

School–Family–Community Partnerships and Educational Change: International Perspectives¹

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The last decade has seen a rise in research on and practices of school, family and community involvement in the education of youth. This trend can be attributed to a number of factors. Low achievement and high dropout rates, especially for poor and marginalized youth, have led educators and social scientists to become more aware of the importance of family and community involvement for school effectiveness and positive student outcomes. Moreover, communarians and others have pointed to the loss of community and collective life that many people feel in their neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools as well. In this chapter, Sanders and Epstein make the case that in order for schools to educate all youth effectively, families and communities must become full partners in the process.

Not all schools and not all nations, they point out, are at the same point in their work on partnerships. Some focus on parent participation on school councils; others concentrate more on choice of schools than on what happens to involve families after the choice is made; some are looking deeply into helping families understand their children's school subjects and curricula; and others are working on improving general communications. Drawing on Epstein's model of different forms of school-community relationship, this chapter summarizes and discusses research studies collected from social scientists in twenty nations to increase our understanding of how partnership approaches are linked to the processes and outcomes of educational change and school improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a rise in research on and practices of school, family and community involvement in the education of youth in the United States and abroad. This trend can be attributed to a number of factors, both social and political. From a social perspective, low achievement and high dropout rates, especially for poor and marginalized youth, have led educators and social scientists to become more aware of the importance of family and community involvement for school effectiveness and student outcomes. From a political perspective, the fall of communism in the former Soviet Union and the spread of democratic systems of government in countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America have sparked dialogue about and policies to promote equal educational opportunity, and parental and community participation in the educational process (Prucha & Walterova 1992; Glenn 1989).

Whatever the reasons for this trend, there is a strong, common desire to make schools more effective institutions of learning. Concurrent with this goal is the realization that schools neither exist nor function in a vacuum. In order for schools in any nation to effectively educate *all* youth, families and communities must become partners in the process.

Epstein's theory (1987) of overlapping spheres of influence provides a framework for research and practice that reflects this viewpoint. This theory integrates and extends educational, sociological and psychological perspectives on social organizations, as well as research on the effects of family, school and community environments on educational outcomes (for details, see Epstein, 1987, 1992). Acknowledging the interlocking histories of the major institutions that socialize and educate children, the theory posits that certain goals, such as student development and academic success, are of interest to all of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support. Pictorially, this perspective is represented by three spheres symbolizing school, family and community, whose connections are determined by the attitudes, practices and interactions of individuals within each context.

Based on years of research, Epstein (1995) has identified six types of school-family-community involvement that are important for student learning and development, and more effective schools and families. These are: 1) parenting – helping all families establish home environments that support children as students and helping schools understand families; 2) communicating – designing and conducting effective forms of two-way communication about school programs and children's progress; 3) volunteering – recruiting and organizing help and support for classrooms, school functions and student activities; 4) learning at home – providing information, ideas and opportunities to families about how to help students at home with academic decisions, homework, and curriculum-related activities; 5) decision-making – including parents in school governance, and 6) collaborating with community – identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students and their families, and from schools, families and students to support the community.

Although most schools are not yet implementing practices that effectively foster all six types of involvement, many elementary, middle and high schools are conducting practices that foster one or more of them. Some schools in this and other nations are focussing on parent representation on school councils, or on choice of schools as a form of family and student academic decision-making. Others are looking deeply into helping families understand their children's subjects and curricula. Still others are working at more general communications. It is clear that investments and actions are increasing in many nations to understand and implement productive school-family-community partnerships. This chapter summarizes and discusses research studies collected from social scientists in twenty nations² to better understand how partnership approaches are linked to the processes and outcomes of educational change and school improvement. The studies referenced here were selected from those sent by members of the International Network of Scholars of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and