

PART 1

Making It Happen

A common finding by Ann Henderson, Karen Mapp, and Vivian Johnson (2007) in their synthesis of the research on parent involvement was that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school. The authors found that when schools, families, and community organizations work together to support learning, children not only achieve better academically, but also stay in school longer.

The key to parent involvement is demonstrating to parents that the school wants them to be a part of school life. The ways that parents can be involved are endless, and the need for their involvement is pressing. All parental involvement is important, whether it is at home supporting their child's academic progress, in the classroom assisting groups of students, or serving through a membership on an advisory council. Schools must value whatever time commitment parents and family members make and recognize that these volunteers want to support their children, but are not always clear on how to do this. What we do know is that they want to make a difference. Educators must convey to parents and family members that their involvement is essential to the learning process.

Joyce Epstein (2011) is a leading researcher in partnerships between schools and parents, and she identifies practices that need to be in place in order to develop effective parent involvement. She states that educators need to establish communication strategies that inform families not only about how their children are progressing, but also about what is happening in the classroom and in the school. Epstein's classic work in this field discusses the need for educators to proactively initiate ways in which families can be involved in the operation of the school. Involvement ranges from helping parents support their children's learning at home to sharing the decision-making process. Epstein also describes the need for educators to work with the community to increase family access to resources.

In order to successfully implement these practices, Epstein recommends that schools develop a parent involvement plan that ensures (a) sharing information on parenting and child development, (b) focusing on two-way communication, (c) finding ways for parents to volunteer and attend school events, (d) supporting children's home studies, (e) increasing the role parents play in decision making, and (f) finding ways for families to access community resources.

Part 1 suggests some practical strategies to involve the whole family.

Starting the School Year

Over the last few decades there has been a major shift in family structure. The construct of the traditional family has been replaced by a model where both parents are employed outside the family home and many families have single parents or are raised by persons other than their parents. Another dimension of that changed model of families is the redefinition of what a family is in today's world. The 2015 Dictionary.com website defines *family* as "a social unit consisting of one or more adults together with the children they care for" (p. 1). Many children's primary caregivers are not their biological mother or father, and schools need to welcome the different models of families that exist in their communities.

A reminder that the term parent throughout this book is used to define the major caregiver of the child. As we know, the norm includes single parents, grandparents, extended family caregivers and many other combinations.

Gwen Rudney (2005) discusses the fact that there is not one model that defines the successful family. She describes two-parent families (most are dual-career families), single-parent families, stepparents, blended families, gay parents, economically disadvantaged parents, as well as parents from different cultures. She concludes that there is not a one-size-fits-all family model.

It is the educator's responsibility to accept and work with all types of families. To accomplish this, it is essential to create an atmosphere that reflects the message that the family and the school need to work together. Offering opportunities

where everyone can be involved in a nonthreatening and supportive environment creates a culture of support and a sense of community.

All of these activities require coordination and planning. Divide the tasks up so there is shared responsibility between staff members, the advisory council, and where appropriate, members of the student body.

In this book, the term *advisory council*—defined as a group of people who are working together to improve the quality of school life—will be used in various scenarios encouraging community participation. There are many formal definitions of this term, and in many cases there are legislated expectations involving parent involvement at the federal, state, and provincial levels. Many of the websites suggested in the Resources will provide you with these formal definitions. Suffice it to say here that whether it is the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the Home and School Association, the Parent Council, or any other group, its focus needs to be on improving the quality of school life for the children in that school and district. Recently, when I typed in the words *Parent Advisory Councils* in an Internet search engine to compile a general definition, the search generated 1,180,000 hits in 2006 and 13.1 million in 2015.

For example, here is a definition of School Advisory Council from the *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council Handbook* (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2011):

The School Advisory Council (SAC) is one example of a partnership that brings together individuals who share an interest in their school and school board. Schools in Nova Scotia are focused on improved student achievement and improved school performance. (p.1)

IDEAS TO USE

1 Begin the school year with a celebration of families.

Convert your traditional September parent-teacher meeting into an evening where the whole family is invited. Include

any event or activity that helps parents understand the importance of the family relationship with the school. Consider hosting a barbecue or organizing a flea market. Make sure to have a sign-up booth for school volunteers. Invite the whole family. Make the evening inclusive, not exclusive.

Take this opportunity to determine if there is an interest in establishing or extending support groups for families with specific interests. For example, you could initiate groups for children with special needs, families new to the community, single-parent families, and families learning the English language. The list should be reflective of your school community needs. This is a win-win opportunity, as you will learn more about your families and the community as you support the whole family.

2 Work with community interagency groups.

The school staff does not always have to be the primary initiator of family support groups, but it can link with many interagency groups in the community to enhance and increase support. Use the September event to invite local interagency groups to set up booths, provide information, or simply have them attend and interact with the school community.

By working with interagency groups, the school and its constituents will increase their knowledge of different communities and organizations, and have opportunities to reach parents who do not communicate well with the school.

This requires the school to see the community interagency groups as allies rather than as interlopers.

3 Prepare a welcome package to distribute to new families.

Include business promotions (discounts on pizza or dry cleaning provided by local merchants), maps of the school and town, and folders and pencils imprinted with the school name and logo in a welcome package. Also, sample newsletters, e-mail addresses, school and district website addresses, social media accounts, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as the names of advisory council members should be

included to make parents aware of how the school communicates with its families. Include a list of suggested ways that families can be involved in the life of the school, such as when parent advisory council (PAC) meetings are being held. Make sure the package is also handed out during school registration.

Advertise that the welcome packages are available through a link on your school website. Include links to local businesses, restaurants, the chamber of commerce, and other community associations.

Where appropriate, involve students in preparing these welcome packages.

4 Ensure understanding.

Translate school information into the main languages that are represented in your school community. Either ask parents of that culture (*or* those dialects) to do the translation, or ask them to proof the documents before they are sent home. As part of this activity, use the parents who are core to the operation of the school and have been involved in the planning and development of the package. Parents know what information is helpful to families as they arrive in a new school and/or a new community setting.

5 Offer home visits.

Ask parents if they are interested in having one or more volunteers from the school community drop in to visit them at home. Depending on your community, this can be a sensitive issue and should be approached accordingly. The advisory council can organize and train a group of parents who are interested in helping new families. The visiting parents should discuss community and school resources. Make sure that the volunteers share the same language or culture as the family they are calling on, as it will promote greater communication, comfort, and inclusion.

If possible, have educators involved in these home visits. Teachers may or may not have the time to do this, but if they do, it will further their understanding of the child's behavior in the classroom, and offer a home context for the children and their families.

6 Survey families at the beginning of the year in order to identify their expertise.

Use surveys to find out more about families' interests, hobbies, travels, and jobs. Because it is important to collect as many surveys as possible, develop a simple survey that is uncluttered, includes only a few items, provides simple directions, and encourages easy responses (Charles & Mertler, 2002). Stress the value of completing the survey for use in planning for curriculum support and inclusion of family members in school activities.

Consider making the development of the survey part of the social studies or art curriculum depending on the grade levels of your school. Secondary school leadership classes could assume responsibility for the design and implementation of this strategy.

Use online surveys and offer the survey in a number of languages. This approach could be very helpful, as many families are already receiving large volumes of paperwork at the start of the school year. You can Google a free survey tool on the Internet called Survey Monkey, which is very simple and effective to use. Remember to keep the survey short and simple to encourage participation.

Ask parents to share their experiences with the school either at career day programs or as curriculum resource speakers.

7 Set up regular school tours.

This can simply be a part of the agenda of the parent council and/or the student leadership team. These tours are particularly useful at the beginning of the school year, between

semesters, and after holiday breaks. Most schools have maps of their school, and it is a simple matter to have these adapted as part of a tour handout you present to newcomers to the school. Also, place a map on both the school and district websites.

8 Ensure there is a positive and accepting school climate.

Welcome parents in various languages and make certain to offer all community and school information in the reception/office area and counselor's office.

Ensure that all staff participate in developing and implementing an open-door policy.

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