



Building relationships is key to true parental engagement

Cultural awareness helps parents feel welcome

Dr. Judy Jackson May, associate professor, Bowling Green State University

Question: What do Ohio parents in Edgerton, Youngstown, West Clermont, Paulding, Columbus and Fort Frye all have in common?

Answer: They all love and care for their children and want them to be the best they can be.

Question: What do the students in the state of Ohio all have in common?

Answer: They have parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles, caretakers and surrogates who want to share some type of space in their children's educational world. This parental love and care is a valuable and strategic resource.

We, as educators, have learned from decades of research that parental engagement and involvement is a significant factor in student success. We also know there is a positive relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement, *regardless* of race, socioeconomic status or other factors. And we learned that students with involved parents experience:

- fewer behavioral problems;
- increased graduation rates;
- higher academic performance;
- improved attendance rates;
- enhanced college readiness skills;
- healthier social and emotional development;
- higher quality student-teacher relationships.

Social science research has long acknowledged the powerful impact of parent engagement. Its importance was highlighted in the No Child Left Behind Act, and its role is further delineated in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Believing in the strength of parent involvement, ESSA outlines specific requirements for planning and implementing parent and family engagement.

This relationship between home and school is so pivotal that, "Gaps in educational opportunity and achievement will *only* be remedied when those closest to the students — parents, families and communities — are driving the decision-making," according to The Leadership Conference Education Fund, one of the nation's leading civil and human rights coalitions.

Question: What percentage of parents are actively engaged in their child's educational experience?

Answer: Sixty percent, according to surveys. It will come as no surprise to any of us that white parents are more likely to be involved in their child's schooling than black or Hispanic parents. This is a troubling trend that has plagued American schools since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in which the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the nation's schools to desegregate.

Prior to the *Brown* decision, black

students attended neighborhood schools with classrooms reflecting their experiences, values, community and culture. That strong cultural link between the schools and the community allowed the school to serve as a focal point of a child's development. From the classroom to the grocery store, teachers, administrators and staff were community centerpieces, affording parents informal communication on their children's progress as well as positive teacher-parent interactions.

As discussed in a 2004 USA Today article, during the decade after the *Brown* decision, black teachers and administrators were not hired in desegregated districts, and the population of black educators dwindled by 46%, from 82,000 to 44,000. These unintended consequences left an indelible mark on home-school relationships and achievement since black teachers and administrators generally held high expectations for achievement.

Some may lament this as an urban issue or a minority issue or a low-income issue. In reality, it is a moral issue, an ethical issue and a justice issue. It is our issue. Engaging the parents of our future 21st century leaders has never been more critical.

In 2014, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, nonwhites became the majority of the school-age population in U.S. public



Making parents feel comfortable, valued and accepted helps encourage them to become more involved in their child's school.

schools for the first time. Last year, 27.4 million of the nation's 50.4 million students — or 54% — were nonwhite.

Question: What is the No. 1 reason parents offer for *not* becoming involved in their child's school?

Answer: They say the school climate is not welcoming, and they do not feel comfortable, valued or accepted. School climate is the totality of the school environment — teachers, students and staff — that affects behavior and is based on collective perceptions. Dr. **John Kesner**, associate professor of early childhood and elementary education at Georgia State University, writes that differences such as ethnicity and gender may influence how we internalize and perceive intentions and actions.

Factors associated with school climate, such as social support, caring classrooms, teacher commitment and student-teacher relations, are not only desirable but also serve as *prerequisites*

for positive behavioral change, according to professor Dr. **Brian Flay** of the Institute for Health Research and Policy. Extensive studies support the fact that effective parent engagement leads to positive student-teacher relationships, which are more likely to impact academic achievement and positive behavioral outcomes.

Question: How can the educational community foster these essential relationships?

Answer: It's not easy. All of us have heard from time to time that parents who are not involved in their children's school experience do not value education. Typically, this characterization is attributed to families of color and families from low-income environments.

This perception is based on a traditional definition of involvement that, more often than not, assesses the quality of parental care by the quantity of time a parent spends visiting a school, writes

Dr. **Susan Auerbach**, a California State University Northridge associate professor who researches the experiences of working-class parents. Auerbach states that the focus on school-based activities assumes a level playing field that may not appreciate the contributions of parents who do not share the traits of more traditional parents.

A Lincy Institute policy brief on parent and family engagement reports that parents who feel marginalized, unwelcome and generally excluded are not likely to participate in school-based activities. They may, however, be engaged in other more indirect activities not centered on visiting schools.

Question: What can schools do to engage all parents as partners in the educational process?

Answer: Developing true and authentic parent engagement requires a sincere desire to become culturally competent.



The teaching force has failed to diversify relative to the increase of students of color in urban schools. This, according to an article in the journal *Insights on Learning Disabilities*, leaves many teachers “relatively uniformed about the cultural backgrounds of their students.” The article’s authors further surmise that teachers who neglect to acknowledge the importance of cultural competence are more likely to experience problems with students that, if not remedied, result in myriad consequences that continue to plague urban schools.

According to a July 2016 USA Today poll, mainstream America acknowledges that racial discrimination is a serious problem, and 60% of Americans believe the situation is worsening. Racial tensions in schools where students are largely minority and poor and teachers are largely white is not a new phenomenon, and history shows that issues afflicting our schools are first embedded in society as a whole.

Question: What percentage of parents would like to be involved with their children’s education?

Answer: Sixty-five percent of surveyed parents said they wish they could be more involved with their children’s schooling. Eliminating barriers, building trust and engaging parents as partners demands that the school community recognizes, whether rich or poor, rural or urban or white or black, we share more commonalities than differences, and our bond is the desire to see our children be successful.

Auerbach asserts that, as a school community, we must expand the traditional parameters of what defines parent engagement and acknowledge that striking a balance of power and trust cannot be achieved at the doors of the school — especially when all are not welcomed and accepted. Engagement includes any activities promoting a safe and healthy environment where a child can achieve, including supportive, positive attitudes.

Research suggests that true and authentic parent engagement requires a shift in our beliefs, attitudes and actions to allow a sharing of power in the decision-making process. True and authentic parent engagement requires that we acknowledge and validate the contributions of families and accept them as true partners.

According to author and researcher **William Barnard**, true parent engagement must include the following considerations:

- family structure;
- culture;
- language;
- ethnic background;
- socioeconomic class;
- gender;
- varying abilities.

Question: So why aren’t more parents involved?

Answer: This, as we all know, is a multitiered challenge, and while there are factors we may not know, there is much we do know.

Question: What can we do to reverse this trend?

Answer: We must be willing to honestly examine what is in our power to change. Dr. **Joel Domingo**, author of the article *What it Takes to Engage Diverse Families*, published on the Washington State Family and Community Engagement Trust website, indicates that for a partnership to be successful, we must understand parent engagement is not a passive activity, but instead a *mutual* two-way relationship that benefits students.

This, Domingo writes, allows for families and schools to share responsibilities, with the schools reaching out to families to initiate the process. In addition, Domingo encourages schools to work toward the following:

- a robust partnership infrastructure;
- a dedicated central office and school building staff;

- budget allocations, policies, procedures and schoolwide and districtwide plans that include annual goals on engagement;
- professional training for educators and school leaders, including training on reaching out to diverse families and beginning the process of understanding that all families have “streams of knowledge” that can contribute greatly to the school community;
- building parent-teacher relationships through home visits;
- creating a space for families in schools;
- using nontraditional forms of parent-teacher communication.

Question: What can school board members do?

Answer: The National School Boards Association Center for Public Education offers guidance in concert with the findings of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, which cautions that educators and policymakers should refrain from viewing the parameters of parent involvement through their own lens. The following recommendations are offered for school board members:

- Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education or cultural background, are involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well.
- Survey parents and teachers to understand their perspective on parent involvement. Investigate how parents want to be involved and how teachers want parents to be involved.
- Work to create a common understanding of how parents could best support their children’s education and how teachers could communicate with parents. This might be accomplished through discussions, fliers, meetings and other strategies.
- Identify barriers to achievement within schools. Can parents help address these challenges? If so, how?
- Give teachers training on how to



develop homework assignments that involve parents.

- Regularly involve parents in their children's homework and report on the results of doing so.
- In middle school and high school, talk clearly to parents about the courses and grades their students need to succeed.
- Continue to survey or otherwise track the effects of involvement to ensure that schools' time and resources are used wisely. In these tight economic times, focus on putting schools' money and energy into what works best, rather than continuing ineffective programs.

Authentic parent and community engagement is essential to creating a

strategic path to address achievement and opportunity gaps. This path requires building active relationships on the part of the educational community. Authentic engagement includes trust and cannot occur in the absence of care, justice and an awareness of the need for cultural competence.

Professors and researchers Dr. **Joyce L. Epstein** of Johns Hopkins University and Dr. **Mavis G. Sanders** of Stanford University write:

"Teachers, parents and students have little understanding of each others' interests in children and schools. ... Most teachers do not know the goals that parents have for their children, how parents help them or how parents would

like to be involved. Most parents don't know much about education programs in their child's school or what teachers require of them.

"But it is imperative that we recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well." ■

About the author: Dr. Judy Jackson May is an associate professor in Bowling Green State University's School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Policy. Prior to joining the university, she was a teacher and administrator in several northern Ohio public school districts. She also serves as OSBA Northwest Regional manager.

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Student Achievement Fair performing groups

OSBA will choose one school district performing group from each of the association's five regions to perform during the Student Achievement Fair. Each group will perform for 20 minutes. To nominate a performing group, submit a nomination at <http://conference.ohioschoolboards.org/saf-nominations> and email an electronic video audition or YouTube link to **Gwen Samet**, administrative associate of search services, at gsamet@ohioschoolboards.org. Only electronic recordings will be accepted. The nomination deadline is Friday, June 23.



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One hundred programs highlighting student achievement will be selected. Nominate a district program at <http://conference.ohioschoolboards.org/saf-nominations>.



If you have questions, contact **Gwen Samet** (gsamet@ohioschoolboards.org) or **Teri Morgan** (tmorgan@ohioschoolboards.org) at (614) 540-4000 or (800) 589-OSBA.