reduce dropout rate

A long-term study of the Chicago Parent Centers (serving families with children from ages three to nine) found that parent participation in the program had a major impact on their children's social and academic outcomes. The longer parents took part in the program, and the more they were involved at school, the less likely their children were to repeat a grade, be abused, be arrested, or require special education. Each year that parents took part in the program increased the odds that their child would complete high school by 16 percent. **Over 80 percent of students whose parents were involved for the whole six years graduated from high school, compared to 38 percent of students whose parents were not involved at all.**⁸

Changing family patterns also present schools with challenges. For example, the 2000 Census shows that over 4 million children are living with grandparents, and that one-fourth of these grandparents have sole responsibility for the children. Nearly half of low-income children, those in the bottom 20 percent, live with only one parent, and nearly half move every year.⁹

These changes in society and the economy have spawned what the media call the "culture wars." Many communities are beset with sharp debates about religious expression in schools (including prayer, religious

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clubs, and how to teach evolution); appropriate treatment of gay, lesbian, and transgendered students; and how to prevent bullying and sexual harassment. School staff are coping with changes in traditional sexual roles and values, and with cultural differences in food, dress, and music. Language differences trigger debates on whether instruction for English-language learners should be given in the home language or focus strictly on English. Safety in and around schools is another pervasive challenge, intensified by headline-grabbing incidents of violence.

There is wide disagreement about solutions to these controversies. School leaders are in the uncomfortable position of having to mediate the disputes and build a consensus about what to do. They know that schools can address few, if any, of these challenges effectively by themselves. Principals, teachers, and other staff already work long hours and volunteer time during vacations to work with families and coordinate programs. Common sense and years of experience suggest that a collaborative approach is needed to define the problems, discuss productive approaches, and design and implement possible solutions. Ideas and examples for how to do this are presented throughout this book.

4. Teachers can benefit from parent and community partnerships. Teachers say they want more support from parents and are troubled by what they see as low parent involvement and poor student behavior. Yet they are unsure about how to collaborate productively with families. Many tend to be more comfortable with helping families to be involved with their children at home than with engaging families in their classrooms and school buildings.

School leaders can help teachers and their unions understand how partnership approaches can be of direct benefit to them. Plans for partnerships are often developed with little or no teacher input, and teachers are told, “Just do it.” A top-down, management-driven approach confirms many teachers’ perception that their views are often ignored. This can doom the effort from the start. If, instead, teachers are involved in planning at the outset, they can become powerful allies for expanding the connections among schools, parents, and community members.

In addition, educators can learn a great deal from parents. Parents and other family members bring knowledge and perspectives about their children, their culture and values, and the strengths and problems of their communities.