



Five Barriers to Parent Involvement

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Engaged parents make excellent partners. They work with the schools to enhance student performance and promote their children's healthy development. So why does parent involvement decline when children reach the middle grades? According to both research and experience, five major barriers hinder parent involvement. Addressing these barriers and developing concrete solutions can help schools increase parent involvement.

Barrier One: Parents believe that their involvement is no longer needed.

In their desire for independence, many young adolescents start pushing their parents away. Consequently, parents are tempted to back off and stay out of their child's academic life.

However, despite their desire to be treated more like adults, most young adolescents still respect their parents' opinions and ideas, continue to seek their parents' affection, look to them to define values and set rules, and ask them for help in solving problems (Dorman 1987).

Schools can help parents navigate the rough waters of their children's adolescence by providing special opportunities for parents to learn about this age group and share their concerns and struggles with other parents. Kennedy Junior High helped parents out when a number of students behaved inappropriately at a party. The school ran workshops for students that focused on dealing with peer pressure and making responsible choices. The school also organized a special parent presentation with an expert to help them talk with their young adolescents about the social pressures they face (Salinas, Jansorn, and Nolan 2001).

Barrier Two: Parents feel they lack the knowledge and skills to help with their children's school work.

As their children's homework becomes more specialized, some parents may feel intimidated and stop helping to the same degree they did in elementary school.

Schools can help parents by providing them with information about the school program and by engaging them directly in their children's homework. Parents need not fully understand their youngster's schoolwork, however, to provide encouragement and support. Parents are also in a position to arrange for their child to get help from a teacher, tutor, peer, or other resource person. Such practices as interactive homework, academy workshops for parents, homework hotlines, and student-led parent/teacher conferences are also helpful in encouraging parent participation and taking away parents' anxiety over homework difficulty.

Barrier Three: Parents don't know what constitutes effective middle-level education.

Another barrier to parent involvement in the middle grades is lack of knowledge about effective middle-grades education (Jovenen *et al.* 2004). Most parents attended traditional junior high schools that functioned much like mini-high schools. A survey of more than 20,000 parents in 131 schools across the South concluded that many parents had little understanding of basic middle school concepts. (*see "Are Parents Familiar with Middle-Level Practices?" from this issue*)

By teaching parents about high-performing middle-level schools and the benefits to their children, principals gain valuable allies in their efforts to improve their schools. If parents have a working knowledge of middle-level practices, they may feel more comfortable talking to their children about academics at home and becoming more involved in the life of the school.

Schools inform parents through a parent newsletter that features a different middle-level practice each month or an orientation night that includes workshops on key concepts. One of the most effective ways to teach parents about middle-grade education is to engage them actively in the school community, inviting them to tour the school, meet the principal, and volunteer in meaningful activities. It is never too early to begin to orient parents to middle-level education. At Jefferson Middle School, principal Carol Stack attended parent-teacher meetings at each of her feeder elementary schools in the spring to answer questions and invite parents to tour her school (National Forum 2000).

Barrier Four: Parents sense cultural and power gaps between home and school.

As curriculum becomes more specialized, the power imbalance between educators and families generally increases. This is especially true when teachers and families come from different cultures, class backgrounds, and levels of educational attainment. If parents perceive the school as judgmental or condescending, they may feel even more intimidated and unwelcome. If parents cannot speak fluent English, they may be reluctant to come to school for fear of embarrassing themselves or their youngsters. Too many educators, however, misinterpret lack of parent involvement at school as a sign of lack of concern.

In order to reach all parents, it is important to communicate often and in many different ways. To facilitate communication, many schools have instituted call-in lines where parents can easily access information about their child's homework, attendance, and grades outside of regular business hours. Parent newsletters are an excellent way of communicating about basic logistical information and more complex issues. There are many additional ways to reach out to parents, including using a parent coordinator to personally connect with other parents; creating a special place for parent visitors and volunteers at the school; planning regular social events to make parents more comfortable; and offering opportunities for adult learning.

Barrier Five: Schools don't have the resources to facilitate family-school partnerships.

Middle schools can be inaccessible to parents for a number of structural, psychological, and socio-cultural reasons. For example, teachers in the middle grades are often organized into teams, and parents may not know whom to approach if they have questions or concerns. What's worse, research suggests that middle-grade schools contribute to the problem by providing fewer workshops and courses, suggestions for home learning activities, child care for school events, and other support for parents than elementary schools (Juvonon *et. al* 2004).

Principals need to set aside resources and/or raise funds to host events and pay for the necessary support to make them truly accessible. As much as possible, schools should provide transportation, childcare, meals, and translation services at school functions. Decreasing obstacles such as these will allow more parents to participate, especially those who are traditionally unable to attend school events.

Dedicating time and resources for quality professional development regarding parent involvement is also a good investment. While teachers are often asked to carry out much of the school's outreach to families, few teacher preparation programs require teachers to take courses on parent involvement.

Middle schools need parents now more than ever to help them reach their students. By understanding what keeps parents away from middle schools, principals can develop programs that address these specific barriers and help middle schools succeed.

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