

What Can Parents Do?

Parents and families can engage with schools in many ways, but does their involvement increase student achievement? Research results may surprise you

School leaders, educators, and certainly parents all believe parent involvement is a key element in school success. But for all of the PTA meetings, back-to-school nights, parenting classes, and classroom volunteering, what, if anything, does parent involvement contribute to making successful students?

NSBA's Center for Public Education

(CPE) set out to answer this question in its recent report, *Back to School: How parent involvement affects student achievement*. What it found is somewhat surprising: Parent involvement can take many forms, but only a few of them relate to higher student performance. Of those that work, parental actions that support children's learning at home are most likely to

have an impact on academic achievement at school.

This is not to say that other forms of involvement don't have value. They do. Good relationships between public schools and parents go a long way toward maintaining the school's central place in the community. Effective two-way communication cultivates more parental support for the school's priorities and policies. And setting out the welcome mat for parents helps them feel secure about sending their children to school every day knowing they are with adults committed to their learning. But research has not yet shown that such outreach efforts produce better student achievement.

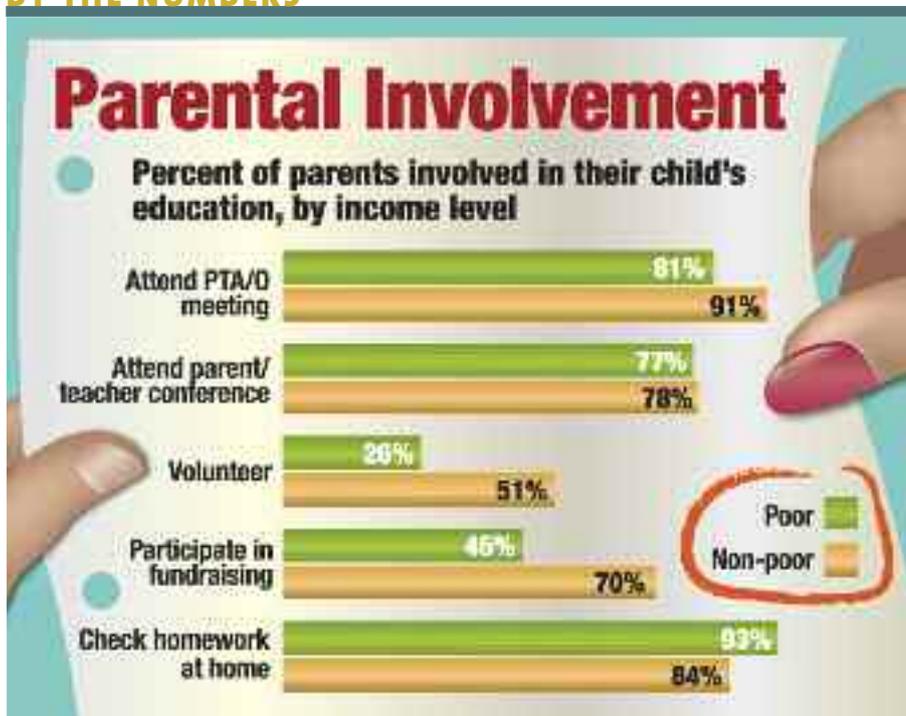
Indeed, researchers agree that even effective parent involvement is not a substitute for good classroom instruction. But families can make teaching and learning much easier for everyone—teachers, parents and guardians, and students—when they reinforce the message at home that school is important.

This can be as simple as monitoring homework, making sure their kids get to school, rewarding their efforts, and talking up going to college. All of these actions can contribute to better student performance as measured by grades, test scores, attendance, college preparation, and attendance.

Encouraging home involvement

For their part, schools can do a lot to encourage at-home involvement through outreach, parent training, and activities designed to engage family support. The report profiles several exemplary programs. While they have their differences, one common characteristic emerges: They feature at-home activities that

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require the involvement of family members along with the student.

For example, a West Virginia effort provided parents materials and training that supported the school's reading and math programs. Students with highly involved parents made stronger gains on the state standardized test than students whose parents were less involved. In addition, low-income families were as likely to be highly involved as higher-income families.

A leading example of effective take-home activities was developed at Johns Hopkins University. The initiative, known as Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork, or TIPS, provides interactive homework assignments that students complete with their families. Evaluations of TIPS showed a boost in the writing scores of nearly 700 participating Baltimore middle-schoolers in writing. Gains in science were even more impressive. Some low-performing TIPS sixth-graders improved to the point of moving into average or honors

classes by eighth grade.

Significantly, these activities don't demand a lot of time from busy or stressed families—or overburden students. As other research has pointed out, too much homework can produce diminishing returns, especially for elementary students. The assignments also do not require special knowledge or skills. No trigonometry problems for parents. By design, all families can participate regardless of their educational background or home language.

Parents want to be involved

Reviewers also found that the great majority of parents, regardless of family background, want to be involved in their child's schooling. More than eight in 10 parents reported participating in various school activities with some differences in how they were involved.

Parents of white students, for example, were more likely to report attending school events, volunteering, or sitting on a school committee. Parents of

African-American or Hispanic students were more likely to check their child's homework. Schools need to recognize that parents are engaged and want their children to do well, even if they do not appear inside the school building.

Many good reasons exist for public schools to promote parent involvement. School leaders who wish to improve such involvement should first be clear about their goals for doing so. If the purpose is to improve student learning, the best bet is to help families' efforts at home to support their child's academic development. Keep in mind that what happens in the classroom is still the single most important factor in students' achievement. But parents and families can play a key role in supporting that effort. ■

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