Enhancing Children's School Success through Parent Involvement/Family Engagement Programs

Dr. David E. Bartz
Professor Emeritus
Department of Educational Leadership
Eastern Illinois University
USA

Dr. Cliff Karnes
Chairperson
Department of Educational Leadership
Eastern Illinois University
USA

Dr. Patrick Rice
Director of Field Services
Illinois Association of School Boards
USA

Abstract

Effective parent involvement/family engagement programs play a crucial role in advancing children's education through enhancing their school success. These programs have the potential for significantly impacting children's: (a) academic achievement, (b) behavior in school, (c) self-esteem, (d) socio-emotional development, (e) career expectations, (f) school attendance, (g) achievement motivation, and (h) promotion/school graduation. Examples of critical skills for parents and family members to practice for enhancing children's school success are:(a) providing powerful everyday messages to their children that communicate high academic aspirations through positive expectations; (b) creating internal (intrinsic) motivation focused on a desire to work hard, persist, and have academic success; (c) providing love and support combined with structure and discipline; (d) sending consistent messages that embed the value of education; and (e) creating a physical and psychological life space environment for learning at home and in the local neighborhood that supports academic success at school.

Keywords: parent involvement, family engagement, community resources, student success

1.0 Context

Effective parent involvement/family engagement programs play a crucial role in advancing children's education and enhancing their school success.[1]These programs have the potential for significantly impacting children's: (a) academic achievement, (b) behavior in school, (c) self-esteem, (d) socio-emotional development, (e) career expectations, (f) school attendance, (g) achievement motivation, and (h) promotion/school graduation. Effective parent involvement/family engagement programs can provide great satisfaction to family members, school staff, and children. Further, extending and nurturing learning for children into the non-school environment has tremendous potential to enhance school success for them.

This article presents suggestions for school personnel developing parent involvement/family engagement programs in the form of needed perspectives from them personally and school policies and procedures in general. It presents effective practices for parents and family members to use for enhancing school success for children. It also assumes that school personnel will incorporate these practices into their programs and provide the training and development needed by parents and family members. The article also discusses the need to equitably serve all parents and family members, regardless of their *backgrounds and present circumstances*.

2.0 Reference Points for School Personnel Developing and Implementing Parent Involvement/Family Engagement Programs

Integrating family members into the child's learning process is crucial for maximizing students' achievement in school (Price-Mitchell, 2009). The reference points, context, and perspectives of school personnel developing and implementing parent involvement/family engagement programs are critical to meaningful involvement of parents and family members with school staff for the betterment of their children. A trusting and positive working relationship is the foundation of these programs. Price-Mitchell (2009) advocates that building this trusting, positive relationship "cannot be constructed from the top-down but must involve bottom-up components of grassroots leadership" (p. 16). The top-down approach results in parents and family members feeling isolated, alienated and disengaged, as well as generating other negative feelings (Bartz, Collins-Ayanlaja, & Rice, 2017). Morgan (2017) opines that "for staff to feel confident in applying honesty to build trusting relationships with parents, the school culture must be one that is supportive, and for parents it must be one of acceptance, communication and value towards all" (p. 16).

In the context of developing parent involvement/family engagement programs, Bartz, Collins-Ayanlaja, and Rice (2017) note that "In a school-centric approach, school personnel determine what parent involvement is, based on the school's norms" (p. 3). They indicate that the school-centric perspective of parent involvement/family engagement programs "often lacks such important functions as decision-making and governance in school operations (e.g., councils, committees, PTAs, and school improvement teams)" with respect to maximizing meaningful parent and family member involvement. Moore, Gallagher, and Bagin (2012) observe that "it is usual for some administrators and teachers to oppose the partnership concept [with parents] when they should be promoting it. They are, in reality, afraid that parent participation may lead to serious interference with their rights and duties" (pp. 113-114).

Educators often see themselves asexperts—rather than equals—with parents and family members, thereby creating a hierarchical relationship that is counterproductive to full utilization of parents' and family members' assets for the benefit of their children (Price-Mitchell, 2009).Regarding optimal partnerships with parents and family members, Price-Mitchell (2009) states that "one of the main barriers to partnership may be schools' mechanistic worldview, which separates educators and parents rather than integrally connecting them" (p. 13).Kohn (2013) observes that when school personnel discuss parent involvement programs holistically, "The parent's point of view is typically absent from the discussion. And, of course, no thought is given to the *student's* perspective—what role kids might want their parents to play (or to avoid playing)" (p. 2).

School staff members need to be *boundary spanners*—building relationships that create a bond between home, school, and community to work in a collaborative partnership for the benefit of children. It is crucial for school staff to remember that parents are "the first educators of children" (Price-Mitchell, 2009). "Children begin learning at home long before they ever reach the classroom, so parents play a critical role in supporting early childhood learning and school readiness" (Bierman, Morris, &Abenavoli, 2017, p. 2).

In his updated edition of The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap, Coontz (2016) describes changes in demographics regarding family, marriage, income, and crime from 1991-2013. Amid many transformations over time, Coontz documents that "one thing has not changed since my book first appeared in 1992—the tendency for many Americans to view present-day family and gender relations through the foggy lens of nostalgia for a mostly mythical past" (p. xiv). He states that as a person progresses from childhood to adulthood—and ages as an adult—the actual situations of the past are skewed by "the weight of the ideal image" (p. xx). One's collective memory becomes selective in the direction of extenuating the good and enjoyable, and minimizing the bad and uncomfortable. School staff members must be careful not to have the ways in which they view children's family members become negatively clouded by *selective memory* from the way it used to be in their mindsin such a way that it impairs the building of positive working relationships.

When implementing a family engagement programit is important for school staff to have a positive *outward mindset*.The key elements of an outward mindset identified by the Arbinger Institute (2016) are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1Staff Members' Application of the Outward Mindsetto Interact Effectively with Parents and Family Members

1. Understand the need to relinquish power and authority to empower parents and familymembers to be responsible and accountable for working effectively with children on implementing interventions.
2. Have the interactions with parents and family members focus on building positive relationships and a trusting environment.
3. Be energized and motivated to work with parents and family members in a modest, respectful, and collaborative manner.
4. Strive to create an environment in which there is shared responsibility with parents andfamily members to be engaged in working with school staff to meet their children's needs.
5. Work collaboratively with parents and family members to solicit their opinions andcollectively develop the best solutions for their children's needs.
6. Strive to facilitate *committed behaviors* with parents and family members to followthrough with agreed upon actions they will implement at home to benefit theirchildren.
7. Focus on the *wants, needs, and challenges of parents and family members* and their children to create solutions that benefit their children.
8. Understand changing how oneself *views* parents and family members is often a prerequisite to staff members changing their behaviors in a positive vein toward parents and family members.
9. Focus on preventing and resolving conflict between parents and family members and school personnel, and between parents and family membersand their children.
10. Identify what is needed to help parents and family members successfully achieve their shared objectives with school staff to work with children to improve student learning.

In the context of a growth mindset, Quay (2018) cautions school personnel to guard against communicating to family members biases—for which they may be unaware of possessing—that negatively impact expectations for children's school success.

It is advantageous for parent involvement/family engagement programs to include community agencies and resources in the loop with the home-family environment and the school. These three entities—home environment, school environment, and community agencies and resources—are akin to a three-legged stool in the context of maximizing benefits for children. The program functions best, and children gain the most, when all three legs are equal and effective in doing their part, as is the case with meaningful home-school-community partnerships (Bartz, Collins-Ayanlaja,& Rice, 2017, p. 4).Epstein and Sheldon (2016) label this phenomenon as *theory of overlapping sphere of influence*. They observe that some educators "Still hold the old view that family engagement is about the parents and that it is up to parents to get involved—or not—in their children's education. This view omits the concept of partnership and ignores the benefits of a strong agreement among educators, parents, and policy leaders that education is a *shared responsibility of home, school, and community"* (p. 216).
In the context of home-family-school partnerships, Epstein (2011) states that "Community includes the family and the school [including self], and it extends to the neighborhood, the city or township, and all of society. The vastness of the term means every school, district, or state must identify its community and design productive connections that will strengthen the school programs, assist families and students, and advance the interest of the community"(p. 611).When school personnel view community in this context, resources for enhancing children's education are rich and fluid. Big Brothers and Big Sisters, YMCAs, Parks and Recreation Departments, 4-H clubs, libraries, museums, business sponsorships, mentoring resources, church facilities for after school and weekend programs, service clubs, professional sororities and fraternities, and universities' services are some of a plethora of resources available. The understanding and utilization of the available resources within a community will aid in the child's overall educational experience.

3.0 Effective Practices for Parents and Family Membersto Enhance Children's School Success

Goodwin (2017) opines that the most effective efforts parents and family members can perform in regard to school success for their children are: (a) provide powerful everyday messages to children that communicate high academic aspirations through positive expectations; (b) create internal (intrinsic) motivation focused on a "desire to work hard, persist, and succeed academically" (p. 81); and (c) provide love and support combined with structure and discipline.

Goodwin clarifies that the context of the aforementioned items is anchored to high expectations and notes that, "In other words, parental expectations for learning aren't delivered as thou-shalt-go-to-college edicts, but rather, as everyday enforcement of the value of education, sacrifice, and hard work that students come to internalize as high aspirations for themselves" (p. 81).

The concepts of *passion, perseverance, and effort* from Duckworth's (2016) best seller book,Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance, have much in common with Goodwin's beliefs about how family members can have a positive impact on school success for their children. Passion includes interest, desire, enthusiasm, and devotion to get important tasks/goals completed. It represents sacrifice and hard work on the part of children to accomplish important tasks/goals such as learning how to add and subtract. Parents believing their children can successfully complete important tasks/goals—and communicating this belief verbally and with support—is crucial. Nurturing the child to acquire intrinsic motivation to complete important tasks and *feeling good* about putting in the effort to do so is critical. Separate from tasks/goals that are related to direct success in the classroom, exposing children to a variety of experiences can prompt a passion for interest in the fine arts, athletics, and hobbies for children to pursue with passion (Duckworth, 2016; Bartz, 2016).

Perseverance isshown by children developing willpower, persistence, self-discipline, hope, and learned optimism. A stubbornness or *stick-to-it-ness* to accomplish important tasks/goals is indicative of perseverance. Encouraging children to keep trying—even when the going gets tough—helps develop a high achievement drive and a desire in children to "get it done right" through continuous improvement (Bartz, 2016).

Grit advocates that innate talent is overrated in comparison to the potential impact of passion and perseverance. Talent, though, often does help a child successfully pursue and accomplish a task/goal such as playing a musical instrument. Talent is composed of intrinsic gifts, knowledge, intelligence, judgment and ability to learn (Duckworth, 2016). Linking effort to talent pays off for children in accomplishing important tasks/goals, but effort is likely more crucial in the context of perseverance and the driving forces of passion.

Summary points for family members applying grit to prompt school success in their children, as well as instilling habits that are beneficial to completing tasks in any aspect of life, are:

1. Nurturing an environment that furnishes children an opportunity to develop interests and, thus, develop intrinsic motivation.
2. Instilling in children the desire to be *purpose driven* and to develop a genuine and authentic feeling that accomplishing important tasks really matters.
3. Displaying hope and optimism that prompts children to continue to pursue important tasks, even at difficult times when the situation and outlook are bleak.
4. Emphasizing that hard work and practice in the context of striving to get better is crucial to overcoming difficult tasks and that being satisfied with mediocrity is damaging to success.
5. Helping to develop in their children loyalty, control of emotions, positive *self-talk,* and being nice and working well with others.

Children with a mindset of optimism have more upbeat moods and positive behaviors, with the opposite being true for a pessimistic mindset. Pessimism leads to depression and depleted mental and physical health. Parents should teach their children to view adversity—a bad and unpleasant event—as only temporary and, in many instances, not even their fault. Pessimistic children see a bad and unpleasant event as permanent, pervasive (all encompassing), and their fault. Thus, they often develop a sense of helplessness and have little or no motivation to overcome the adverse situation. Optimistic children learn from adversity, stay positive, and move forward from the bad and unpleasant event. The crucial point is for parents to instill optimism in their children and intervene when children become pessimistic by demonstrating that they will be all right, need to think *forward*, and not dwell on the past event. (See Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, and Gillham's The Optimistic Child [1995] and Seligman's Learned Optimism [2006] for detailed information about learned optimism.)

Harris and Robinson (2016) advocate a "New Framework for Family Member Involvement" that also has similarities to Goodwin's (2017) ideas for maximum family member impact on children's school success. The critical elements of the Harris and Robinson framework are: (1) parents giving consistent messages to their children that embed the value of school and (2) parents creating a physical and psychological *life space* environment for learning at home and in the local neighborhood that supports academic success at school.

Harris and Robinson also advance four general themes for family members to utilize in enhancing children's academic success:

1. **Being Supportive**—This means instilling in children, from an early age through high school, the importance of schooling; and demonstrating psychological and behavioral support to children indicative of success in all aspects of schooling, including extra-curricular activities. This represents parents authentically behaving in a manner which communicates that they truly care about their children and are nurturing them to be successful in school.
2. **Skillfully Navigating School Choices**—Through the PreK-12 school experience, this includes parents being advocates for children, seeking out the highest quality of education possible, and establishing and following through with advanced planning (e.g., on-going prerequisite to school success over multiple years).
3. **Effectively Conveying the Importance of School**—This means that the parents consistently—and in a positive and reinforcing manner—communicate the importance of academic success in all aspects of their children's schooling.
4. **Labeling of Being Smart**—This means there is consistent and authentic praise and reinforcement regarding children being bright, capable, and academically successful.These four points advocated by Harris and Robinson are similar to the Support, Monitor, and Advocate Model by Santana, Rothstein, and Bain (2016) in which parents play three roles: "(1) *support* their children's education, (2) *monitor* their progress, and (3) *advocate* for them when necessary" (p. 21).

Bartz and Rice (2017) offer these suggestions linked to Goodwin (2017)for parents and family members:

1. Provide reinforcement for good performance and de-emphasize penalties for poor performance.
2. Build bridges with *significant others* (e.g., grandparents, aunts/uncles, and close family friends) to reinforce the children's positive accomplishments at school and life in general.
3. Reduce comparing children to one another, especially siblings.
4. Demonstrate to children that each is a special person and has strengths that will help her/him to be successful.
5. Help develop time-management skills in children.
6. Discuss and show children how their efforts cause success for specific accomplishments (attribution theory).
7. Do not tease children about issues important to them at school and generally in life.
8. Structure activities so that children's achievements are recognized.
9. Reduce the emphasis on negative aspects of failure and emphasize the positive attributes of success.
10. Systematically teach and demonstrate the *growth mindset* to children:
    (a) the hand a person is dealt is just a starting point in life, and a given situation isnot fixed;
    (b) everyone can change and grow through experiences;
    (c) an individual's true potential is unknown and unlimited;
    (d) passion, hard work, and education greatly impact what can beaccomplished; and
    (e) even when feeling distressed, keep working at being better.
11. Talk to children about their interests and relate those interests to possible hobbies, vocations, careers, and college programs.
12. Assure children that everyone has positive attributes and, coupled with determination, they can lead to success at school (Dweck, 2016).

Galinsky (2017) advocates "combining the critical importance of family engagement with new technology, showing that technology can become a tool for engaging children and families together" (p. xx). Technology certainly has the potential to enhance student learning beyond the schoolhouse for families that can afford it. Technology opens doors and exposes them to many aspects of the world, both locally and globally. Children begin interacting with technology at a very early age, often for entertainment. The curiosity and interest of these children needs to be guided to learning that does—or will—be an under-pinning for school success. For families that cannot afford learning technology in the home, community resources such as libraries and community centers are useable sources. These outside resources, as well as some school districts providing 1-1 computing devices for children to take home, help to decrease the technological divide within student populations. As young children progress to formally structured education such as Head Start and other preschool programs—followed by K-12—school staff membersneed to prioritize their efforts to collaborate with family members in utilizing the benefits of technology for school success.

Henderson (2018) advocates that "If we want more students on the path of success in school and beyond, it's time for us to stop expecting families to engage without showing them how" (p. 11). She stresses the need for educators to personalize interactions with family members to help them *navigate* through the plethora of issues they encounter in pursuit of aiding their children for school success. George (2018) notes the need for *navigation* assistance for the challenges many parents encounter with the maze of paperwork and requirements needed to be met to enroll their children in school for the first time. It is important that school personnel view parents as full partners in their children's education on more equal terms. Involving employers and businesses as community partners in children's school success with families and school staff members is also crucial (Henderson, 2018).

4.0 Leveling the Playing Field

Epstein and Sheldon (2016) identify the need for parent involvement/family engagement programs to effectively serve all economic strata of parents and family members. They note that sometimes there may be proportionately more involvement by parents and family members of higher economic levels; hence the need to make sure to effectively serve lower economic family members equally well. Four concepts relevant for serving all families and their members effectively are: (1) marginalized, (2) minoritized, (3) culturally-responsive, and (4) equity.

Marginalized refers to processes that cause individuals, groups, communities within a school district, and school districts within a state to have their power minimized, undervalued, and become less important because of factors such as race, ethnicity, religious preference, immigration status, and income (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016). These processes can be legitimized through policy and laws, or the embedded bias of general school operations and the behaviors of staff members. Two examples in the United States are:

1. A state legislature passes a law that gerrymanders legislative districts such that the influence of African Americans is diluted. This results in a new state school funding formula that proportionately decreases revenue to school districts with high percentages of African American children.
2. The collective behaviors of school staff depict lower expectations for the academic performance of African American students in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups, thus hindering their attainment. (See Gershenson and Papageorge, 2018, for research on this topic.)

Minoritized is the resulting impact on people or entities—children, family members, and school districts—from the marginalizing processes. This is often because of their non-dominant status with respect to factors such as race, ethnicity, income, citizenship, and religious preference. Minoritized people have been disadvantaged (e.g., stereotyped) historically by oppressive political and social structures; and these disadvantages are sometimes perpetuated, in general, by school personnel and educational institutions (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Culturally responsive means making all family members and students—especially minoritized ones—in the entire school and community feel welcome, included, and accepted (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Developing knowledge of cultural customs, traditions, and beliefs on the part of school staff is crucial. Placing the activities of parent involvement/family engagement programs into the context of these factors is essential.

Equality means all parents, family members, and students are treated the same. *Equity*, however, means that all families and their children are receiving the resources and attention needed to be successful now, and in the future—even if it requires that some families and students get more resources than others (Connelly, 2017). *Equity* is essential for parent involvement/family engagement programs to *level the playing field* for all.

5.0 Concluding Thoughts

Extending learning related to school success for children beyond the schoolhouse walls through the efforts of parents and family members is exciting to pursue and actualize. Effective parent involvement/family engagement programs have great potential for aiding children "to be their best." This is what educators should strive to pursue as they approach the education of the whole child. Training parents and family members is key to developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities to interact effectively with their children in the home environment to improve school success. In order for effective parent involvement/family engagement programs to be developed, it is essential that leadership be provided by district and school administrators as well as teachers and other school staff members. Finally, with the current time demands on school personnel, it is critical to provide engagement program activities and available resources to positively benefit students through family involvement.

6.0 Footnote

[1]While understanding that some experts in the field differentiate between parent involvement and family engagement programs, the two programs are addressed collectively because the content presented applies to both.

7.0 References

Arbinger Institute. (2016). *The outward mindset*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-KoehlerPublishers, Inc.

Bartz, D.E. (2016, November/December). What is your "mindset"? And do youhave "grit"?*Leadership Matters*, 26-27.

Bartz, D., Collins-Ayanlaja, C., & Rice, P. (2017). African-American parents andeffectiveparent involvement programs. *Schooling*, 8(1), 1-9.

Bartz, D. & Rice, P. (2017). Enhancing education for African American children.*NationalForum of Teacher Education Journal*, 27(3), 1-9.

Bierman, K.L., Morris, P.A., &Abenavoli, R.M. (2017). *Parent engagementpractices improve outcomes for preschool children*. Edna Bennett Pierce PreventionResearch Center, Pennsylvania State University, College State, PA.

Connelly, G. (2017). Equity, equality, and you. *Principal*, 96(3), 56.

Coontz, S. (2016). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgiatrap*.Bel Air, CA: Basic Books.

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York,NY:Simon and Schuster, Inc.

Dweck, C. (2016). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY:Ballantine Books.

Epstein, J.L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships (2nd edition)*.Boulder, CO:Westville Press.

Epstein, J.L. & Sheldon, S.B. (2016, September). Necessary but not sufficient:The roleof policy for advancing programs of school, family, andcommunity partnerships.*The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5), 202-218.

Galinsky, E. (2017). In C. Donohue, *Family engagement in the digital age*.New York, NY:Routledge.

George, R. (2018). Equal footing. *Principal*, 97(3), 26-29.

Gershenson, S. & Papageorge, N. (2018, Winter). The power of teacherexpectations: Howracial bias hinders student attainment. *EducationNext*,18(1), 65-70.

Goodwin, B. (2017). The power of parental expectations. *EducationalLeadership*, 75(1), 80-81.

Harris, A.L. & Robinson, K. (2016, September). A new framework forunderstanding parentalinvolvement: Setting the stage for academicsuccess. *The Russell Sage FoundationJournal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5),186-201.

Henderson, W. (2018). Parent engagement. *Education Week*, 37(16), 10-11.

Khalifa, M.A., Gooden, M.A., & Davis, J.T. (2016). Culturally responsive schoolleadership:A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*,86(4), 1272-1311.

Kohn, A. (2013, February 6). In V. Strauss, Is parent involvement in schoolsreally useful?*Washington Post*.

Moore, E.H., Gallagher, D.R., &Bagin, D. (2012). *The school communityrelations*. UpperSaddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Morgan, N.S. (2017). *Engaging families in schools*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Price-Mitchell, M. (2009). Boundary dynamics: Implications for buildingparent-schoolpartnerships. *The School Community Journal*, 19(2), 9-26.

Quay, L. (2018). Research in action. *Education Week*, 37(16), 22-23.

Santana, L., Rothstein, D., & Bain, A. (2016). *Partnering with parents*.Alexandria, VA:ASCD.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2006). *Learned optimism*. New York, NY: First VintageBooks.

Seligman, M.E.P., Reivich, M.A., Jaycox, L., & Gillham, J. (1995). *The optimisticchild*.Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.