Connecting Secondary Schools to Parents and Community

By Diana Oxley

Parent involvement plays an important role in students' achievement across all school levels. The approaches to parent involvement used in elementary schools, however, may not yield the same results at the secondary level. Middle and high school organizational and instructional practices require different approaches to support parent involvement.

By examining the research about the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement, school leaders can gauge how to invest resources in bolstering parent involvement and how to adapt it according to students' developmental changes in secondary school.

Importance of Parent Involvement at the Secondary School Level

Parents and educators place greater value on family involvement in children's education at the elementary school level, and the trend is for parent involvement to decline over the school years (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007; Singh, et al., 1995). That trend mirrors the experience of children entering adolescence who seem to need less direct parental guidance and often do not want it. Yet studies consistently document strong relationships between parent involvement and student achievement across all grade levels, although the magnitude of the relationship lessens as students advance through school (Bouffard & Stephen, 2007). A meta-analysis of more than 50 studies of parent involvement at the secondary school level (Jeynes, 2007) found that the effect of parent involvement on student achievement ranged from .50 to .55 of a standard deviation. That effect size is significant but smaller than that found for parent involvement in elementary schools (.70 to .75). Those results held across ethnic and racial demographics.

By examining the research about the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement, school leaders can gauge how to invest resources in bolstering parent involvement and how to adapt it according to students' developmental changes in secondary school.

Just the Facts

- Most researchers conclude, however, that parents' direct involvement in their children's schooling remains an important element in student achievement in secondary school (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; 2012).

- Williams and Sánchez's (2012) interviews with parents of inner-city high school students revealed that the majority of parents embraced the notion that it "takes a village" to meet all students' needs.

- Jeynes (2007) found that parent expectations had the strongest effect on parent involvement and a weaker but still significant effect on parenting style.

- A recent meta-analysis (Jeynes, 2012) may help to resolve that dilemma. Jeynes reported that staff-led parent involvement programs exerted positive effects on student outcomes across elementary and secondary school levels; the size of the effect was as great at secondary levels as at elementary levels.

Research does not provide an explanation for the diminished relationship between parent involvement and student achievement at higher grade levels. It is widely perceived that parent involvement has less impact on success as students gain the ability to take responsibility for their own actions and form an enduring sense of their identity and abilities. It is also possible that parents reduce the scope of their school-based support in middle and high school because they feel it is less needed or because they find that middle and high schools are less accessible. Reduced levels of support then produce smaller effects on achievement.

Most researchers conclude, however, that parents' direct involvement in their children's schooling remains an important element in student achievement in secondary school (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; 2012). One compelling source of evidence for this conclusion is found in the Consortium on Chicago School Research studies of student achievement in Chicago schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Although those studies were conducted in elementary schools, the lessons they yield for improvement apply to all school levels because they show that parent involvement increases student achievement by several different means, including boosting teachers' instructional effectiveness. First, the researchers demonstrated that parent involvement operated as one of five essential supports for improved student achievement. Schools that scored low on any one of the five supports made weaker gains in reading and math achievement than schools that scored high on all of them. The likelihood that the schools in the study improved in both reading and math over a six-year period was especially weak in schools with weak parent involvement as measured by teachers' outreach to parents and by parent participation in school activities (e.g., parent-teacher conferences). In 19 schools where parent involvement was weak, not a single school improved in math.

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Additional analyses showed that parent involvement not only increases support for student learning but also interacts with other essential supports to create an environment in which school improvement efforts can be realized. Communication with parents increases teachers' knowledge of the community and their professional capacity to respond directly to their students' interests and skills and to draw on community-based resources to help meet students' needs. Further, the resulting social network of teachers, parents, and community members enhances school order and schoolwide capacity to pursue instructional improvements successfully. This complex relationship between parent involvement and other school improvement efforts suggests that adolescents' increased independence and responsibility-taking does not reduce demands for parent outreach and involvement. Indeed, Williams and Sánchez's (2012) interviews with parents of inner-city high school students revealed that the majority of parents embraced the notion that it "takes a village" to meet all students' needs.

Implications of Adolescent Development for Parent Involvement

Other researchers argue that although parent involvement remains important to students' success in secondary school, adolescent development necessitates adjustments in parent support to reap benefits. Changes in cognitive development enable middle school students to reason abstractly and process information more efficiently with overall increases in their ability to make decisions and regulate their behavior (Keating, 2004; Moshman, 1998). Those cognitive abilities are related to identity formation, increased social awareness and sensitivity, and the ability to manage self-presentation (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006). These dramatic changes in cognition along with hormonal changes influence students' moods and mental health.

Parents generally respond to those developmen-

tal changes by renegotiating their relationships with their children. Parents engage in more discussion with adolescents, give them more say in rule making, and reduce their direct supervision of their children's activities. This renegotiation of their relationships with their adolescent children may lead parents to spend less time in school and pull back from direct assistance with students' homework.

A meta-analysis of parent involvement in relation to middle school student outcomes provided evidence that direct forms of parent involvement are not as potent at the middle school level (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Researchers found that only academic socialization (i.e., parents' communication of expectations, values, and goals for their children's education and future) had sizable effects on students' success. School-based involvement had a statistically significant but smaller positive relationship to students' achievement. Likewise, home-based involvement had a statistically significant but weak relationship to student outcomes. The research also showed that help with homework had a negative relationship, a reflection perhaps of unhelpful assistance or students' difficulty with the material.

Jeynes' (2007) meta-analysis of research on parent involvement in secondary school corroborated those findings. Jeynes found that parent expectations had the strongest effect on parent involvement and a weaker but still significant effect on parenting style. Checking on homework, a more direct form of parent involvement, did not affect student achievement as measured by standardized tests but was related to grades. The author interpreted the latter finding as evidence that parent involvement may influence students' effort and, in turn, grades, which often reflect student effort but are not objective measures of learning.

The finding that fewer forms of parent involvement are effective in secondary schools is consistent with adolescent development trends, but there may be other explanations as well. For example, intensified student learning problems at secondary school levels and parents' increased difficulty in developing meaningful relationships with middle and high school teachers may reduce the effectiveness or scope of parent support.

School Organizational Practices Enable Parent Collaboration

Many authors have observed that the larger size of secondary schools and the higher number of teachers who instruct students make it more difficult for parents to be meaningfully involved in their children's education (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Likewise, secondary school teachers' large student loads may make outreach less manageable, except to the parents and guardians of students who struggle the most.

The Chicago Consortium researchers (Bryk, et al., 2010) found that large school size was negatively related to parent involvement even among the elementary schools they studied. They reported that part of that relationship resulted from the greater trust that teachers and parents more readily developed in small schools. This finding prompts the question: How can middle and high school staff members develop trusting relationships with parents given the large number of students they teach?

One solution is interdisciplinary teaming. Middle schools that engaged in teaming exhibited more frequent contact with parents (Felner, Mertens, & Lipsitz, 1996; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998). Further—in line with the Chicago Consortium findings—Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2000) found that parent involvement was positively correlated with teacher efficacy: Teams' contact with parents was significantly related to the frequency of using nearly all classroom practices employed in the study as indicators of effective instructional strategies.

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Interdisciplinary teaming represents a long-standing recommendation for middle school practice (Jackson & Davis, 2000) and is commonly found in middle schools. Teaming occurs less often in high schools, although it is frequently present in schools with small learning communities, freshman transition programs, and career academies (Kemple, Connell, Legters, &Eccles, 2006; Oxley, 2008). In addition to those structures, high schools can also use student advisory programs that assign teachers to small groups of students as a way to support outreach to parents (Klem, Levin, Bloom, & Connell, 2003).

These organizational arrangements can overcome barriers to parent involvement linked to secondary schools' large size and high enrollments, particularly if teacher-student relationships are maintained long enough to develop trust. The question remains, however, about what types of parent involvement staff members should pursue to ensure that their efforts are developmentally appropriate and ultimately effective (Hill & Chao, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Promising Secondary School Parent Involvement Programs and Practices

The findings (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007) that academic socialization and parenting style exert more powerful effects on secondary school student achievement than other types of parent involvement present a dilemma to educators. Academic socialization and parenting style are not behaviors that school staff members can readily influence, especially since they are related to sociocultural context (Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009). Further, academic socialization and parenting style may be confounded with socioeconomic status since it was not controlled in these studies.

A recent meta-analysis (Jeynes, 2012) may help to resolve that dilemma. Jeynes reported that staff-led parent involvement programs exerted positive effects on student outcomes across elementary and secondary school levels; the size of the effect was as great at secondary levels as at elementary levels. The programs that contributed to those results included shared reading activities, parent-teacher collaboration in areas targeted for student improvement, checking homework (in contrast to helping with homework), and communication about rules and goals.

A key difference between the findings of recent and earlier meta-analyses is that parent involvement is more likely to enhance secondary school students' achievement when it is staff-led. Parents may experience difficulty negotiating the more complex environment of secondary schools, and parental support is unlikely to pay off unless staff members help to shape it. Rather than pulling back from parent-teacher collaboration at the secondary school level to give students more room to take on their own struggles, parents and teachers may need to engage in structured efforts to achieve successful student outcomes. Such efforts include the general types identified in Jeynes' (2012) analysis and other types (e.g., parent-supported community service) to the extent that they build trust among teachers and students and overcome the adverse effects of large school size (Bryk, et al., 2010).

Jeynes (2012) further suggested that effective parent involvement programs may require more than getting parents on the side of teachers and necessitate teachers' reinforcement of what parents are doing. As teachers get to know students' parents and communities they can use this knowledge to respond more effectively to students' learning needs.

There are many steps that staff members can take to validate and respond to students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, one school trying to adapt to a growing Hispanic student population hired a new bilingual vice principal to serve as an advocate for bilingual students' needs and to assume a highly visible role in the school. School leaders recognized that many school activities did not appeal to Hispanic students and expanded offerings to include activities that would attract Hispanic students and their families (e.g., an intramural Hispanic soccer team). They adopted an automated telephone message system that calls students' homes in English and Spanish. The school hired additional Hispanic

staff, and teachers of literacy classes who had excellent command of Spanish invested time in developing curriculum materials that addressed the students' cultural identity as well as learning needs (Davis, Oxley, & Fast, 2005).

Another strategy to engage parents is for schools to partner with reliable and reputable community members. This strategy is a valuable way to make essential information about students' achievement accessible to parents and prompt them to pursue more focused in-house conversations about how to address students' strengths and weakness:

> This strategy of changing or sharing the role of messenger helps to build trust and foster support. Trusted community members may be enlisted to assist educators in designing easy to understand data formats, assembling the target audience, and effectively delivering the data. These may include faith- and community-based organization leaders, civic organization officers, business leaders, and family members, such as parents or grandparents who are well known, respected, and active in their communities. (Baldwin & Wade, 2012, p. 4)

Summary

Secondary schools face a number of challenges when they attempt to foster parent involvement. Early and middle adolescents begin to operate more independently of parents, lessening the impact of family involvement in their learning. Secondary schools' larger size and higher enrollments also present barriers that render parent involvement less prevalent and less effective than in elementary schools. Despite that, several studies have shown that parent involvement can have a positive effect on student achievement in secondary schools. Additional evidence suggests that teacher teaming and student advisories can help improve parent involvement by building closer relationships with students and their families. A variety of staff-led programs can attract parents

and structure their engagement in ways that exert sizable effects on student achievement at the secondary school level. Programs that build familiarity and trust among members of the school community appear to be especially promising in achieving student success. PRR

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