Invaluable Allies

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

by MARGERY B. GINSBERG

Parents — whether they're biological parents, legal guardians, grandparents, or other family members who are primary caregivers — can be the most critical partners you have in your students' academic journeys. How can you build effective relationships that help students to succeed?

This article provides ideas and methods that can help teachers and parents work together as invaluable allies who nurture student motivation and learning. As an educator and a parent who has lived in rural, small town, suburban, and urban communities across the United States, I am confident that in *all* communities, parents, primary caregivers, and educators are concerned and competent people who want to effectively help young people thrive.

As you read on, you'll discover five interconnected sections that are relevant to new teachers and also to school improvement: learning from literature, developing two-way communication, resolving problems, rethinking homework, and creating school improvement partnerships. But first, I'd like to begin with a brief discussion of terms and definitions.

Terms and definitions

It is a challenge to find language that means the same thing to everyone. Word choice both influences and represents how we think. The terms "parent" and "caregiver" are used interchangeably here. While "parent" doesn't automatically acknowledge grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other family members who raise children, it is commonly accepted that there are many different kinds of parents such as birth, custodial, and intergenerational. Their love and commitment to the child are what unites them and defines them as parents.

I also prefer the term "participation" to "involvement," because to many people, "involvement" has come to mean something that educators do *to* parents as oppose to *with* parents.

Learning from literature: Four assurances

Experiential wisdom and academic research (Bloom, 1981) indicate that a positive relationship between school and home is an important contributor to students' academic success. However, a range of scholarship on school-family partnerships suggests that time pressures, multiple responsibilities, and unspoken assumptions and expectations can interfere with parent participation.

Across ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic communities, there are four basic assurances that parents and caregivers would like to receive from a teacher.

- The teacher is going to respect and learn from families.
- The teacher is going to keep their child's safety and well-being in mind at all times.
- The teacher is going to do everything she can to help their child become a responsible, caring, and well-educated person.
- The teacher is a skillful educator.

By communicating these assurances in written messages and everyday behavior, teachers can inspire parents to be motivated partners. Among my favorite research-supported and creative resources are *Classroom to Community and Back: Using Culturally Responsive, Standards-Based Teaching to Strengthen Family and Community Partnerships and Increase Student Achievement* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005), which can be found online at http://www.oregonpirc.org/webfm_send/19, and *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action,* 3rd edition (2009) by J.L. Epstein and associates. An academic yet readable article that many teachers appreciate because of the opportunity to ponder commitments to all families is "The Value of Hard Work: Lessons on Parent Involvement from an (Im)migrant Household" by Gerardo López, published in the December 2001 issue of *Harvard Educational Review.* The article helps teachers see the many ways that parents are actively involved in and committed to their children's education, even when they are not present at school events. Although assurances and resources are essential, they are only part of a comprehensive approach to partnership. Effective two-way communication is fundamental as well.

Developing two-way communication

We'll explore two-way communication in two parts. First, I'll provide ideas for how teachers can open the door to building strong, positive communication and mutual trust with parents through personal phone calls, letters, open-ended questionnaires, and scheduled meetings. Next, I'll discuss a set of questions for teachers to ask other school staff so they can learn from the local experiences of colleagues.

PHONE CALLS, WRITTEN COMMUNICATION, AND MEETINGS

For parents and teachers who speak a language in common or who have the benefit of an interpreter, phone calls are a productive way for teachers to introduce themselves and express their willingness to answer families' questions and listen to their concerns. The calls can be brief, often no more than five minutes. Well-timed and well-intended gestures of recognition can mean a great deal.

For teachers with many students and many classes, individual phone calls may be difficult. In these cases, teachers can send a letter to parents communicating the same message. This is not as personal as a phone call, but it is far better than no communication at all. The main idea is to let parents know that you, as a teacher, are available and accessible.

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Some teachers send students home with an open-ended questionnaire asking parents for information that might be helpful to the teacher. This questionnaire is most likely to encourage a response and contribute to a positive relationship when it is developed to build on a family's or student's strengths. For example, questions might include: What does your child like most about school? In your child's opinion, what would make school more interesting or enjoyable? What activities does your family enjoy together? What, in general, gives your family strength? With respect for other demands on your time, what skills or knowledge might you be able to share?

Parents often appreciate a questionnaire that has space for questions that they may want to ask a teacher. Some teachers begin this section with a simple prompt, such as: What are some questions you haven't had a chance to ask and would value information about? Sometimes it is helpful to provide examples of questions, noting that these examples are not intended to limit their questions in any way. Sample questions might be: What activities does my child seem to enjoy most in school? What does my child do really well? In what ways does my child contribute positively to the class and the school community? To what extent does my child recognize these contributions? In what ways is my child meeting academic standards?

Even when a questionnaire is focused on strengths, the purpose of the questionnaire should be clear, including how the information will be used and whether it will be kept confidential. Such requests should be made in the context of assisting a child and should indicate the option of not completing all items of the questionnaire.

Other opportunities for teachers to express their availability to parents are school open houses, parents' nights at school, parent-teacher organization meetings, and parent conferences.

LEARNING FROM LOCAL EXPERTISE

Although a detailed and nuanced set of strategies for effective person-to-person and written two-way communication exceeds the scope of this article, the following questions can be prioritized according to relevance and asked as a form of inquiry by teachers who seek to learn from the expertise of their experienced colleagues.

- **How do you maintain a flexible and accessible approach to meeting with families?** *How, if at all, do you … set aside time for families with challenging or unpredictable schedules? … work with an interpreter?… make home visits?… meet with parents in the community?*
- **How do you create a welcoming environment that encourages authentic conversation when we have parent-teacher meetings at school?** *What ideas do you have for… posting pictures of students or people who matter to students and to you? … posting student work?... posting signs in multiple languages? … having an abundance of books that are written by people from the various cultural groups represented in the school or community?... helping families feel comfortable when they visit your classroom?*
- **What have you learned about being a good listener?** *What are some basic norms of respect you try to abide by? What ideas do you have for … good conversation starters? … prompting deeper conversation? … inviting different perspectives? … being careful about clichéd responses? (Many families find the active listening technique to be clichéd or tedious. You may want to ask colleagues about how they communicate to parents that parents have been heard.)*
- **What suggestions do you have for sharing information in ways that are sincere, specific, and hopeful?** *What have you learned about praise that is culturally relevant and that avoids being controlling or contrived?*
- **What kind of information is most important to parents when teachers write to them about homework or class assignments?** *If you grade homework, how do you ensure that students have equal access to resources? How do you allow students to turn in work late or to redo work without penalizing them? What is your homework policy, and is there anything about it that you are rethinking?*
- **What have you learned about concluding communication on a hopeful note?** *When you discuss students' mistakes or challenges, how do you also discuss ways that students can apply other forms of skill and competence to improving their work? How do you set goals so that they are valued and realistic?*

Strong two-way communication is essential to forgiveness when, later in the relationship, there is miscommunication or a mistake has been made. In such instances, it is also helpful to have an approach to solving problems.

Solving problems

Many parents are gifted problem solvers. Because of the bond between parents and children, parents' strong emotions are often just below the surface when a problem arises that concerns their child. Skillful teachers know that a one-size-fits-all, step-by-step approach to work through problems is likely to lead to more problems. In our most troubling moments, none of us wants to be reduced to or controlled by a formulaic sequence. That said, it is advisable to have a basic protocol that can be easily adapted to the nuances of different situations.

In problematic situations, an advisable first step is to offer a sincere expression of empathy, such as "This is an issue I care about as

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well," or "I can relate to your frustration." Insinuating that you *know* how another person feels is most likely a step too far. This is especially important when a teacher is white and a parent is from a nonwhite community that has been historically marginalized. No matter how much a teacher from a dominant culture may care about children and families, white educators do not personally know the ways in which race, racism, and issues of power are interacting — or not — in any given situation. Following an empathic start, a wise next step is to invite a parent to sit down with you to share information and think through possible solutions. Beyond the courtesy of reaching out, an invitation helps to ensure that parents are ready to talk. Finally, if the time is right to set some goals, teachers may want to remember that this is a shared, creative process in which teachers don't need to, nor should they, have all the answers.

If the situation allows for goal setting, a simple approach usually works well. Clarity, alignment, and evidence of success are three objectives that problem solvers keep in mind. In other words, make sure the problem you are trying to solve is clear, and be clear about the solution. Then, ensure that the solution is aligned with the problem so that you have a tight "if-then" sequence. To put it another way, you want to be able to say, "*If* we do this, *then* this will happen." Finally, identify the specific kind of data you will collect to show evidence of progress.

Evidence doesn't need to be numerically measurable; it can be anecdotal. For example, if a child has been having troubling interactions with another child, keeping some notes about what you are doing to help with the situation and what results you see can constitute a credible form of data that can provide evidence of success or of the need to reconsider a course of action. Whether you conclude your conversation with a better understanding of a problem or a plan to resolve things, try to follow up as soon as possible. In a challenging situation, a simple note that says, "I appreciated the chance to understand the problem, and here is what I am doing about it," shows concern and responsiveness. This is often the beginning of a loyal two-way partnership.

RETHINKING HOMEWORK

Homework is an intriguing word. For students who have welcoming homes, it combines the comfortable thought of "home" at the end of a long day with the dissonance of more "work." For students who have responsibilities that take them away from their homes, it can be a source of constant anxiety. And for students who are without support or means to complete homework, it can erode a hopeful orientation to a promising future.

Although teachers and parents commonly believe that homework is fundamental to academic success, its relationship to high grades is somewhat counterintuitive. In fact, in recent years researchers have become aware that often the students who already are high achieving are the students who are most likely to turn in their homework. Because of this, many teachers have become more conscientious about assigning meaningful homework, and many teachers have stopped grading homework. Instead, they encourage completion without penalizing students' grade point average by providing time in class for students to share what they have learned through homework assignments, writing comments on homework that show evidence of the impact of the assignment on student learning, and allowing students to use their homework on open-book tests.

It is interesting to note that in a study of 50 countries, the countries that are seen as being the most educationally effective are the least likely to grade homework. While 70% of U.S. teachers said they calculate homework into students' final grade, only 14 % in Japan and 9% in Singapore do so. In fact, the study found a negative correlation between grading homework and increased achievement (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). Homework's value lies not in a grade but in the student's value for learning. To create motivationally and academically effective homework assignments, teachers can:

- Make the assignment directly relevant to a classroom learning experience.
- Give assignments that are clear.
- Create interesting assignments, including assignments about which the teacher is enthusiastic.
- Develop assignments that are challenging and stimulating and that require skills and knowledge that are within the range of students' current capabilities.
- Implement a cooperative telephone network among students so that everyone has access to someone who can provide assistance.
- Brief students and parents on your system of homework. (How much do you typically assign and how often? What is its function? What are your requests of parents? This can often be accomplished in a letter that parents and students are requested to read, comment on, and sign at the beginning of the school year.)

Meaningless homework bears a relationship to mindless video games or television. It can override rich curiosity, creativity, and social responsibility and contribute to a student's desire to just get it done in ways that don't require intellectual responsibility or courage. In fact, teachers may want to provide a gentle reminder to parents to try to avoid offering television viewing as a reward for homework completion. Instead, they could create family experiences such as cooking, sharing a book, exercising, playing games, doing puzzles,

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enjoying the arts, or simply engaging in conversation. These are activities that are rewarding in ways that enhance emotional, physical, and cultural well-being. On this note, when parents are willing to share some of what they are learning — from work, their community, or their child — it communicates the importance of education as a shared enterprise. Most students are curious about what parents or family members are learning when they are able to assist with school improvement activities. Such a conversation topic can be a valuable ending to finishing homework.

Creating school improvement partnerships

Recognizing that school success or failure is often a social and political as well as an educational challenge, the need for partnerships that provide a sustained focus on academic success for all student groups is imperative. Across the United States, only 30% of high school freshmen can read at grade level and 1.2 million U.S. high school students drop out every year — roughly 7,000 each school day. From an economic perspective, a college degree has become more important than ever before. However, data from 1999-2000 indicates that while only 7% of 24-year-olds from low-income families had earned a four-year college degree, 52% of those from high-income families had completed a post-secondary degree (Cook & King, 2004). Data that points to persistent gaps in learning outcomes among diverse student groups suggest that school improvement needs to be a community enterprise that often exceeds the typical definitions of parent involvement.

Instructional partnerships require creative scheduling and respect for the demands parents and teachers already face. Schools are incubators of invention, and in recent years there have been exciting developments in how schools and communities can learn together for the sake of school improvement. Of the three examples that follow, the first occurs in the community (home visits), the second in a set of classrooms (shadowing students), and the third in teams with teachers, high school students, and community members (Data-in-a-Day).

1. **HOME VISITS:** These are off-campus meetings with the families of selected students, and they are set up early in the school year. They help teachers get to know their students at a level deeper than mere classroom contact can provide. These visits are usually held in the students' home and follow a "Funds of Knowledge" approach (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Baeder, 2010). The visit enables teachers to discover student strengths that can be "mined" to make teaching and learning more culturally responsive, motivating, and academically effective. Examples of questions that teachers ask are: What are you most proud of about your child? When your child talks about school, what are some of the things he has mentioned? We are developing a unit/learning experience about _____. What do you think might be particularly important or interesting for your child to learn?
2. **SHADOWING STUDENTS:** Although test scores and grade point averages provide evidence of what students are learning, they don't show *why* students are learning. One way to understand is through shadowing. For example, one school wanted to see how well it was implementing its approach to supporting language development among English learners. Teachers invited several parents to be researchers. They asked parents to take notes of when and how specific students 1) spoke to the teacher, 2) spoke one-to-one with a peer, and 3) actively engaged in small group work with peers. In this particular instance, teachers identified two students for each shadower to watch. At an agreed-upon time, parents shared their data and insights with teachers. Teachers took notes for further reflection to continuously strengthen their effectiveness (Ginsberg, 2011).
3. **"DATA-IN-A-DAY:"** This collaborative approach to visiting every classroom in a school typically occurs three times a year. It provides an opportunity for parents, high school students, and teachers to serve on four-member teams, each of which has a schedule that allows them to visit six different classrooms for 15 minutes each. In this example, eight teams would collectively visit 48 classrooms in a single morning.

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(In smaller schools, there could be fewer teams or more time spent in each classroom). Although brief visits to classrooms do not provide a full picture of instruction, they can reveal certain trends and identify inspired interactions that can be replicated in other classrooms when conducted on a regular basis. Teams are provided with a form so that they can note what to notice across the classrooms that they visit. Each member of the four-person teams has a different thing to look for so that the process isn't overwhelming. For more information on this process, read "Seeing Through New Eyes" by Joan Richardson at www.learningforward.org/news/tools/tools10-01rich.cfm. Richardson's article explains different approaches to classroom visits and provides references for practices such as Data-in-a-Day. The Center for Action, Inquiry and Motivation also provides information about Data-in-a-Day at www.aimcenterseattle.org/motivation/diad.

As I conclude this article, I am reminded that two of the most essential characteristics of skillful educators, whatever their level of experience, are vision and imagination. In some ways, the ideas within each of these five sections — learning from literature, developing two-way communication, resolving problems, rethinking homework, and creating school improvement partnerships — require vision and imagination. Not only must they be customized to work within a local context in ways that are pragmatic and responsive, but they reside among a host of other everyday priorities. In education, rich and authentic partnerships are the architecture of student success. In a broader sense, they are the foundation of democracy. **EH**

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