A Comprehensive Framework

This chapter includes two summaries of research and practical approaches that will help school, district, and state leaders develop and sustain excellent programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

*Reading 1.1: School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share* by Joyce L. Epstein. The first article summarizes the theory of overlapping spheres of influence to explain the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for children’s learning and development. It also charts the research-based framework of six types of involvement, the challenges each type poses, and the expected results of well-designed and well-implemented practices.

This article outlines important structures and processes to develop effective partnership programs. The workshops, tools, and guidelines in the rest of the *Handbook* have been designed to help schools implement these strategies. For example, one key structure is an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) of educators, parents, and others who plan, implement, evaluate, and improve school programs of partnership. Other sections of the *Handbook* include the tools needed to help elementary, middle, and high schools organize effective ATPs and to conduct active, goal-oriented partnership programs.
Reading 1.2: Community Involvement in School Improvement: The Little Extra That Makes a Big Difference by Mavis G. Sanders. The second article summarizes research on school-community linkages in comprehensive programs of school, family, and community partnerships. In addition to families, businesses, organizations, groups, and individuals in the community offer many resources and opportunities to improve schools, strengthen families, and increase student success.

This article provides examples of student-, family-, school-, and community-centered activities. Four factors have been found to support school-community partnerships: high commitment to learning, principal support, a welcoming climate, and two-way communication between partners. The article also emphasizes the importance of reflection and evaluation for sustaining effective community partnerships.

The two articles in Chapter 1 provide background information, research, and practical strategies to help you understand the big picture of positive school, family, and community partnerships.
The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children’s education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students.

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. Partnerships can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life. When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work.

What do successful partnership programs look like? How can practices be effectively designed and implemented? What are the results of better communications, interactions, and exchanges across these three important contexts? These questions have challenged research and practice, creating an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into school, family, and community partnerships with “caring” as a core concept.

The field has been strengthened by supporting federal, state, and local policies. In the 1990s, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act set partnerships as a voluntary national goal for all schools. Title I specifies and mandates programs and practices of partnership for schools to qualify for or maintain funding. Many states and districts have developed or are preparing policies to guide schools in creating more systematic connections with families and communities. These policies reflect research results and the prior successes of leading educators who have shown that these goals are attainable.

Underlying these policies and programs is a theory of how social organizations connect; a framework of the basic components of school, family,
and community partnerships for children’s learning; a growing literature on the positive and negative results of these connections for students, families, and schools; and an understanding of how to organize good programs. In this chapter, I summarize the theory, framework, and guidelines from our research that should help elementary, middle, and high schools and education leaders take similar steps toward successful partnerships.

**Overlapping Spheres of Influence: Understanding the Theory**

Schools make choices. They might conduct only a few communications and interactions with families and communities, keeping the three spheres of influence that directly affect student learning and development relatively separate. Or they might conduct many high-quality communications and interactions designed to bring all three spheres of influence closer together. With frequent interactions among schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school.

The *external* model of overlapping spheres of influence recognizes that the three major contexts in which students learn and grow—the family, the school, and the community—may be drawn together or pushed apart. In this model, there are some practices that schools, families, and communities conduct separately and some that they conduct jointly to influence children’s learning and development. The *internal* model of the interaction of the three spheres of influence shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community. These social relationships may be enacted and studied at an *institutional* level (e.g., when a school invites all families to an event or sends the same communications to all families) and at an *individual* level (e.g., when a parent and a teacher meet in conference or talk by phone). Connections between educators or parents and community groups, agencies, and services can also be represented and studied within the model (Epstein, 1987, 1992, 1994).

The model of school, family, and community partnerships locates the student at the center. The inarguable fact is that students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school. School, family, and community partnerships cannot simply produce successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes. The assumption is that if children feel cared for and are encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best to learn to read, write, calculate, and learn other skills and talents and to remain in school.

Interestingly and somewhat ironically, studies indicate that students are also crucial for the success of school, family, and community partner-
ships. Students are often their parents’ main source of information about school. In strong partnership programs, teachers help students understand and conduct both traditional communications with families (e.g., delivering memos or report cards) and new communications (e.g., interacting with family members about homework or participating in parent-teacher-student conferences). As we gain more information about the role of students in partnerships, we are developing a more complete understanding of how schools, families, and communities must work with students to increase their chances for success.

**How the Theory Works in Practice**

In some schools there are still educators who say, “If the family would just do its job, we could do our job.” And there are still families who say, “I raised this child; now it is your job to educate her.” These words embody a view of separate spheres of influence. Other educators say, “I cannot do my job without the help of my students’ families and the support of this community.” And some parents say, “I really need to know what is happening in school in order to help my child.” These phrases embody the theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

In a partnership, teachers and administrators create more family-like schools. A family-like school recognizes each child’s individuality and makes each child feel special and included. Family-like schools welcome all families, not just those that are easy to reach. In a partnership, parents create more school-like families. A school-like family recognizes that each child is also a student. Families reinforce the importance of school, homework, and activities that build student skills and feelings of success. Communities, including groups of parents working together, create school-like opportunities, events, and programs that reinforce, recognize, and reward students for good progress, creativity, contributions, and excellence. Communities also create family-like settings, services, and events to enable families to better support their children. Community-minded families and students help their neighborhoods and other families. The concept of a community school is reemerging. It refers to a place where programs and services for students, parents, and others are offered before, during, and after the regular school day.

Schools and communities talk about programs and services that are family-friendly—meaning that they take into account the needs and realities of family life, are feasible to conduct, and are equitable toward all families. When all these concepts combine, children experience learning communities or caring communities (Brandt, 1989; Epstein, 1995; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1995; Viadero, 1994).

All these terms are consistent with the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, but they are not abstract concepts. You will find them daily in conversations, news stories, and celebrations of many kinds. In a family-like school, a teacher might say, “I know when a student is having a bad
day and how to help him along.” A student might slip and call a teacher “mom” or “dad” and then laugh with a mixture of embarrassment and glee. In a school-like family, a parent might say, “I make sure my daughter knows that homework comes first.” A child might raise his hand to speak at the dinner table and then joke about acting as if he were still in school. When communities reach out to students and their families, youngsters might say, “This program really made my schoolwork make sense!” Parents or educators might comment, “This community really supports its schools.”

Once people hear about such concepts as family-like schools or school-like families, they remember positive examples of schools, teachers, and places in the community that were “like a family” to them. They may remember how a teacher paid individual attention to them, recognized their uniqueness, or praised them for real progress, just as a parent might. They might recall things at home that were “just like school” and supported their work as a student, or they might remember community activities that made them feel smart or good about themselves and their families. They will recall that parents, siblings, and other family members engaged in and enjoyed educational activities and took pride in the good schoolwork or homework that they did, just as a teacher might.

How Partnerships Work in Practice

These terms and examples are evidence of the potential for schools, families, and communities to create caring educational environments. It is possible to have a school that is excellent academically but ignores families. However, that school will build barriers between teachers, parents, and children that affect school life and learning. It is possible to have a school that is ineffective academically but involves families in many good ways. With its weak academic program, that school will shortchange students’ learning. Neither of these schools exemplifies a caring, educational environment that requires academic excellence, good communication, and productive interactions involving school, family, and community.

Some children succeed in school without much family involvement or despite family neglect or distress, particularly if the school has excellent academic and support programs. Teachers, relatives outside the immediate family, other families, and members of the community can provide important guidance and encouragement to these students. As support from school, family, and community accumulates, significantly more students feel secure and cared for, understand the goals of education, work to achieve their full potential, build positive attitudes and school behaviors, and stay in school. The shared interests and investments of schools, families, and communities create the conditions of caring that work to “overdetermine” the likelihood of student success (Boykin, 1994).

Any practice can be designed and implemented well or poorly. And even well-implemented partnership practices may not be useful to all fami-
ilies. In a caring school community, participants work continually to improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth or successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships withstand questions, conflicts, debates, and disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after differences have been resolved. Without this firm base, disagreements and problems about schools and students that are sure to arise will be harder to solve.

What Research Says

In surveys and field studies involving teachers, parents, and students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, some important patterns relating to partnerships have emerged.

- Partnerships tend to decline across the grades, unless schools and teachers work to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership at each grade level.

- Affluent communities currently have more positive family involvement, on average, unless schools and teachers in economically distressed communities work to build positive partnerships with their students’ families.

- Schools in more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having, unless they work at developing balanced partnership programs that also include contacts about the positive accomplishments of students.

- Single parents, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school, and fathers are less involved, on average, at the school building, unless the school organizes opportunities for families to volunteer at various times and in various places to support the school and their children.

Researchers have also drawn the following conclusions:

- Just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities so as to remain good partners in their children’s education.

- Just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive programs and are consequently fearful about trying. This creates a “rhetoric rut,” in which educators are stuck, expressing support for partnerships without taking any action.
Just about all students at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—want their families to be more knowledgeable partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in assisting communications between home and school. However, students need much better information and guidance than most now receive about how their schools view partnerships and about how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions.


The research results are important because they indicate that caring communities can be built intentionally; that they include families that might not become involved on their own; and that, by their own reports, just about all families, students, and teachers believe that partnerships are important for helping students succeed across the grades.

Good programs will look different at each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, and ages and grade levels of students and their families. However, there are some commonalities across successful programs at all grade levels. These include a recognition of the overlapping spheres of influence on student development; attention to various types of involvement that promote a variety of opportunities for schools, families, and communities to work together; and an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) to coordinate each school’s work and progress.

**Six Types of Involvement—Six Types of Caring**

A framework of six major types of involvement has evolved from many studies and from many years of work by educators and families in elementary, middle, and high schools. The framework (summarized in the accompanying tables) helps educators develop more comprehensive programs of school and family partnerships and also helps researchers locate their questions and results in ways that inform and improve practice (Epstein, 1992; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

Each type of involvement includes many different practices of partnership (see Table 1.1.1). Each type presents particular challenges that must be met to involve all families and needed redefinitions of some basic principles of involvement (see Table 1.1.2). Finally, each type is likely to lead to different results for students, parents, teaching practices, and school climates (see Table 1.1.3). Thus, schools have choices about which practices will
help achieve important goals. The tables provide examples of practices, challenges for successful implementation, redefinitions for up-to-date understanding, and results that have been documented and observed.

**Charting the Course**

The entries in the tables are illustrative. The sample practices displayed in Table 1.1.1 are only a few of hundreds that may be selected or designed for each type of involvement. Although all schools may use the framework of six types as a guide, each school must chart its own course in choosing practices to meet the needs of its families and students.

The challenges shown (Table 1.1.2) are also just a few of the many that relate to the examples. There are challenges—that is, problems—for every practice of partnerships, and they must be resolved in order to reach and engage all families in the best ways. Often, when one challenge has been met, a new one will emerge.

The redefinitions (also in Table 1.1.2) redirect old notions so that involvement is not viewed solely as or measured only by “bodies in the building.” As examples, the table calls for redefinitions of workshops, communication, volunteers, homework, decision making, and community. By redefining these familiar terms, it is possible for partnership programs to reach out in new ways to many more families.

The selected results (Table 1.1.3) should help correct the widespread misperception that any practice that involves families will raise children’s achievement test scores. Instead, in the short term, certain practices are more likely than others to influence students’ skills and scores, whereas other practices are more likely to affect attitudes and behaviors. Although students are the main focus of partnerships, the various types of involvement also promote various kinds of results for parents and teachers. For example, the expected results for parents include not only leadership in decision making, but also confidence about parenting, productive curriculum-related interactions with children, and many interactions with other parents and the school. The expected results for teachers include not only improved parent-teacher conferences or school-home communications, but also better understanding of families, new approaches to homework, and other connections with families and the community.

Most of the results noted in Table 1.1.3 have been measured in at least one research study and observed as schools conduct their work. The entries are listed in positive terms to indicate the results of well-designed and well-implemented practices. It should be fully understood, however, that results may be negative if poorly designed practices exclude families or create greater barriers to communication and exchange. Research still is needed on the results of specific practices of partnership in various schools, at various grade levels, and for diverse populations of students, families, and teachers. It will be important to confirm, extend, or correct the information on results listed in Table 1.1.3 if schools are to make purposeful choices among practices that foster various types of involvement.
## TABLE 1.1.1  Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership and Sample Practices

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<tr>
<th>Type 1</th>
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### Sample Practices

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Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level
- Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed
- Language translators assist families, as needed
- Workshops, videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting and child rearing for each age and grade level
- Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., GED, college credit, family literacy)
- Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services
- Home visits at transition points to preschool, elementary, middle, and high school; neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families

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Sample Practices
### TABLE 1.1.2 Challenges and Redefinitions for the Successful Design and Implementation of the Six Types of Involvement

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type 1 Parenting</th>
<th>Type 2 Communicating</th>
<th>Type 3 Volunteering</th>
<th>Type 4 Learning at Home</th>
<th>Type 5 Decision Making</th>
<th>Type 6 Collaborating With the Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide information to all families who want it or who need it, not just to the few who can attend workshops or meetings at the school building.</td>
<td>Review the readability, clarity, form, and frequency of all memos, notices, and other print and nonprint communications.</td>
<td>Recruit volunteers widely so that all families know that their time and talents are welcome.</td>
<td>Design and organize a regular schedule of interactive homework (e.g., weekly or bimonthly) that gives students responsibility for discussing important things they are learning and helps families stay aware of the content of their children’s coursework.</td>
<td>Include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the school.</td>
<td>Solve turf problems of responsibilities, funds, staff, and locations for collaborative activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable families to share information about culture, background, and children’s talents and needs.</td>
<td>Review the quality of major communications (e.g., the schedule, content, and structure of conferences; newsletters; report cards; and others).</td>
<td>Make flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable employed parents to participate.</td>
<td>Coordinate family-linked homework activities, if students have several teachers.</td>
<td>Offer training to enable leaders to serve as representatives of other families, with input from and return of information to all parents.</td>
<td>Inform families of community programs for students, such as mentoring, tutoring, and business partnerships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make sure that all information for families is clear, usable, and linked to children’s success in school.</td>
<td>Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home.</td>
<td>Organize volunteer work; provide training; match time and talent with school, teacher, and student needs; and recognize efforts so that participants are productive.</td>
<td>Involve families with their children in all important curriculum-related decisions.</td>
<td>Include students (along with parents) in decision-making groups.</td>
<td>Ensure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs or to obtain services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Workshop” to mean more than a meeting about a topic held at the school building at a particular time; “workshop” also may mean making information about a topic available in a variety of forms that can be viewed, heard, or read anywhere, anytime.</td>
<td>“Communications about school programs and student progress” to mean two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community.</td>
<td>“Volunteer” to mean anyone who supports school goals and children’s learning or development in any way, at any place, and at any time—not just during the school day and at the school building.</td>
<td>“Homework” to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life.</td>
<td>“Decision making” to mean a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not a power struggle between conflicting ideas.</td>
<td>“Community” to mean not only the neighborhoods where students’ homes and schools are located but also neighborhoods that influence student learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Help” at home to mean encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing—not “teaching” school subjects.</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Parent leader” to mean a real representative, with opportunities and support to hear from and communicate with other families.</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Parent leader” to mean a real representative, with opportunities and support to hear from and communicate with other families.</td>
<td>“Community” rated not only by low or high social or economic qualities, but also by strengths and talents to support students, families, and schools.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Redefinitions**

- “Community” means all who are interested in and affected by the quality of education, not just families with children in the schools.
### TABLE 1.1.3  
Expected Results for Students, Parents, and Teachers of the Six Types of Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Results for Students</th>
<th>Results for Parents</th>
<th>Results for Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 1: Parenting</strong></td>
<td>Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents</td>
<td>Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school</td>
<td>Understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 2: Communicating</strong></td>
<td>Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades</td>
<td>Understanding school programs and policies</td>
<td>Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 3: Volunteering</strong></td>
<td>Skill in communicating with adults</td>
<td>Increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers</td>
<td>Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 4: Learning at Home</strong></td>
<td>Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classroom work</td>
<td>Homework completion</td>
<td>Better design of homework assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 5: Decision Making</strong></td>
<td>Awareness of representation of families in school decisions</td>
<td>Understanding that student rights are protected</td>
<td>Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 6: Collaborating With the Community</strong></td>
<td>Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences</td>
<td>Awareness of careers and options for future education and work</td>
<td>Awareness of community resources to enrich curriculum and instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results for Students**  
- **Type 1: Parenting**  
  - Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents  
- **Type 2: Communicating**  
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- **Type 4: Learning at Home**  
  - Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classroom work  
- **Type 5: Decision Making**  
  - Awareness of representation of families in school decisions  
- **Type 6: Collaborating With the Community**  
  - Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences

**Results for Parents**  
- **Type 1: Parenting**  
  - Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school  
- **Type 2: Communicating**  
  - Understanding school programs and policies  
- **Type 3: Volunteering**  
  - Increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers  
- **Type 4: Learning at Home**  
  - Homework completion  
- **Type 5: Decision Making**  
  - Understanding that student rights are protected  
- **Type 6: Collaborating With the Community**  
  - Awareness of careers and options for future education and work

**Results for Teachers**  
- **Type 1: Parenting**  
  - Understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children  
- **Type 2: Communicating**  
  - Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly  
- **Type 3: Volunteering**  
  - Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school |
- **Type 4: Learning at Home**  
  - Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions  
- **Type 5: Decision Making**  
  - Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions  
- **Type 6: Collaborating With the Community**  
  - Awareness of community resources to enrich curriculum and instruction  

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**Expected Results for Students, Parents, and Teachers of the Six Types of Involvement**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Expected Results</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type 1: Parenting</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type 2: Communicating</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type 3: Volunteering</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type 4: Learning at Home</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type 5: Decision Making</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type 6: Collaborating With the Community</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Students</strong></td>
<td>Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents</td>
<td>Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades</td>
<td>Skill in communicating with adults</td>
<td>Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classroom work</td>
<td>Awareness of representation of families in school decisions</td>
<td>Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Parents</strong></td>
<td>Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school</td>
<td>Understanding school programs and policies</td>
<td>Increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers</td>
<td>Homework completion</td>
<td>Understanding that student rights are protected</td>
<td>Awareness of careers and options for future education and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Teachers</strong></td>
<td>Understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children</td>
<td>Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly</td>
<td>Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school</td>
<td>Better design of homework assignments</td>
<td>Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions</td>
<td>Awareness of community resources to enrich curriculum and instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 1.1.3 Expected Results for Students, Parents, and Teachers of the Six Types of Involvement**  

**Results for Students**  
- **Type 1: Parenting**  
  - Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents  
- **Type 2: Communicating**  
  - Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades  
- **Type 3: Volunteering**  
  - Skill in communicating with adults  
- **Type 4: Learning at Home**  
  - Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classroom work  
- **Type 5: Decision Making**  
  - Awareness of representation of families in school decisions  
- **Type 6: Collaborating With the Community**  
  - Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences

**Results for Parents**  
- **Type 1: Parenting**  
  - Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school  
- **Type 2: Communicating**  
  - Understanding school programs and policies  
- **Type 3: Volunteering**  
  - Increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers  
- **Type 4: Learning at Home**  
  - Homework completion  
- **Type 5: Decision Making**  
  - Understanding that student rights are protected  
- **Type 6: Collaborating With the Community**  
  - Awareness of careers and options for future education and work

**Results for Teachers**  
- **Type 1: Parenting**  
  - Understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children  
- **Type 2: Communicating**  
  - Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly  
- **Type 3: Volunteering**  
  - Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school |
- **Type 4: Learning at Home**  
  - Better design of homework assignments | Respect of family time | Recognition of equal helpfulness of single parent, dual income, and less formally educated families in motivating and reinforcing student learning | Satisfaction with family involvement and support | Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions | View of equal status of family representatives on committees and in leadership roles | Openness to and skill in using mentors, business partners, community volunteers, and others to assist students and augment teaching practice | Knowledgeable, helpful referrals of children and families to needed services |
The tables cannot show the connections that occur when one practice activates several types of involvement simultaneously. For example, volunteers may organize and conduct a food bank (Type 3) that allows parents to pay $15 for $30 worth of food for their families (Type 1). The food may be subsidized by community agencies (Type 6). The recipients might then serve as volunteers for the program or in the community, thereby perpetuating Type 3 and Type 6 activities. Or consider another example. An after-school homework club run by volunteers and the community recreation and parks department combines Type 3 and Type 6 practices. Yet it also serves as a Type 1 activity because the after-school program assists families with the supervision of their children. This practice may also alter the way homework interactions are conducted at home between students and parents (Type 4). These and other connections are interesting, and research is needed to understand the combined effects of such activities.

The tables also simplify the complex longitudinal influences that produce various results over time. For example, a series of events might play out as follows. The involvement of families with children in reading at home may lead students to give more attention to reading and to be more strongly motivated to read. This in turn may help students maintain or improve their daily reading skills and then their reading grades. With the accumulation over time of good classroom reading programs, continued home support, and increased skills and confidence in reading, students may significantly improve their reading achievement test scores. The time between reading aloud at home and increased reading test scores may vary greatly, depending on the quality and quantity of other reading activities in school and out.

Consider yet another example. Studies using longitudinal data and rigorous statistical controls on background and prior influences found important benefits for high school students’ attitudes, behaviors, and grades as a result of continuing several types of family involvement from middle school through high school (Lee, 1994; Simon, 2001). However, achievement test scores, stable by 12th grade, were not greatly affected by partnerships at the high school level. Longitudinal studies and practical experiences that are monitored over time are needed to increase our understanding of the complex patterns of results that can develop from various partnership activities (Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

The six types of involvement can guide the development of a balanced, comprehensive program of partnerships, including opportunities for family involvement at school and at home, with potentially important results for students, parents, and teachers. The results for students, parents, and teachers will depend on the particular types of involvement that are implemented, as well as on the quality of the implementation.
Action Teams for Partnerships

Who will work to create caring school communities that are based on the concepts of partnership? How will the necessary work on all six types of involvement get done? Although a principal or a teacher may be a leader in working with some families or with groups in the community, one person cannot create a lasting, comprehensive program that involves all families as their children progress through the grades.

From the hard work of many educators and families in many schools, we have learned that, along with clear policies and strong support from state and district leaders and from school principals, an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) in each school is an essential structure. The action team guides the development of a comprehensive program of partnerships, including all six types of involvement, and the integration of all family and community connections within a single, unified plan and program. The trials and errors and the efforts and insights of many schools across the country have helped identify five important steps that any school can take to develop more positive school, family, and community connections (Burch & Palanki, 1994; Burch, Palanki, & Davies, 1995; Connors & Epstein, 1994; Davies, 1991, 1993; Davies, Palanki, & Burch, 1993; Epstein & Connors, 1994; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein, Herrick, & Coates, 1996; Johnson, 1994).

Step 1: Create an Action Team

A team approach is an appropriate way to build school, family, and community partnerships. The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) can be the “action arm” of a School Council, if one exists. The action team takes responsibility for assessing present practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, evaluating next steps, and continuing to improve and coordinate practices for all six types of involvement. Although the members of the action team lead these activities, they are assisted by other teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members.

The action team should include at least three teachers from different grade levels, three parents with children in different grade levels, and one administrator. Teams may also include at least one member from the community at large and, at the high school level, at least two students from different grade levels. Others who are central to the school’s work with families also may be included as members, such as a cafeteria worker, a school social worker, a counselor, or a school psychologist. Such diverse membership ensures that partnership activities will take into account the various needs, interests, and talents of teachers, parents, the school, and students.

The leader of the action team may be any member who has the respect of the other members, as well as good communication skills and an understanding of the partnership approach. The leader or at least one member
of the action team should also serve on the School Council, School Improvement Team, or other such body, if one exists.

In addition to group planning, members of the action team elect (or are assigned to act as) the chair or co-chair of one of six subcommittees for each type of involvement. Alternatively, members can serve as chair or co-chair of three to five committees that focus on family and community involvement for school improvement goals (e.g., improving reading, math, behavior, partnerships). A team with at least six members (and perhaps as many as 12) ensures that responsibilities for leadership can be delegated so that one person is not overburdened and so that the work of the action team will continue even if members move or change schools or positions. Members may serve renewable terms of two to three years, with the replacement of any who leave in the interim. Other thoughtful variations in assignments and activities may be created by small or large schools using this process.

In the first phase of our work in 1987, projects were led by “project directors” (usually teachers) and were focused on one type of involvement at a time. Some schools succeeded in developing good partnerships over several years, but others were thwarted if the project director moved, if the principal changed, or if the project grew larger than one person could handle. Other schools took a team approach to work on many types of involvement simultaneously. Their efforts demonstrated how to structure the program for the next set of schools in our work. Starting in 1990, this second set of schools tested and improved on the structure and work of action teams. Now, all elementary, middle, and high schools in our research and development projects, and in other states and districts that are applying this work, are given assistance in taking the action team approach.

**Step 2: Obtain Funds and Other Support**

A modest budget is needed to guide and support the work and expenses of each school’s action team. Funds for state coordinators to assist districts and schools and funds for district coordinators or facilitators to help each school may come from a number of sources. These include federal, state, and local programs that mandate, request, or support family involvement, such as Title I and other federal and state funding programs. In addition to paying the state and district coordinators, funds from these sources may be applied in creative ways to support staff development in the area of school, family, and community partnerships; to pay for lead teachers at each school to serve as ATP chairs or co-chairs; to set up demonstration programs; and for other partnership expenses. In addition, local school-business partnerships, school discretionary funds, and separate fundraising efforts targeted to the schools’ partnership programs have been used to support the work of ATPs. At the very least, a school’s action team requires a small stipend (at least $1,000 per year) for time and materials needed by each subcommittee to plan, implement, and
revise practices of partnership that include all six types of involvement and that promote school improvement goals.

The action team must also be given sufficient time and social support to do its work. This requires explicit support from the principal and district leaders to allow time for team members to meet, plan, and conduct the activities that are selected for each type of involvement. Time during the summer is also valuable—and may be essential—for planning new approaches that will start in the new school year.

**Step 3: Identify Starting Points**

Most schools have some teachers who conduct some practices of partnership with some families some of the time. How can good practices be organized and extended so that they may be used by all teachers, at all grade levels, with all families? The action team works to improve and systematize the typically haphazard patterns of involvement. It starts by collecting information about the school’s current practices of partnership, along with the views, experiences, and wishes of teachers, parents, administrators, and students. See “Starting Points” (pp. 208-211) and “Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnerships” (pp. 330-335) for two ways of assessing the nature and extent of present practices.

Assessments of starting points may be made in a variety of other ways, depending on available resources, time, and talents. For example, the action team might use formal questionnaires (Epstein & Salinas, 1993) or telephone interviews to survey teachers, administrators, parents, and students (if resources exist to process, analyze, and report survey data). Or the action team might organize a panel of teachers, parents, and students to speak at a meeting of the parent-teacher organization or at some other school meeting as a way of initiating discussion about the goals and desired activities for partnership. Structured discussions may be conducted through a series of principal’s breakfasts for representative groups of teachers, parents, students, and others; random sample phone calls may also be used to collect reactions and ideas; or formal focus groups may be convened to gather ideas about school, family, and community partnerships at the school.

What questions should be addressed? Regardless of how the information is gathered, the following areas must be covered in any information gathering:

- **Present strengths.** Which practices of school, family, and community partnerships are now working well for the school as a whole? For individual grade levels? For which types of involvement?

- **Needed changes.** Ideally, how do we want school, family, and community partnerships to work at this school three years from now? Which present practices should continue, and which should change? To reach school goals, what new practices are needed for each of the major types of involvement?
- **Expectations.** What do teachers expect of families? What do families expect of teachers and other school personnel? What do students expect their families to do to help them negotiate school life? What do students expect their teachers to do to keep their families informed and involved?

- **Sense of community.** Which families are we now reaching, and which are we not yet reaching? Who are the hard-to-reach families? What might be done to communicate with and engage these families in their children’s education? Are current partnership practices coordinated to include all families as a school community? Or are families whose children receive special services (e.g., Title I, special education, bilingual education) separated from other families?

- **Links to goals.** How are students faring on such measures of academic achievement as report card grades, on measures of attitudes and attendance, and on other indicators of success? How might family and community connections assist the school in helping more students reach higher goals and achieve greater success? Which practices of school, family, and community partnerships would directly connect to particular goals?

**Step 4: Develop a Three-Year Outline and a One-Year Action Plan**

From the ideas and goals for partnerships collected from teachers, parents, and students, the action team can develop a Three-Year Outline of the specific steps that will help the school progress from its starting point on each type of involvement to where it wants to be in three years. This plan outlines how each subcommittee will work over three years to make important, incremental advances to reach more families each year on each type of involvement. The Three-Year Outline also shows how all school, family, and community connections will be integrated into one coherent program of partnerships linked to school improvement goals.

In addition to the Three-Year Outline of goals for family and community involvement, a detailed One-Year Action Plan should be developed every year. It should include the specific activities that will be implemented, improved, or maintained for each type of involvement; a timeline of monthly actions needed for each activity; identification of the subcommittee chair who will be responsible either for each type of involvement or for involvement to promote specific goals for student success; identification of the teachers, parents, students, or others (not necessarily action team members) who will assist with the implementation of each activity; indicators of how the implementation and results of each major activity will be assessed; and other details of importance to the action team.

The Three-Year Outline and detailed One-Year Action Plan are shared with the school council and/or parent organization, with all teachers, and with the parents and students. Even if the action team makes only one
good step forward each year on each of the six types of involvement, it will take 18 steps forward over three years to develop a more comprehensive, coordinated, and goal-oriented program of school, family, and community partnerships.

In short, based on the input from the parents, teachers, students, and others on the school’s starting points and desired partnerships, the action team will address these issues:

- **Details.** What will be done each year, for three years, to implement a program of all six types of involvement? What, specifically, will be accomplished in the first year on each type of involvement? For which goals for student success?

- **Responsibilities.** Who will be responsible for developing and implementing practices of partnership for each type of involvement? Will staff development be needed? How will teachers, administrators, parents, and students be supported and recognized for their work?

- **Costs.** What costs are associated with the improvement and maintenance of the planned activities? What sources will provide the needed funds? Will small grants or other special budgets be needed?

- **Evaluation.** How well have the practices been implemented and what are the effects on students, teachers, and families? What indicators will we use that are closely linked to the practices implemented to determine their effects?

**Step 5: Continue Planning and Working**

The action team should schedule an annual presentation and celebration of progress at the school so that all teachers, families, and students will know about the work that has been done each year to build partnerships. Or the district coordinator for school, family, and community partnerships might arrange an annual conference for all schools in the district. At the annual school or district meeting, the action team presents and displays its accomplishments on one or all six types of involvement and shares its best practices with other educators and parents. Problems are discussed and ideas are shared about improvements, additions, and continuations for the next year.

Each year, the action team updates the school’s Three-Year Outline and develops a detailed One-Year Action Plan for the coming year’s work. It is important for educators, families, students, and the community at large to be aware of annual progress, new plans, and how they can help.

In short, the action team addresses the following questions. How can it ensure that the program of school, family, and community partnerships will continue to improve its structure, processes, and practices to increase the number of families who are partners with the school in their children’s education? What opportunities will teachers, parents, and students have
to share information on successful practices and to strengthen and maintain their efforts?

**Characteristics of Successful Programs**

As schools have implemented partnership programs, their experience has helped to identify some important properties of successful partnerships.

**Incremental Progress**

Progress in partnerships is incremental, including more families each year in ways that benefit more students. Like reading or math programs, assessment programs, sports programs, or other school investments, partnership programs take time to develop, must be periodically reviewed, and should be continuously improved. Schools in our projects have shown that three years is the minimum time needed for an action team to complete a number of activities on each type of involvement and to establish its work as a productive and permanent structure in a school.

The development of a partnership program is a process, not a single event. All teachers, families, students, and community groups do not engage in all activities on all types of involvement all at once. Not all activities implemented will succeed with all families. But with good planning, thoughtful implementation, well-designed activities, and pointed improvements, more and more families and teachers can learn to work with one another on behalf of the children whose interests they share. Similarly, not all students instantly improve their attitudes or achievements when their families become involved in their education. After all, student learning depends mainly on good curricula and instruction and on the work completed by students. However, with a well-implemented program of partnerships, more students will receive support from their families, and more will be motivated to work harder.

**Connection to Curricular and Instructional Reform**

A program of school, family, and community partnerships that focuses on children’s learning and development is an important component of curricular and instructional reform. Aspects of partnerships that aim to help more students succeed in school can be supported by federal, state, and local funds targeted for curricular and instructional reform. Helping families understand, monitor, and interact with students on homework, for example, can be a clear and important extension of classroom instruction, as can volunteer programs that bolster and broaden student skills, talents, and interests. Improving the content and conduct of parent-teacher-student conferences and goal-setting activities can be an important step in curricular reform; family support and family understanding of child and adolescent development and school curricula are necessary elements to assist students as learners.
The connection of partnerships to curriculum and instruction in schools and the location of leadership for these partnership programs in departments of curriculum and instruction in districts are important changes that move partnerships from being peripheral public relations activities about parents to being central programs about student learning and development.

**Redefining Staff Development**

The action team approach to partnerships guides the work of educators by restructuring staff development to mean colleagues working together and with parents to develop, implement, evaluate, and continue to improve practices of partnership. This is less a dose of inservice education than it is an active form of developing staff talents and capacities. The teachers, administrators, and others on the action team become the experts on this topic for their school. Their work in this area can be supported by various federal, state, and local funding programs as a clear investment in staff development for overall school reform. Indeed, the action team approach as outlined can be applied to any or all important topics on a school improvement agenda. It need not be restricted to the pursuit of successful partnerships.

It is important to note that the development of partnership programs would be easier if educators came to their schools prepared to work productively with families and communities. Courses or classes are needed in preservice teacher education and in advanced degree programs for teachers and administrators to help them define their professional work in terms of partnerships. Today, most educators enter schools without an understanding of family backgrounds, concepts of caring, the framework of partnerships, or the other basics that are discussed here. Thus, most principals and district leaders are not prepared to guide and lead their staffs in developing strong school and classroom practices that inform and involve families. Most teachers and administrators also are unprepared to understand, design, implement, or evaluate good practices of partnership with the families of their students. Colleges and universities that prepare educators and others who work with children and families should identify where in their curricula the theory, research, policy, and practical ideas about partnerships are presented or where in their programs these can be added (Ammon, 1990; Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Epstein, 2001; Hinz, Clark, & Nathan, 1992; see also Booth & Dunn, 1996; Christenson & Conoley, 1992; Fagnano & Werber, 1994; Fruchter, Galletta, & White, 1992; Rioux & Berla, 1993; Ryan, Adams, Gullotta, Weissberg, & Hampton, 1995; Swap, 1993).

Even with improved preservice and advanced coursework, however, each school’s Action Team for Partnerships will have to tailor its selection of practices to the needs and goals of the teachers, families, and students in the school. The framework and guidelines offered in this chapter can be used by thoughtful educators to organize this work, school by school.
The Core of Caring

One school in Baltimore named its partnership program the I Care Program. It developed an I Care Parent Club that fostered fellowship and leadership of families, the I Care Newsletter, and many other events and activities. Other schools also gave catchy, positive names to their programs to indicate to families, students, teachers, and everyone else in the school community that important relationships and exchanges must be developed in order to assist students.

Interestingly, synonyms for “caring” match the six types of involvement:

Type 1—Parenting: supporting, nurturing, and child rearing
Type 2—Communicating: relating, reviewing, and overseeing
Type 3—Volunteering: supervising and fostering
Type 4—Learning at Home: managing, recognizing, and rewarding
Type 5—Decision Making: contributing, considering, and judging
Type 6—Collaborating With the Community: sharing and giving

Underlying all six types of involvement are two defining synonyms of caring: trusting and respecting. Of course, the varied meanings are interconnected, but it is striking that language permits us to call forth various elements of caring associated with activities for the six types of involvement. If all six types of involvement are operating well in a school’s program of partnerships, then all these caring behaviors could be activated to assist children’s learning and development.

Despite real progress in many states, districts, and schools over the past few years, there still are too many schools in which educators do not understand the families of their students, in which families do not understand their children’s schools, and in which communities do not understand or assist the schools, families, or students. There are still too many states and districts without the policies, departments, leadership, staff, and fiscal support needed to help all schools develop good programs of partnership. Yet relatively small financial investments that support and assist the work of action teams could yield significant returns for all schools, teachers, families, and students. Educators who have led the way with trials, errors, and successes provide evidence that any state, district, or school can create similar programs (Lloyd, 1996; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1994).

Schools have choices. There are two common approaches to involving families in schools and in their children’s education. One approach emphasizes conflict and views the school as a battleground. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment guarantee power struggles and disharmony. The other approach emphasizes partnership and views the school as a homeland. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment invite power sharing and mutual respect, and allow
energies to be directed toward activities that foster student learning and development. Even when conflicts rage, however, peace must be restored sooner or later, and the partners in children’s education must work together.

**Next Steps: Strengthening Partnerships**

Collaborative work and thoughtful give-and-take among researchers, policy leaders, educators, and parents are responsible for the progress that has been made over the past decade in understanding and developing school, family, and community partnerships. Similar collaborations will be important for future progress in this and other areas of school reform. To promote these approaches, the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University was established. The National Network provides state, district, and other leaders with research-based tools and guidelines to help their elementary, middle, and high schools plan, implement, and maintain comprehensive programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

Partnership schools, districts, and states put the recommendations of this chapter into practice in ways that are appropriate to their locations. Implementation includes applying the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the framework of six types of involvement, and the action team approach. Researchers and staff at Johns Hopkins University disseminate information, guidelines, and newsletters; offer e-mail and website assistance; and hold annual workshops to help state and district coordinators and school leaders learn new strategies and share successful ideas. Activities for leaders at the state and district levels are shared, along with school-level programs and successful partnership practices. With a strong research base, the National Network of Partnership Schools guides state and district leaders, educators, and parents to work together to establish and strengthen programs of family and community involvement that contribute to student success.

**Note**

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1.2 Community Involvement in School Improvement: The Little Extra That Makes a Big Difference

Mavis G. Sanders

Rationale for School-Community Partnerships

Families and schools traditionally have been viewed as the institutions with the greatest effect on the development of children. Communities, however, have received increasing attention for their role in socializing youth and ensuring students’ success in a variety of societal domains. Epstein’s (1987, 1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, for example, identifies schools, families, and communities as major institutions that socialize and educate children. A central principle of the theory is that certain goals, such as student academic success, are of interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support.

Similarly, Heath and McLaughlin (1987, p. 579) argued that community involvement is important because “the problems of educational achievement and academic success demand resources beyond the scope of the school and of most families.” They identified changing family demographics, demands of the professional workplace, and growing diversity among students as some of the reasons that schools and families alone cannot provide sufficient resources to ensure that all children receive the experiences and support needed to succeed in the larger society.

When describing the importance of community involvement in educational reform, Shore (1994) focused on the mounting responsibilities placed on schools by a nation whose student population is increasingly placed “at risk.” She stated, “Too many schools and school systems are failing to carry out their basic educational mission. Many of them—in urban and rural settings—are overwhelmed by the social and emotional needs of children who are growing up in poverty” (p. 2). She contended that schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students and that these resources, both human and material, are housed in students’ communities.

Other authors also have emphasized the importance of schools, families, and communities working together to promote students’ success. Toffler and Toffler (1995) asserted that school-family-community collaborations are one way to provide a caring component to today’s often large, assembly-line schools. Benson (1997), Crowson and Boyd (1993), Dryfoos (1998), and others have suggested that schools must reach out into the
community in an attempt to strengthen the social capital available to children. Similarly, Waddock (1995) agreed that schools alone cannot provide children and youth with the resources they need to be competent citizens in the 21st century. She explained that good schools are part of a total system of interactive forces, individuals, institutions, goals, and expectations that are linked together inextricably.

School-community partnerships, then, can be defined as the connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to directly or indirectly promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development (Epstein, 1995). Within this definition of school-community partnerships, community is not constrained by the geographic boundaries of neighborhoods, but refers more to the “social interactions that can occur within or transcend local boundaries” (Nettles, 1991b, p. 380).

**Forms of School-Community Partnerships**

School-community partnerships can take a variety of forms, as shown in Table 1.2.1. The most common linkages are partnerships with businesses, which can differ significantly in focus, scope, and content. Other school-community linkages involve universities and educational institutions, government and military agencies, health care organizations, faith-based organizations, national service and volunteer organizations, senior citizen organizations, cultural and recreational institutions, other community-based organizations, and community volunteers that can provide resources and social support to youth and schools.

Partnership activities also may have multiple focuses. Activities may be student-, family-, school-, or community-centered, as shown in Table 1.2.2. Student-centered activities include those that provide direct services or goods to students, for example, mentoring and tutoring programs, contextual learning, and job-shadowing opportunities, as well as the provision of awards, incentives, and scholarships to students. Family-centered activities are those that have parents or entire families as their primary focus. This category includes activities such as parenting workshops, GED and other adult education classes, parent-family incentives and awards, family counseling, and family fun and learning nights. School-centered activities are those that benefit the school as a whole, such as beautification projects or the donation of school equipment and materials, or activities that benefit the faculty, such as staff development and classroom assistance. Community-centered activities have as their primary focus the community and its citizens, for example, charitable outreach, art and science exhibits, and community revitalization and beautification projects (Sanders, 2001).
TABLE 1.2.1  Examples of Community Partners

**Businesses/Corporations:** Local businesses, national corporations, and franchises

**Universities and Educational Institutions:** Colleges and universities, high schools, and other educational institutions

**Health Care Organizations:** Hospitals, health care centers, mental health facilities, health departments, health foundations, and associations

**Government and Military Agencies:** Fire departments, police departments, chambers of commerce, city councils, and other local and state government agencies and departments

**National Service and Volunteer Organizations:** Rotary Club, Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, VISTA, Concerned Black Men, Inc., Shriners, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, United Way, Americorp, Urban League

**Faith-Based Organizations:** Churches, mosques, synagogues, other religious organizations, and charities

**Senior Citizens Organizations:** Nursing homes and senior volunteer and service organizations

**Cultural and Recreational Institutions:** Zoos, museums, libraries, and recreational centers

**Other Community Organizations:** Fraternities, sororities, foundations, neighborhood associations, and political, alumni, and local service organizations

**Community Individuals:** Individual volunteers from the surrounding school community

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TABLE 1.2.2  Focuses of Partnership Activities and Examples of School-Community Partnership Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student Centered</strong></th>
<th><strong>Family Centered</strong></th>
<th><strong>School Centered</strong></th>
<th><strong>Community Centered</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student awards, student incentives, scholarships, student trips, tutors, mentors, job shadowing, and other services and products for students</td>
<td>Parent workshops, family fun-nights, GED and other adult education classes, parent incentives and rewards, counseling, and other forms of assistance to parents</td>
<td>Equipment and materials, beautification and repair, teacher incentives and awards, funds for school events and programs, office and classroom assistance, and other school improvements</td>
<td>Community beautification, student exhibits and performances, charity, and other outreach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Role of Community Involvement in Partnership Programs

Community involvement activities are an important part of a school’s comprehensive partnership program, which includes six major types of involvement: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995).

Some community activities can support or strengthen the other types of involvement. For example, community partners might provide meeting space for parenting workshops (Type 1), interpreters for school meetings with families (Type 2), volunteer tutors (Type 3), information on books that families can read to and with their children at home (Type 4), and meals to increase parents’ attendance at school meetings (Type 5).

Community collaborations also can be developed to enhance schools’ curricula, identify and disseminate information about community resources, and further schools’ community outreach (Type 6). One school in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), for example, worked with its state department of environmental protection to help science faculty integrate local resources and environmental concerns into the science curriculum. Another NNPS school developed a community resource handbook for its families. Other schools partnered with a local library to hold a community art exhibit of students’ work and with local hospitals, dentists, nurses, and dieticians to develop a low-cost health care site to provide preventive and maintenance health care for students, families, and community members. These and other reported activities show how important community partnerships can be for students, schools, families, and communities (Sanders, 2001).

Outcomes of School-Community Partnerships

Community partnership activities can lead to measurable outcomes for students and schools. Mentoring programs have been found to have significant and positive effects on students’ grades, school attendance, and exposure to career opportunities (McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Yonezawa, Thornton, & Stringfield, 1998). School-community collaborations focused on academic subjects have been shown to enhance students’ attitudes toward these subjects, as well as the attitudes of teachers and parents (Beyerbach, Weber, Swift, & Gooding, 1996). Nettles (1991a) also reported positive effects of school-community collaborations with an instructional component on students’ grades, attendance, and school persistence.

Documented benefits of school-linked service integration initiatives include behavioral and academic gains for students who receive intensive
services (Newman, 1995; Wagner, 1995). Research also has shown improved student attendance, immunization rates, and student conduct at schools providing coordinated services (Amato, 1996). Finally, partnerships with businesses and other community organizations have provided schools with needed equipment, materials, and technical assistance and support for student instruction (Longoria, 1998; Mickelson, 1999; Sanders & Harvey, in press). School-community partnerships, then, are an important element in schools’ programs of improvement and reform and an important part of a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships.

Factors That Promote Community Involvement

Case study research identified four factors that support a school’s ability to develop and maintain meaningful community partnerships (Sanders & Harvey, in press). These factors are (a) high commitment to learning, (b) principal support for community involvement, (c) a welcoming school climate, and (d) two-way communication with potential community partners about their level and kind of involvement.

High Commitment to Learning

Interviews with community partners representing faith-based organizations, nonprofit foundations, health care organizations, businesses, educational institutions, and senior citizen organizations revealed a common desire to support students’ academic achievement. Community partners wanted to be a part of an effective school that was visibly focused on students’ learning and to engage in activities that had demonstrable effects on student outcomes. Community partners identified schools that were well organized, student centered, family friendly, and academically rigorous as the most desirable partners for collaboration.

Principal Support for Community Involvement

Community partners also stated that a principal’s support for community involvement was critical for successful collaboration. A school principal who not only allowed, but also created opportunities for community involvement was viewed as a necessary if not sufficient requirement for effective collaboration. Indeed, principal support largely explained the community partners’ continued engagement in the case school. One community partner stated, “I don’t want to pinpoint any schools, but I’ve gone into some and have been totally turned off by the administration. If I’m turned off, what’s the interest in helping you . . . ?”
A Welcoming School Climate

Similarly, community partners expressed the importance of a school that is receptive to and appreciative of community involvement. Community partners stated that being greeted warmly at the school by staff, faculty, and students strengthened their commitment to the partnership and increased the enjoyment of their involvement. Although most community partners in the study agreed that formal acknowledgment was not necessary, they valued the school’s expressions of gratitude. Several of the community partners reported that they received thank-you letters and notes from students, were thanked for their assistance over the intercom system, were stopped on the street by students and their parents and thanked for their service, were acknowledged in the school newsletter, and received certificates of appreciation at the school’s annual awards ceremony.

Two-Way Communication

Community partners and school administrators interviewed for the case study also emphasized the importance of honest, two-way communication between schools and potential community partners so that each party is fully aware of the intent and expectations of the other. The school principal stated that initial honest and up-front conversations prevented both parties from “wasting each other’s time.” She used a simple measure to determine if a community partnership was “right” for the school. Her measure was whether the partnership would be positive for students.

These four factors that promote community partnerships were linked to the principal’s actions as school leader. She created fertile ground in which school-community partnerships flourished by maintaining a school environment where teachers and parents focus on students’ academic success, modeling for faculty and staff a genuine openness to community involvement and by establishing an expectation for partnerships, actively networking with individuals in the community to inform them of her school’s needs and goals, and supporting others in developing leadership in the area of family and community involvement.

Factors That Improve School-Community Partnerships

In theory, then, community involvement in schools is an opportunity for a more democratic and participatory approach to school functioning that can revitalize communities, enhance students’ achievement and well-being, assist families, and build stronger schools. In reality, however, community involvement is too often a reminder of the difficulty of
implementing inclusive, collaborative strategies for school improvement. Evaluative studies of different forms of school-community collaboration underscore key challenges that, if addressed, may help to move the reality of community involvement in schools closer to theory (Sanders, 2002).

**Professional Preparation**

One issue that is highlighted in the community involvement literature is the importance of professional preparation for partnerships. Such preparation is especially important for educators at the state, district, and school levels, who arguably should be in the forefront of educational improvement. Ideally, professional preparation for collaboration would begin during the preservice stage of teacher and administrator training. It would include structured opportunities for future educators to develop the skills and capacity to work collaboratively with other educators and service providers and with adults in students’ families and communities. It would be a theme present throughout educators’ professional training so that they enter schools, classrooms, offices, and departments of education with a clear understanding of the rewards and benefits of collaboration and a working knowledge of strategies for successful collaboration. Collaboration also would be an ongoing theme in the inservice professional development of educators so that the day-to-day reality of teaching and managing schools and district and state departments and offices would not cloud educators’ view of themselves as partners in the development of children and youth.

Schools that have successfully built a sense of community within their walls—that is, schools that are collaborative, communicative, and inclusive—appear to have the greatest success in developing strong connections with the community outside their walls (Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Merz & Furman, 1997; Sanders & Harvey, in press). This is no coincidence. When the capacity to collaborate becomes a part of educators’ professional identity and knowledge base, community involvement becomes “business as usual” (Stroble & Luka, 1999). In complex school-community collaborations, challenges around turf, funding, roles, and responsibilities will surely arise (Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Jehl & Kirst, 1992; Mawhinney, 1994). However, educators who have been prepared to collaborate will have the resources and skills to minimize and resolve these challenges (Epstein, 2001; Welch, 1998).

**Partnership Selection**

Professional development also will assist educators in selecting appropriate community partners and partnership opportunities. There are many community partners and opportunities available to schools. School districts and state departments of education also have choices of community partnership opportunities. The selection of partners should be based on shared goals and a common commitment to the basic tenets of successful
collaboration—open communication, joint decision making, and respect for all stakeholders. Therefore, before a partnership begins, representatives from the partnering groups or organizations should meet to discuss the goals of the potential connection and how their work together will be organized.

When selecting community partners and partnership opportunities, educators also should consider the intensity and duration of collaborations. Community involvement in schools can range from very simple, short-term connections to very complex, long-term arrangements. For example, a school, a local health care agency, and community leaders may partner to hold a community health fair on the school grounds. This short-term partnership would require only basic collaborative skills, knowledge, and expertise. These same partners, however, may collaborate to open a school-based preventative health care clinic for students, families, and community members. This complex, long-term partnership would require more planning time to address issues related to funding, operational hours, program development and services, building security and maintenance, and other responsibilities and issues. Consequently, it also would require more sophisticated organizational processes and structures to ensure its successful implementation.

A school with little experience in community collaboration might elect to engage in some simple connections before venturing into more complex collaborations such as school-linked service integration initiatives. This purposeful, measured approach to the selection of community partners and community partnership opportunities would provide educators the necessary time to hone their collaborative skills, identify partnerships that are most important for achieving their schools’ goals, and reflect on factors that influence their ability to successfully work with community partners.

**Partnership Reflection and Evaluation**

Finally, the literature on community involvement in schools highlights the importance of reflection and evaluation. Because school-community collaboration is a process and not an event, it is important that partners take the time to reflect on and evaluate the quality of their interactions and the implementation of their partnership activities. This exercise will assist in the refinement of collaborative efforts and the enhancement of collaborative skills. To engage in reflective action, partners need time to meet. Time is an increasingly rare commodity, especially among professional educators in schools. The challenge of finding time for professional educators to engage fully in collaborative efforts with the community is perhaps greatest in resource-poor urban schools that stand to benefit most from well-planned community partnerships.

This challenge has been successfully met in many schools (Sanders, 2001). One factor that is crucial to schools’ planning and evaluation of partnerships is principal leadership. Many studies of community involvement cite the importance of effective principal leadership for successful school-
community collaboration. An effective school leader is one who supports the faculty and staff in developing their professional skills as collaborators. This requires that the principal models such behavior, rewards such behavior, and provides teachers with the necessary time to plan partnerships and engage in collaborative action and evaluation (Sanders & Harvey, in press).

Research and practice clearly show that community involvement in schools can benefit students, schools, families, and communities. The success of such involvement requires that partners have collaborative skills, common goals, structures for inclusive decision making, and time for reflection and evaluation. For all its promise, community involvement is not a panacea for the ills of many of today’s schools. It cannot replace sound educational policies, adequate funding, excellent teaching, and effective partnerships with families. It can, however, enhance the effect that these elements have on schools and on students. When properly executed, community involvement in schools can be the little extra that makes the big difference.

References


