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Parents as Partners in Progress: A Study
of Parent Involvement in an Urban
Elementary School

by
Janine P. Riggins

A Masters Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in The Graduate School
of Rowan University
May 1998

Approved by _____

Professor

Date Approved _____

May, 1998

Abstract

Janine P. Riggins

Parents as Partners in Progress: A Study of
Parent Involvement in an Urban Elementary
School
1998
University Mentor: Dr. Ronald L. Capasso
School Administration

The research project focused on parent involvement in the context of the urban school setting. The target population included one parent or guardian for each BSI student in grades 1-3 during the 1997-98 school year. Subjects completed a pre-survey during the first semester of the 1997-98 school year using a 6 item interest inventory. Responses to individual items were summarized using percentages. This data served as the basis for the development of the internship activities. A post-survey was administered during the second half of the 1997-98 school year using a similar inventory. Post-survey data was summarized and compared to patterns found in pre-survey responses.

Results of the pre-survey showed a high level of interest in parent involvement activities. However, comparative analysis of post-survey data did not show a high level of parent participation. Although parents originally indicated an interest in becoming involved, the majority did not follow through. Participation in traditional activities such as open house was high, but parents did not attend non-traditional activities such as educational parent workshops. One possible barrier to participation is the work schedule of parents. A comprehensive approach and total school effort are necessary if parent involvement is to improve.

Mini-Abstract

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The study focused on parent involvement in the urban school setting. Pre-survey data revealed a high level of interest in parent involvement activities. However, post-survey data showed low levels of actual participation. A comprehensive approach and total school effort are necessary if parent involvement is to improve.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Focus of the Study

Problem Statement

Current status. Throughout the years, urban education has faced numerous challenges. The stereotypic image of a city school is one in which classrooms are over-crowded, the building is dilapidated, and chaos is the rule of the day. Although this is not always the case, the educational forecast seems grim for urban children who live in poverty and whose lives are overshadowed by the ever present cloud of gangs, drugs, and violence. These conditions have a tendency to lead to low attendance rates, high drop-out rates, and low student achievement. Students who are at-risk require additional attention and assistance in order to succeed in school. At-risk students place a heavy burden on the urban public school. Compensatory programs must be expanded while school budgets are failing at the polls. At one time, the main concern was providing after school programs for latchkey students. Now we are faced with a growing number of students who fall into new at-risk categories such as homeless youth, crack-exposed babies, and migrant children. These are just a few of the pressing issues that continue to impede the progress of urban public schools.

Atlantic City Public Schools (ACPS) district is an urban school district in a relatively small city. The total population hardly qualifies Atlantic City to be classified as a true city. However, ACPS faces many of the same problems as schools in larger urban areas such as Philadelphia or New York City. At the present time, the district is operating under Level II of State Monitoring. As a result of deficiencies in various categories, the district is obligated to make changes and improvements. Failure to meet the minimum state requirements within the given time frame could cause the district to be placed at Level III Monitoring. As a result, the State would take over the school system.

Student achievement throughout the district is measured by standardized test scores. At the elementary level, the district goal is for 75% of all students to achieve the minimal level of

proficiency on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, Edition 7 (MAT7), in the areas of reading, mathematics, and language. Past efforts to raise test scores have not produced desired results. To date the district's goal has not been achieved and Level II monitoring continues.

During the past three years, numerous programs have been initiated at the district level and at the internship site to improve student achievement. Most CAP recommendations stress remedies that focus on teacher accountability. Strict lesson plan reviews, grade book monitoring, academic pacing charts, and student portfolio assessments have been used in an attempt to place accountability for student achievement on the teaching staff.

Despite the efforts of both administration and staff, test scores have not improved to the target level. Other strategies must be examined in order to produce the desired learning outcomes. One variable that has not been fully explored is the influence of parent involvement. In fact, this area has been a serious problem at the internship site. Too often, the only contact parents have with the school is related to disciplinary problems. Negative attitudes have developed and communications are confrontational. Relations between the school and parents need to be improved. Based on this reasoning, the following research problem is proposed: A study of parent involvement in an urban elementary school.

Product Outcome Statements. As a result of this study, three product outcomes are suggested. The outcome of the research will be measured and analyzed in the remaining chapters of this report. The product outcome statements focus on three areas: the project itself, the leadership development of the intern, and the organizational change resulting from the project.

As a result of the project activities, it is hypothesized that 90% of 1st-3rd grade students receiving basic skills instruction (BSI) will be represented by a parent or guardian attending one or more parent involvement programs during the 1997-98 school year. Throughout the course of the project, it is proposed that the intern will display proficiency

(a minimum rating of 4 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest) in the areas of leadership behavior, communication skills, group processes, and organizational management as measured by an instrument adapted from the National Association Of Elementary School Principals' (NAESP) Proficiencies For Principals. Finally it is suggested that 75% of 1st-3rd grade students receiving basic skills instruction (BSI) will score at or above the minimal level of proficiency (MLP) on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, Edition 7 (MAT7) during the 1997-98 school year. The proposed outcomes will be examined thoroughly upon the completion of the study.

Purpose of the study. Current literature on the topic of parent involvement is intriguing reading for parents, teachers, and school administrators. The impact of increased parent involvement continues to be examined and debated by educational researchers and practitioners. As is the case with most research topics, a wide range of questions arise as one examines the underlying issues. How does parent involvement effect student achievement? Is there a correlation between the amount of parent involvement and student standardized test scores? How do the attitudes of parents, teachers, and school administrators effect parent involvement? In which types of activities are parents regularly involved? Clearly, there are numerous areas that merit further research.

The current study will focus on the last question posed above. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to determine the types of programs that interest parents. The Parents as Partners in Progress initiative will then provide programs for parents based on this data. A follow-up measurement will be taken to determine whether parents actually participated in traditional school functions and the special events held throughout the school year.

Definitions

Various terms will be used throughout the body of this report. In different contexts these words may be defined differently or take on subtle, but important, differences in

meaning. To ensure clarity of the meaning of the terms within this study, the following list of definitions is provided:

Basic Skills Instruction (BSI) - Small group instruction provided on a daily basis through a pull-out program for students who have not met the minimum level of proficiency on the Metropolitan Achievement Test.

BSI student- Any student who is currently receiving basic skills instruction.

Metropolitan Achievement Test, Edition 7 (MAT7)- The standardized test used in the Atlantic City School district to measure student achievement.

MLP- The Minimum Level of Proficiency or minimum percentile score required on the Metropolitan Achievement Test. The MLP varies by grade level.

Parent- The significant adult guardian or caretaker of the student with whom the student resides. This could be, but is not limited to, the biological mother or father, a grandparent, or a foster parent.

Parent involvement- Attendance and participation in a program presented for parents at the school.

Parent involvement program- A workshop or training session presented by school personnel for the purpose of parent education.

Parents as Partners in Progress- A series of special workshops based on the expressed interests of parents.

Student achievement- Academic success of the student as measured by scores in the areas of reading, language, and math on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, Edition 7.

Limitations of the study

The internship district has recently undergone significant reorganization. The internship site was originally a kindergarten through sixth grade building with an enrollment of roughly 800 students. This year, the internship site houses only kindergarten through fourth grade. In addition, the reconfiguration of the district has caused a 50% drop in the student population at the internship site. The fact that the internship site is now what

may be called a primary school may influence the outcome of the study. Parents generally tend to be more involved in the educational process when children are younger.

The smaller population also factors into the area of student behavior.

Overcrowding has been reduced dramatically. Class size is now smaller than in the past. The average class of roughly 30 students has been reduced to an average of 25 students per class. Student discipline has shown a marked improvement in the first months of school. Office referrals are down and there have been fewer fights in the cafeteria and on the playground. These are significant aspects of the internship site that must be considered when interpreting the results of this study because they may have an effect on outcome of student achievement.

A baseline measurement of the sample will be generated by the pre-survey.

Implementation of the Parents as Partners in Progress program will begin immediately after pre-survey data has been compiled and analyzed. A follow-up measurement will then be taken during the second half of the school year in the form of a post-survey. The pre- and post-surveys will provide the data for this study.

Setting of the study

The City. Atlantic City is a resort town on the southern coast of New Jersey within Atlantic County. The city rests on a large sand bar known as Absecon Island and is separated from the mainland by a network of bays and inlets. Atlantic City is often referred to as America's Favorite Playground and is world renowned for its boardwalk. The boardwalk was the first of its kind when it was built in 1870 and has been attracting visitors since before the turn of the century. Other famous city firsts include the origination of salt water taffy and the first picture postcard. Atlantic City's streets are also well known as they are represented on the board game Monopoly.

Tourism is the staple source of revenue in Atlantic City. The arrival of the casino industry in 1978 caused a wave of physical reconstruction, particularly along the boardwalk. Whole city blocks were leveled as casinos were built. Additional casino

buildings and expansions provide an on-going facelift for the city. As the casino industry expands, so do tourism and the revenue that is generated for the city and state.

Although much has been accomplished in the way of "rebeautifying" Atlantic City, the casino industry has done little to boost the economic prosperity of city residents. Of the 22% of local residents who are employed by casinos, most hold low paying jobs (Atlantic City Board of Education [ACBOE], 1994) in areas such as housekeeping, food services, etc. Extremely high property taxes, lack of affordable housing, and over-crowded public housing have resulted in mass movement out of the city.

City demographics as recorded in the 1990 census show the population of Atlantic City to be 37,986. Ethnic groups represented include 19,491 Black, 13,460 White, 5,813 Hispanic and 3,327 other ethnic groups. The majority of the city's population is within the 18 to 64 years of age range and totals 22,183.

The mayor/city council form of government went into effect as of July 1982. The result is a government run by: a mayor, a Council President, a Council Vice President, a Council at large, and Ward Council members (Atlantic City Free Public Library). Until just recently, the mayor and city council have maintained an appropriate distance from the functioning of the city's schools (despite the fact that Mayor Whelan is a former district swimming teacher). The separation of the two entities ended when voters went to the polls in the spring of 1997.

For many years, the Atlantic City community showed support for the educational goals of the district by supporting the school budget. In fact, community support has been so strong that the nearly \$100 million dollar price tag on the new Atlantic City High School did not cause voters to waiver. Because past budgets have enjoyed overwhelming success, there has been little need for formal involvement between the city government, the school district, and the tax payers.

Based on this "honeymoon" at the polls, the rejection of the school budget in the spring of 1997 was a real shock. The defeat was a serious message of dissatisfaction from

the public. Reasons for this revolt are debatable. Perhaps the continuation of State monitoring raised public concern about the district's shortcomings. Negative and often slanted media coverage may have also contributed to voters' opinions. Perhaps voters were making a more political statement, rather than commenting on their satisfaction with the schools themselves. Extremely high property taxes may have been the bottom line for voters. The district may have been partially to blame as well. After years of successful and relatively easy budget passage, the district may have taken voter support for granted.

Whatever the reason, the budget defeat presented another problem for the district. Even after Board of Education revisions, the city council did not go easy on the district. The final council decision resulted in even deeper cuts to the "slimmed down" budget. These cuts are being felt throughout the district. In some cases, programs have been cut, new program implementation has been halted, and teachers' supply budgets have been cut by up to 50%. This situation may produce even more problems for an already struggling school district.

The School District. Dr. H. Benjamin Williams is currently the superintendent of schools. Dr. Williams hails from the Patterson school district and has been the impetus for numerous changes during his first year. He and the elected Board of Education members continue efforts to work with the state and city's government, the casino industry, and local businesses in school/community partnerships.

The Atlantic City Public Schools (ACPS) system is unique in that it has recently undergone major reorganization. Originally, the district's eight elementary schools housed students from grades K-6. There were two junior high schools which housed the city's 7th and 8th grade students. The district had planned a K-8th grade configuration for the 1997-98 school year for all elementary school sites. This plan included the use of the old Atlantic City High School, located on Albany Avenue, as "swing" space to relieve overcrowding in the other elementary schools. Opposition from State Commissioner of Education, Leo Khlagholz, caused an alternative plan to be adopted which allowed for the use of the

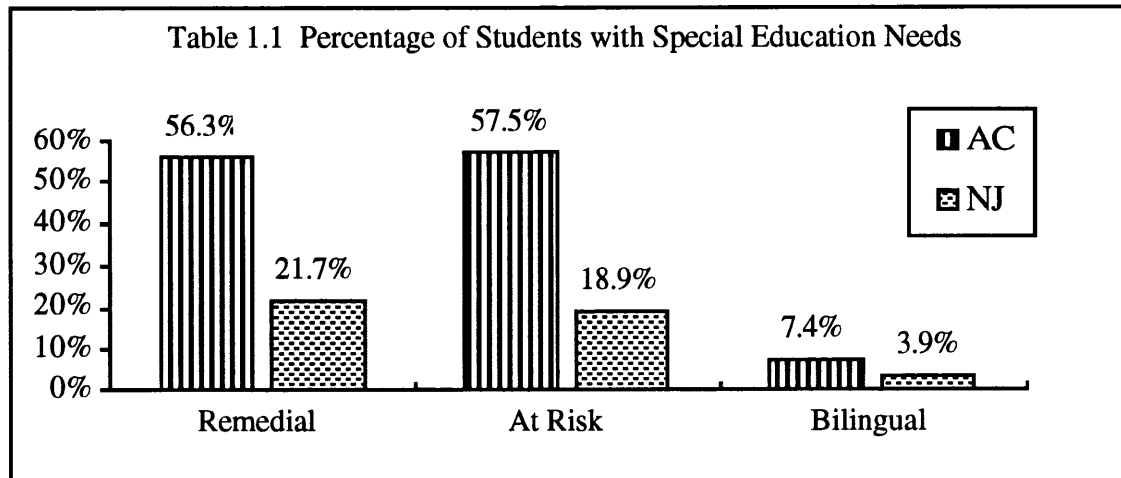
Albany Avenue School for all of the city's 5-8th grade students. As a result, the remaining elementary school sites not house K-4th grade with preschool programs operating in select sites.

Atlantic City High School (ACHS) is a regional school, serving students from Atlantic City as well as those from neighboring Brigantine, Ventnor, Longport and Margate. The new ACHS facility opened in the fall of 1994 and at that time was a source of major publicity for the district, both positive and negative.

Financially, ACPS faces funding problems unique to an urban, casino town. The Atlantic City Board of Education (ACBOE, 1994) reported:

A corollary impact of the casinos has been the skyrocketing value of property ratables which form the only basis of school funding. On paper it seems as if Atlantic City has a strong base for funding its school system. The reality, however, leads to the opposite outcomes. Looking at the socioeconomic and ethnic make-up of the school children served by the district clearly point out the answer. The tax-base is about to produce another detrimental effect--the loss of up to eight million dollars in state funding as a result of the "Quality Education Act of 1990. (p. 2)

The population of the elementary schools is predominantly minority. Statistics from ACBOE's 1994 State Desegregation Grant showed that 43% of the school population was classified as "low income" while 78% of elementary school students received free or reduced lunch. Furthermore, 34% of the students in grades K-8 were classified as Chapter 1 and 40% required compensatory education services. Table 1.1, below, graphically displays the disparity between Atlantic City's students and students in the rest of the state.



Recent reorganization effects have been aimed at addressing the needs of the city's students. The district is making efforts to reducing class size, improving daily attendance, and gain the cooperation and support of parents in order to improve student achievement.

The School. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex is one of the newest schools in the city. Located in an upper-middle class area of the city known as the Westside, the three story round building has an innovative appearance both inside and out. The facility is designed as an open space school which means there are no walls separating instructional areas. Instead, there are three main "pods" within which teachers have designated areas. Plans to erect walls in the school were put on hold recently due to the school budget defeat in the spring of 1997.

The school curriculum is extensive covering every subject area from Media to Holocaust Education. Each summer, Curriculum Task Force Committees are assembled for the purposes of curriculum review and revision. The committees consist of teachers from grades K to 12 who are compensated at the contracted hourly rate for their participation. The focus of the Task Force Committees varies from year to year and may run from twenty to eighty hours based on the specific needs for the particular subject area. Each year, revised curriculum guides are delivered to all district teachers. Revised curriculum guides are piloted by a select group of teachers and input from this group is

gathered throughout the year. The curriculum review process contributes to keeping the district updated and focused on the latest teaching innovations.

The MLK staff is a mixture of “traditionally trained” and “alternate route” teachers. (Approximately one in four teachers are alternatively certified.) District reorganization has caused a major change in the teaching staff in the current school year. As recently as October of this year, staff members were moved to other schools and placed in new positions. As a result, exact statistics on staff credentials are unavailable. Based on the personal knowledge of this writer, one staff member holds a doctoral degree, 15% of the staff have obtained master’s degrees, and an additional 25% have completed some graduate work.

Along with the reorganization of the district, attendance zones have recently been implemented. The open enrollment policy originally allowed parents to choose the elementary school of their choice. Student movement under the old plan was rampant and what was a privilege became a bargaining tool for disgruntled parents. Attendance zones are now strictly enforced to eliminate this problem. Students must attend their neighborhood school. This plan was also implemented to control and equalize school population.

The current population of MLK reflects the outcome of district wide reorganization and the implementation of attendance zones. On roll numbers as of the October count show a total population of just over 350 students. This is less than half of the student population during the 1996-97 school year. This setting is ideal for implementing a pilot program to raise parent involvement in the school.

Importance of the study

Parents have always played an integral role in education. As the first and most important teacher, parents provide children with an overwhelming body of knowledge long before the first day of school. The mother who talks baby talk to her infant helps her child to develop language skills as the infant echoes and mimics sounds. The father who initiates

a game of hide-and-go-seek helps his child to develop problem solving strategies as the child searches for the next hiding spot. Either knowingly or unknowingly, the parent continues to influence learning throughout the child's formal schooling.

Parent involvement is critical for the successful operation of a school. An administrator who maintains ongoing and effective public relations can make community involvement work for the betterment of the school. However, neglecting this vital area can lead to disastrous results and become an administrator's biggest nightmare.

All too often the media sensationalizes educational horror stories, playing up isolated incidents of violence, drugs, and gangs. Unfortunately, the public is easily misled into believing that educators have lost control or even given up. It is incumbent upon educational leaders to dispel the myths and promote the countless success stories that occur in schools across the nation on a daily basis. One way to change the public image is to get parents involved.

When parents participate as partners in progress, everyone benefits. Parents begin to see the many positive aspects of school and therefore are more likely to support the efforts of the school board, administrators, and teachers. Likewise, as parents begin to understand the goals and objectives of the school they are more likely to buy into the school as an organization.

Parent involvement can also play an important role in implementing change and improvement within a school. This is particularly true in the area of student achievement. With parents as team members, academic achievement becomes a shared priority and an atmosphere of excellence prevails throughout the school and as well as at home. In the end, learning outcomes are improved and the students are the real winners!

Organization of the study

This report will elaborate on the interests of parents and their level of involvement following the implementation of the Parents as Partners in Progress program. The study will be detailed in the following chapters: Chapter 2- Review of the Literature, Chapter 3-

The Design of the Study, Chapter 4- Presentation of the Research Findings, and Chapter 5- Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Parents have always played an integral role in education. As the first and most important teacher, parents provide children with an overwhelming body of knowledge long before the first day of school. The mother who talks baby talk to her infant is teaching language skills as the infant echoes and mimics sounds. The father who plays hide-and-go-seek is promoting problem solving strategies as the child searches for the next hiding place. Either knowingly or unknowingly, parents continue to influence learning throughout the years of formal schooling.

The current state of education indicates a need for increased support and assistance from parents and the community. Schools today face serious issues on a daily basis that at one time simply did not exist to such an extent. These issues include such horrors as homelessness, gang violence, and child abuse. More and more, education is burdened by the challenges brought on by modern society and yet there is the on-going struggle to teach even amongst so much baggage. How can these unbearable odds be overcome? What will change this bleak outlook? Parent involvement may be one way to improve the state of education.

A Look Back

As we approach the new millennium, it seems an appropriate time for retrospect. The 1900's were filled with a wide range of educational reforms. From expanded educational opportunities for women to the end of segregation to inclusion programs, there have been numerous revelations over the last 100 years. Ornstein & Hunkins (1997) content that "this century has been characterized by a high rate of diverse and extensive changes affecting many aspects of our world. This rapidity and extensiveness of change

have given to this century a high degree of uncertainty” (p. 387). In a number of ways, this mood of uncertainty has also been evident in the field of education. Looking back one may legitimately argue that great progress has been made over the past century.

Nonetheless, there are many issues that remain unresolved.

For educators, the bad news on the state of education hit in 1983 with the publication of A Nation at Risk. This report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education revealed the rising tide of mediocrity across the nation (National Commission, 1983). Ornstein & Levine (1997) provide the following summary of the report:

This mediocrity is linked to the foundations of our educational institutions and is spilling over into the workplace and other sectors of society...The United States has compromised its commitment to educational quality as a result of conflicting demands placed on the nation’s schools and concludes that the schools have attempted to tackle too many social problems that the home and other agencies of society either will not or cannot resolve. (p. 434)

The shock wave of this stark reality rippled throughout the nation. By 1990, a response to A Nation At Risk came in the form of another national report entitled The National Education Goals. Commonly known as Goals 2000, the original report outlined six national education goals which were to be reached by the year 2000. Ornstein & Levine (1997) explain that “in 1994 Congress passed Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which added two new goals to address the critical areas of teacher education and professional development and parent participation” (p. 435). With the year 2000 looming ever so near, it is necessary to reevaluate the state of education and assess the extent to which the National Goals have or have not been implemented.

Goals 200: Goal 8

The “critical area” of parent involvement has long been recognized as a vital part of the educational process. Many reasons exist to support this assertion. Coleman (1991) explains the value of parent involvement as follows:

..Social capital exists in the relations between persons. The effectiveness of schools in settings where the social capital of family and community is weak depends on rebuilding this social capital that facilitates learning. This rebuilding requires parental involvement with the school and school involvement with parents. (p. 3)

In today’s fluctuating economic climate, school budgets are stretched to the limit and often go unsupported at the polls. It is essential for schools to take advantage of any untapped resource. Boards of education would be wise to develop equity by building their “social capital”.

Griffith (1996) also supports the economic feasibility of parent involvement in the following statement:

Parent participation can be influenced by parents, teachers, and students; it usually involves grass-roots, low-cost programs that are presumed to have positive effects on multiple domains, for example, on parent attitudes and behaviors, quality of parent-school and parent-teacher relationships, and student academic performance. (p. 33)

That schools need the resource of parent involvement is indisputable. The fact is parents need schools just as much as schools need parents. James P. Comer (1988), an expert and widely publicized author on this topic, claims that parents desire the following:

First, they want to know what is going on in school and how their child is doing. Second, they want to know how the “system” works and how they can be a part of it. Third, they want to know what they can do with their child at home to help him or her in school. (p. 9-10)

These conditions seem ideal for developing closer home-school connections, yet there are some who are not quite so sure.

Skeptics question how realistic parent partnerships are. Wolf & Stephens (1989) claim that “while we extol the virtue of involving all parents as partners with school personnel, in reality the present system could not withstand such stress. Time is not available for such in-depth interaction with all parents” (p. 28). The authors then declare that “teachers and administrators can and should commit time and energy to working with parents of ‘target children’- those for whom ongoing communications may spell the difference between success and failure” (Wolf & Stephens, 1989, p. 28). This seems somewhat ironic. Anything so crucial as to spell the difference between success and failure should be applied not only to target students, but must be applied to all students. In addition, with parents as partners perhaps the present system could be alleviated of such stress. Time well spent on interactions with parents may not take as much time as they do thought, planning, and organization of resources. Lastly, the outcomes of such programs more than justify whatever efforts may be required. Next, an analysis of the beneficial effects of parental involvement programs.

The Bottom Line

The importance of parent involvement is echoed over and over again in current literature. With today’s technology allowing access to the most recent information at the touch of a few buttons, there is even a special U.S. Department of Education web-site (Get involved, 1997) which promotes the importance of parent involvement with the following:

...All parents and family members should try to find the time and make the effort because research shows that when families get involved, their children:

- Get better grades and test scores.
- Graduate from high school at higher rates.
- Are more likely to go on to higher education.

- Are better behaved and have more positive attitudes. (p. 3)

This view is supported by Berla (1991) who claims “the research is overwhelmingly clear: When parents play a positive role in their children’s education, their children do better in school” (p. 16). The author goes on to explain that the “major benefits of parent involvement include higher grades and test scores, positive attitudes and behavior, more successful academic programs, and more effective schools” (Berla, 1991, p. 16).

Flaxman & Inger (1992) make a similar claim, stating that “all studies of parental involvement show that the more parents participate in a sustained way, the more positive the effect on their children’s educational achievement” (p. 3). These writers’ positions are so extreme that even a healthy skeptic may raise an eyebrow. Nevertheless, research findings substantiate the value of parent involvement.

For example, Griffith (1996) examined the relationship of parent involvement and empowerment with student academic performance. The researcher’s findings reveal that not only does parent involvement relate to student test scores, but that these results are unaffected by variables such as race or social class. More specifically, the author writes:

Multiple regression analyses showed that parental involvement and empowerment accounted for substantial variance in student standardized test performance...Positive relations of parental involvement to student test performance were largely unaffected by school characteristics or the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic composition of the student population.
(p. 33)

That parent involvement is an equal opportunity facet of education provides even further proof of its validity. With such strong evidence, it would seem that every school in the nation would be making efforts to improve parent involvement. In reality, numerous barriers exist which prevent the home-school connection from being a success.

Barriers and Solutions

Although there is a great deal of support for promoting the theory of parent involvement, numerous barriers exist in practice. These barriers are traditional, historical, and universal. In the educational setting, they are also very familiar. Swap (1990) describes these barriers as follows:

1. A traditional separation between home and school;
2. A tradition of blaming parents for children's difficulties in school, especially when parents are poor and not involved;
3. Changing demographics including more working mothers and rising poverty;
4. Persistent structures which perpetuate traditional forms of involvement such as conferences or fund-raising activities. (p. 13-16)

Improving the level of parent involvement may also depend on the leadership within the school itself. Coleman (1991) points to administrators as a potential barrier in the following:

Incorporating the interests and activities of parents into the functioning of a school can, in the long run, give the school greater strength for its task of educating children; but this is a more difficult task of school administration. It requires more consultation, building consensus over a wider range of people, sharing control, and sharing responsibility. To keep parents away from school functioning simplifies the administrative task. (p. 5)

Hopefully, a school leader who possesses a vision of success will not be confined by such limitations. Trends toward site-based management may play a part in changing such attitudes or administrative styles.

Another possible solution is using a collaborative approach. Fine (1991) identifies three objectives of a collaborative model, including:

1. To include parents in decision-making regarding their child;

2. To educate parents for participation in the decisionmaking[sic] process regarding their child; and
3. To enable and empower parents to work actively on behalf of their child. (p. 17)

Teacher-parent collaboration is also essential for parent involvement programs to be successful. Teacher attitudes can have a great impact on any program's success or demise. According to Pipher (1994) "educators often list parental involvement as one of their top concerns" (p. 270). If this assertion holds true, then teachers should act on their concerns and work to promote such programs. Teacher support sets the stage for positive parental involvement. The critical role of the educator is emphasized in the following excerpt from Robinson and Fine (1994):

Whether the parent and teacher are attempting to communicate over the telephone, at a staffing, or in a parent-teacher conference, specific behaviors that support collaboration should ideally be demonstrated by both parties. [However,] because the teacher is the professional educator, it is reasonable to expect that teachers will be ready to exhibit the behaviors and to influence parents to assume these skills through modeling. (p. 14)

It is incumbent upon both teachers and administrators to stress and model partnership through not only words, but deeds. Working together to build a trusting relationship is part of getting parents to buy into schools as an institution. Only then will parents feel comfortable and confident enough to join the team. There are a number of different ways that parents can become true partners in education. Types of parental involvement are presented next.

Types of involvement

Various researchers detail basic ways for parents to become involved in the educational process (Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Griffith, 1996; Robinson & Fine, 1994). Traditionally, parents have been asked to participate in a limited number of formal events

each school year. These events include activities such as open-house, report card conferences, and fund raising projects. Perhaps the most mutually beneficial parent involvement activity has been to chaperone the annual class trip. Such activities seem somewhat trivial, although important in their own respect. Current literature suggests more vital ways for parents to get involved and provides a more definitive view of the types of parent involvement.

Epstein & Dauber (1991) provide a clear outline of the types of parent involvement which may be included in a school's comprehensive program. Here, the original list of five which was developed by Epstein in 1986 is expanded to include the sixth area listed below:

1. Basic obligations of families including building positive home conditions;
2. Basic obligations of schools including communications about programs and children's progress;
3. Involvement at school as volunteers;
4. Involvement in learning activities at home wherein parents assist their own children;
5. Involvement in decision making such as participation in parent-teacher associations; and
6. Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations so that families can access support services. (Epstein & Dauber, 1991, p. 290-291)

Implementing programs across each of the six areas may be unfeasible or even unnecessary. Schools may choose to focus on a particular area and eventually build their parent involvement program toward one that is more comprehensive. Each school setting presents its own unique characteristics and its own unique set of needs. These factors must be given serious consideration if any parent involvement program is to succeed.

Elements of Success

Improving any program requires strategic planning. Starting off on the right foot is not something that can be left up to chance. Brandt (1989) conducted an interview of researcher and parent involvement expert Joyce Epstein who provides insights on how schools can begin to improve their parent involvement programs: “One way to start is by assessing present practices...get the perspectives of teachers and parents, then develop short-range and long-range plans to strengthen practices in all five types of parent involvement over a three- to five-year period” (p. 27).

It is the opinion of this writer that a total school commitment, based on a common vision and mission statement is a crucial cornerstone of any successful program. In addition, Williams & Chavkin (1989) identify the following seven elements common to successful parent involvement programs:

1. Written policies
2. Administrative support
3. Training (for staff and parents)
4. A partnership approach
5. Two-way communication
6. Networking
7. Evaluation (p. 19)

These elements provide a framework for initiating or bolstering parent involvement programs. When first beginning a parent involvement program, these elements should be reviewed and considered. Similarly, existing programs may be strengthened by adding elements that are currently missing. It should be noted that the list provides only suggestions. In each situation the special needs of the individual school must be given top priority, rather than blindly following a prescribed list.

Final Thoughts

Changes in current parent involvement practices are clearly needed. The goal of student achievement and academic excellence is dependent on high quality programs which are aimed at addressing student needs. Students need parents to be actively involved in the educational process. By examining existing barriers, addressing a range of parent involvement activities, and incorporating elements of successful programs, great strides can be made toward achieving another educational success story. With parents as educational partners, Goals 2000 seem that much more achievable for all students and that much closer to being realized for the sake of education in the next century. Perhaps in this way we can move away from being a nation at risk and become a nation in progress.

Chapter 3

The Design of the Study

Research Design

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the research design that was utilized in this study. Following a thorough review of the literature, the researcher planned to employ a survey design. Presented in this chapter are the specific research activities conducted to address the following research hypothesis: 90% of 1st-3rd grade students receiving Basic Skills Instruction will be represented by a parent or guardian at three or more parent involvement programs during the 1997-1998 school year. The research design included developing the research instruments and sampling design as well as developing a data collection approach and data analysis plan.

Research Design

The topic of parent involvement in education is one that does not lend itself to a true experimental design. The variables involved in this study occurred in the natural school setting and could not be deliberately manipulated by the researcher. For example, it would not have been feasible to schedule report card conferences wherein the experimental group of parents received quality feedback on their children's progress and a control group received no feedback at all. The goal of promoting parental involvement in the educational process could not be applied to some and not to others, and therefore a control group was not utilized. Based on this particular research problem and the setting of the study a true experimental design was not used. Rather, the researcher determined that a pre- and post- survey design would be most appropriate.

The survey design was a short term longitudinal design. Based on the research time frame, a pre-survey was administered at the end of the first marking period and the post-survey was administered at the end of the second marking period. The questionnaires were administered to the same group of respondents at these two points.

Survey research is commonly used in the field of education. In order to address the topic of parent involvement, the researcher decided that a questionnaire was the best method for data

collection. Several factors contributed to this decision. First and foremost, survey research which utilizes a questionnaire is low in cost. Both monetarily as well as in terms of human time and effort, this was a highly economical research method. The survey was also a method by which respondents (parents) would be able to remain anonymous, writing responses in the privacy of their own homes. Knowing that parent involvement, or lack thereof, is often a highly emotional issue, the researcher decided that anonymity and privacy were important factors. Utilizing a format that offered both anonymity and privacy to respondents was given top priority in hopes of achieving a higher response rate. In addition, a written response format was selected in an effort to gain more honest responses, as opposed to a face to face interview or phone survey which would place more pressure on the respondents. All of these issues were given serious thought and contributed significantly to the planning phase of the research design.

Research Instruments

The data collection instruments used in this study were questionnaires. This format was determined to be the most efficient research method for the purposes of this study. The questionnaires allowed the researcher to gather the data necessary to address the research question while providing a certain level of control against being overwhelmed by irrelevant data. An extensive list of framing questions was developed prior to constructing the individual items of the research instruments. These questions guided the researcher in constructing the items and deciding on an overall format for the pre- and post-surveys. The framing questions included:

1. Are the parents of Basic Skills students attending school functions throughout the school year?
2. In what types of activities are parents participating (traditional/non-traditional)?
3. How often are parents participating in various activities?
4. Do parents feel comfortable participating in school functions?

5. Are there any factors that may contribute to parents feeling uncomfortable participating in school functions?
6. Are parents interested in workshops that would offer help with how to work with children at home?
7. Are parents interested in workshops that offer help with how to work on specific subject areas such as reading, math, etc.?
8. How often do parents feel that they are participating in the educational process?
9. How often do parents help their children with learning at home?
10. Do parents feel that the school is doing enough to motivate parent involvement?
11. Are parents interested in other levels of parent involvement such as volunteering at school, becoming active in the Parent Advisory Council, or attending special workshops for parents?
12. When is the best time to schedule parent meetings and/or workshops?

The framing questions were the basis for the items included in the questionnaires. In order to ensure that the length of time required to respond to the questionnaires was manageable, the majority of survey items was constructed using a yes/no format. Only a limited number of items used a rating scale and two open-ended questions were included. Initial drafts of the research instruments proved to be quite lengthy and overly wordy. These were serious flaws which needed to be addressed. Several format changes were made to correct these problems. The researcher also made numerous revisions to ensure that the language of the items was clear and concise. A pilot of each questionnaire was conducted with five individuals. Feedback was positive and overall the questionnaires were judged as satisfactory. (See Appendix A and B).

Sampling Design

Purposeful sampling was used for this study. In this case, probability sampling which includes some form of random selection would not have been appropriate or desirable. The research question focuses specifically on parents of students who receive

Basic Skills Instruction. This group had been previously identified based on the established criteria of MAT7 test scores. The number of students at the targeted grade levels (1st-3rd) that qualified for BSI was less than one hundred. As a result, the researcher determined that sampling was not necessary. Within the natural setting of the study, the BSI group already represented a subgroup within the total school population. Thus, the sample population for this study consisted of the one significant parent or guardian for each subgroup member.

Data Collection Approach

The data collection plan included two points at which the questionnaire was administered. Once again, the natural function of the school came into play. Key opportunities to reach parents on a large scale occur each year during report card conference time. At the end of the first and third marking periods, students are dismissed early for three days and each parent is scheduled to come in at a specified time. Turn out is usually high with an overall attendance rate of well over 90% of parents. Based on this prior knowledge, the data collection plan capitalized on the first marking period report card conferences as the pre-survey measurement point. Although conferences were not held for the second marking period, the post-survey measurement was taken at the end of the second marking period at which time the surveys were sent home with the students.

The data provided by the pre-survey factored into the planning and organization of the internship activities. The goal of the project was to promote a higher level of parent involvement by addressing the needs and concerns of the parents. Therefore, feedback from the pre-survey was highly valuable to the entire project development.

The data provided by the post-survey served as an evaluation of the project goal. This data included the number of parents that subsequently became involved in the educational process and the variety of ways parents participated throughout the school year. The baseline data obtained from the pre-survey served as the comparison for the post-survey results.

Data Analysis Plan

Upon completion of the study, questionnaire responses from the sample population were tabulated. The data was closely scrutinized and comparative analysis was completed to determine the relationship between parent interests and the actual level of participation. Patterns in responses were calculated to provide a comparison of the level of parent involvement in traditional activities as opposed to non-traditional activities. An important focus of the data analysis included attention to factors that may have contributed to parents feelings of discomfort in participating in school functions. Additional comments written by parents also provided valuable insight.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

Introduction

The data generated by the pre- and post-surveys were analyzed and the results are presented in this chapter. A word of caution to the reader is necessary so that the data may be interpreted appropriately. First, the findings of this study must be interpreted based on the knowledge that the scope of this study was very limited. The sample population was limited to only one of the eight elementary schools within the school district. As a result, the external validity of results is limited at best. Secondly, the number of respondents for both measurements was less than 20. The fact that this rate is very low (less than one-third of the sample population for each measurement) compromises the representativeness of the data. In layman's terms, the findings may not truly reflect the feelings, attitudes, or behaviors of the entire population.

Finally, it is the opinion of this writer that the reader should focus on the ramifications of this data. Although the data may not make a strong case in support of the research problem presented, it may suggest a new direction or different angle for future researchers. For this reason, the findings presented are indeed valuable and should be given careful consideration.

Response Rate

The response rate was low for both the pre- and post- surveys. For the pre-survey, only 18 questionnaires were returned out of a total of 58 (31%). For the post-survey, 11 questionnaires were returned out of a total 49 or 22%. This represents a 9% decrease in the response rate from the first measurement. The implications of such a low response rate are discussed later in this chapter.

The fluctuation in the total population of basic skills parents (from a total of 58 to the current total of 49) can be attributed to a number of variables. Throughout the school year, student movement within the district was one influencing factor. Basic skills students moving out of the school decreased the total population. Conversely, student movement into the school increased the

total if the new student qualified for basic skills instruction. Teacher evaluation of students throughout the school year also lead to an increase in the total number of basic skills students. Students who did not initially meet the requirements for basic skills instruction and did not work up to grade level expectations were subsequently recommended for basic skills instruction by the classroom teacher. Lastly, during the first grading period of the school year first grade students who were selected for the Reading Recovery program were deleted from the original basic skills list. The net result of these fluctuations accounts for the change in the total population of basic skills students and subsequently a change in the total population of basic skills parents.

Pre-Survey

The pre-survey focused mainly on the level of interest and opinions about parent involvement. Results showed that there was clearly some interest in becoming involved. Eight out of 18 respondents (44%) reported feeling comfortable participating in school events. Only two respondents (11%) reported feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Eight respondents (44%) chose not to complete this item.

When asked to give reasons for feeling uncomfortable, one parent cited “work” although the same individual had reported feeling comfortable participating in school events in the previous question. The response given describes a barrier to parent involvement more so than a reason for feeling uncomfortable participating at school.

It should be noted that the quality of response was not the same for each questionnaire analyzed. For each item on the questionnaire, some respondents did not circle an answer choice. Some opted to only circle “yes” for areas of interest, and left the other areas blank. The researcher did not interpret non-response as a “yes” or a “no” for fear of biasing the findings report. Therefore, when analyzing the data blank responses were not tabulated.

Overall results show a high level of interest in attending special parent workshops. When given a list of workshop topics, respondents were asked to indicate interest by circling “yes”. The majority (78%) answered affirmatively to four of the six workshop topics listed on the survey (see Table 4.1 below).

Table 4.1

Summary of Finding from Parent Reports of Interest in Attending Workshops

Workshop Topics:	n=18	
	Number of “yes” responses	Number of “no” responses
helping your child with reading	14	2
helping your child with math	10	2
helping your child with writing and spelling	14	2
helping your child with homework	14	2
parenting skills (including discipline)	10	4
learning more about standardized tests	14	2

Interest in workshops that focus on “helping your child with math” and “parenting skills (including discipline)” was not as high as compared to the others topics. For these two categories, only 10 respondents (56%) answered “yes” as opposed to 14 (78%) in all other areas. A higher response rate would have been needed to determine whether this variation represented a true pattern. Of particular interest to this researcher was the category “parenting skills (including discipline)”. This was the only area that received four “no” responses. Again, a more extensive study would be required to determine whether there were any underlying reasons for this variation.

Some variation was also evident for the different types of parent involvement. “Becoming a school volunteer” was close to an even split with 10 “yes” (56%) and 8 “no” (44%) responses. There was little interest (17%) in joining the parent council or attending a special parents partnership workshops (17%). Again, it should be noted that non-responses were not considered in the data analysis. Table 4.2, below, summarizes the data on parent interests.

Table 4.2

Summary of Findings from Parent Reports of Interest in Different Levels of Parent Involvement

Type of Involvement:	n=18	
	Number of “yes” responses	Number of “no” responses
becoming a school volunteer	10	8
becoming a member of the parent council	3	8
attending special parent partnership workshop	3	8

When asked to indicate a time preference for meetings, results varied greatly. Four out of six parents (67%) indicated a preference for meetings or workshops after school. Four out of seven parents (57%) indicated a preference for evening meetings. When asked to write in the best days and time for meetings, only four respondents answered. The written comments indicated a preference for after school meetings ranging from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. The final analysis of the data on meeting times was inconclusive. It appears that there is not a common time that would meet everyone’s needs.

The final question of the pre-survey asked respondents to write in additional comments. Only three parents (17%) answered this item. One written comment caught the eye of this writer because it focused on the confounding issue of meeting time. The comment clearly indicates the conflict that exists for the working parent who wants to get involved, but is prohibited due to work. A direct quote from this respondent’s additional comments follows:

...I would love to be a part of my children’s learning and I would love to attend workshops-etc. but the timing is not good for me. I work 9 to 5, weekends off.
Please help.

Overall, the results from the initial measurement were highly indicative of a moderate to high level of interest in parent involvement. The majority of parents indicated an interest in attending workshops and becoming involved in volunteering. Furthermore, only one reason (work schedule) was cited as a barrier to being more involved.

Post-Survey

The post-survey data was analyzed to determine the level of parent involvement that actually occurred throughout the school year. For the post-survey, the total number of respondents was 11 (22%). Numerous efforts were made by this researcher to increase the response rate. The deadline for returning the surveys was extended, students were given additional copies of the survey to take home to the parent, and reminder notes were also sent home. The low level of parent response could certainly be interpreted as one indicator of the low involvement by this group of parents. In addition, the data provided by the post-survey tend to support this assertion.

Respondents indicated a high level of involvement in the most traditional types of parent involvement activities and low levels of involvement in non-traditional activities (see Table 4.3). The activities parents attended most included open house (82%) and report card conferences (91%). That parents are typically more involved in such traditional activities is consistent with the research found within this writer's Review of the Literature.

Behavior problems are another reason that parents become involved in school. Although this may not be a positive aspect of involvement, it is a traditional type of parent activity. Data analysis showed that this area was not a problem for this group of parents. Only 1 parent (9%) reported having a discipline conference with a teacher. No one reported having a discipline conference with the principal or vice-principal. Although this would be considered as a very low level of involvement, it is a positive in that discipline conferences were not needed. Future studies may be well served to isolate such a category because of its dual nature.

Three of the 11 parents (27%) attended Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meetings. However, the pattern of involvement was inconsistent. Parents indicated attending 2-3 PAC meetings during the school year. At the time of the measurement, 9 PAC meetings had been held. Thus, involvement was very limited.

Involvement in the new Parents as Partners in Progress program was very low. Only 1 parent (9%) indicated having attended a Parents as Partners in Progress meeting. Table 4.3

provides a clear picture of the different levels of parent involvement in various activities. The activities have been categorized as “traditional” or “non-traditional”.

Table 4.3
Summary of Findings from Parent Reports of
Participation in Different Levels of Parent Involvement

Type of Involvement:	n=11	
	Number of “yes” responses	Percentage of participation
•Traditional activities:		
a. open house	9	82%
b. report card conferences	10	91%
c. discipline conference with teacher	1	9%
d. discipline conference with principal or v. principal	0	0%
•Non-traditional activities:		
a. Parent Advisory Council meetings	3	27%
b. Parents as Partners in Progress meetings	1	9%

The responses to questions on parent involvement were validated by the follow-up question “On the average, how often do you participate in some way in you child’s education at the school?” Again, very low levels of participation were indicated. Overall, 100% of respondents reported participating once a month or less than once a month *at the school*. However, when asked “On the average, how often do you help your child with learning at home?” parents reported an extremely high level of participation. All 11 respondents (100%) reported participating more than once a week or daily *with learning at home*.

Two questions were asked to address reasons for low levels of parent involvement. First, parents were asked “Do you feel that the school does enough to get parents involved?” The overwhelming majority (9 out of 11 respondents or 82%) answered “yes” and only 2 respondents

(18%) answered “no”. Clearly, the data reveals that this group of respondents felt that the school was doing its part.

The second question was open-ended, asking for “reasons that you have been unable to participate in school events this year”. Only 4 of the 11 (36%) respondents chose to write in a response, but these written comments were very revealing. Three of the four comments focused on work related conflicts. This information was concurrent with the additional comments provided by respondents in the pre-survey. One written response in particular provides great insight into a possible reason why parent involvement decreased during the school year.

...I participated in the Christmas show that MLK had and Luncheon and it was terrible, very unorganized. Since that time I said to myself that I won't do it again. It seems ironic that the very programs that are planned for parents may ultimately have a negative impact on involvement.

Data Summary

Overall, the data gathered in the pre- and post-surveys showed a conspicuous contrast. The pre-survey indicated a high level of interest in parent involvement. The majority of respondents clearly indicated interest in workshops covering a range of topics and in volunteerism. Although these types of activities were provided and open to all parents during the school year, the post-survey revealed that very few parents followed through on their expressed interests.

Only 1 respondent reported having participated in the Parents as Partners in Progress program. These special parent workshops focused specifically on the areas of interest expressed by respondents in the pre-survey. Furthermore, special volunteer meetings were held. These meetings were designed to collaborate with interested parents and implement an organized volunteerism program. Sign-in sheets from these meetings verify that this group of parents, other than one person, did not take advantage of these programs. Overall, the findings show that although parents expressed interest in becoming involved, they did not follow through. Other than in the most traditional types of activities, the actual level of parent involvement was very low.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

Introduction

Throughout the course of the research project, the intent of this writer was to examine the complex issue of parent involvement in programs that were specifically geared to the interests of the parents. Following analysis of the pre-survey, the planned intervention was fairly simple; find out what parents want to know about and then plan workshops on those topics. Of course, increasing the level of parent involvement requires much more than just offering workshops. Throughout the school year, the researcher utilized numerous strategies to promote parent participation in various school events ranging from educational workshops to training for volunteers. Examples such strategies include televised promotions, flyers sent out by mail, and posters placed prominently in the school lobby.

Unfortunately, these efforts did not seem to impact the level of parent involvement during the course of this study. Analysis of post-survey data showed that parent involvement was very low. It is the conclusion of this writer that a much more comprehensive approach is required to truly affect parent involvement in school programs.

On a more positive note, the post-survey data also showed that parents tended to report a much higher level of participation at home. This insight provides at least a starting point for future efforts. Perhaps the focus needs to shift from parent *involvement* to parent *support* (e.g. helping students with homework assignments, keeping attendance rate high, etc.). This approach opens the door to a whole new field of study for future researchers.

Barriers to Involvement

Based on this research experience, a word of caution about research bias is in order. Future researchers who focus on urban, low-income, ethnic minority groups must carefully study the underlying causes of low levels of parent involvement, or non-involvement. It is all too easy to

assume that an attitude of indifference on the part of the parent is the primary barrier to participation in school activities.

The findings of this study show that scheduling is more likely the most common problem. Schools try to work around teachers' and administrators' schedules when planning parent programs. At the same time parents are grappling with work schedules, child-care issues, and transportation. The findings did not reveal any one time that was convenient for parents, regardless of whether it was during the school day or after school hours. The problematic nature of scheduling programs at school indicates that a shift of focus may be most feasible. If parent participation is not possible, then the next best alternative is to work toward a high level of parent support of education.

Another barrier that must be closely examined in future studies is that of the internal climate of the organization. Again, the common bias is to assume that barriers to parent involvement are external in nature (and thus the fault of the parent). Objective examination of the internal variables may provide a more complete and realistic picture. Appendix C contains a sample of the Reflective Journal of this writer. This documentation provides a scenario that relates to the internal climate of the organization in which the study was conducted. This is just one example of this writer's experiences with the negative school environment.

Throughout the course of the research project, this writer observed and experienced other internal conditions which acted as barriers to parent involvement. These factors can be attributed to both the culture of the organization as well as the bureaucratic power structure which is currently in place. Perhaps most surprising to this writer was an attitude of resistance and even opposition to parent involvement by certain teachers. Such undertones can resonate producing a subtle yet powerful force which can undermine even the best efforts to implement a new program.

Types of Parent Involvement

The findings of this study revealed a higher level of participation in traditional types of parent involvement activities including open house and report card conferences (see Chapter 4, Table 4.3). As witnessed in numerous interactions with parents, both formal and informal, this writer has concluded that this trend toward traditional activities has a perfectly logical and sound basis. First of all, activities such as open house and report card conferences have been around for a long time. They are a consistent and reliable part of each and every school year. As a result, all parties involved (parents, teachers, and administrators) are very comfortable with these activities. Their regularity and even their redundancy make them non-threatening. They are within the participant's "comfort-zone". Lastly, these activities are limited in number. As a result, it may be more likely that parents are able to make arrangements to attend these traditional school functions.

Just as it is understandable that traditional programs tend to be more highly attended, there are also numerous reasons to explain the lack of involvement in new or non-traditional programs. New programs may be uncomfortable to everyone involved due to the different roles required for parents, teachers, and administrators. Indeed, the findings of this study showed that parents did not participate in the new Parents as Partners in Progress initiative, even though programs and workshops were specifically designed with parent interests in mind.

It is the conclusion of this writer that new programs are somewhat threatening to all participants. Parents, teachers, and administrators alike become comfortable with traditionally segregated roles. Just like a pair of old slippers even when they have outlived their usefulness, it is hard to do away with them. Similarly, coming together in a partnership effort may be, in and of itself, too intimidating or just plain unfamiliar. What will we do if we all work together? How will these new roles affect our power structure? Will there be increased accountability? These questions if left unanswered may undermine any new program.

Final thoughts

The scope of this study was very limited, however many of the findings and conclusions of this writer were similar to those discovered in the Review of the Literature. Although the overall results of this study may seem disheartening, there is no reason to assume that the topic of parent involvement is a waste of educators' time and effort. Admittedly, the generalizability of the findings of this study are limited. A study such as this which is limited to a few months' time can only be viewed as one step in the path of examining partnerships with parents. There is certainly room for further study into the potential and actual benefits of parent involvement programs.

In retrospect, the most important conclusion is neatly summarized in an excerpt from the writer's Reflective Journal (see Appendix D). Furthermore, this author concurs with other researchers (Comer, 1984; Epstein, 1987; Conoley, 1987) that in order to increase parent involvement, a comprehensive approach is required. The efforts of one individual simply pale in comparison to what is required to effectively impact parent involvement. A total school effort is the key.

Within this total school effort, the role of the classroom teacher is particularly important. Teacher-parent collaboration is essential for parent involvement programs to be successful. Educators not only play an important part in encouraging positive interactions with parents, they also stand to gain a great deal from increased parental involvement. From fund-raising efforts to classroom volunteers and tutors, parents can assist teachers with a wide range of routine tasks and major responsibilities. Administrators who plan to implement a parent involvement program cannot ignore the role of the teacher and must provide staff training in order for the program to be successful.

In addition to staff training, this writer recommends incorporating the following elements as a part of a comprehensive approach to increasing parent involvement:

1. Staff commitment. Parent involvement is at the heart of all that a school does. Every parent that walks into a school receives a message about parent involvement. Every teacher

who calls a student's home sends a message about parent involvement. From secretaries to teaching aids to the principal, there must be a total staff commitment in order for parent involvement to improve. This commitment should be addressed in the school's mission statement.

2. Communication. Along with staff commitment comes a responsibility to communicate directly, openly, and frequently with parents. Line of communication must be two-way, open to incoming messages as well as out-going. This is an area in which both parents and educators may benefit from training. Professional communication and active listening are skills which must be practiced and refined. Improving communication can improve parent participation.

3. Planning. For new programs to come across as flawlessly as the tried and true open house night, a great deal of forethought and planning is required. Just one workshop can be a major task. The meeting place, time, materials, etc. must all be given careful consideration well in advance. An organized approach is necessary to ensure that all of the pieces come together. Again, this job is made easier by a total staff commitment. Sharing responsibilities makes the task manageable. This is an area in which parent volunteers can also be utilized in a meaningful way. Being involved on the ground floor may help parents have a greater sense of belonging and efficacy.

4. Funding. One facet of any new program that can contribute to a greater level of success is funding. Innovative ideas often require financial backing. If staff members are to have the freedom to explore and experiment with new programs, then the funds necessary to do so must be accessible. Here again, parents can become a part of the effort assisting with fund raisers or even helping teachers write grants.

This researcher concludes with a variation to the popular saying, "it takes a village...". To the contrary, this writer proffers "it takes one devoted, knowledgeable, and loving parent" to raise (i.e. educate) a child. The parent is the first teacher and will continue to be the most important influence on a child if by nothing else than by virtue of

proximity. Only by reaching out to and educating parents can we truly provide the best possible education for the children.

Parent involvement must be addressed if student achievement is to improve. Especially for parents of students who have demonstrated low levels of academic achievement, becoming involved in the educational process may be one the single most important factor that spells out the difference between success and failure. It is the hope of this writer that this report has in some way opened the eyes of the reader to this important issue and will in some small way lead to the improvement of urban education.

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Appendix A

First Measurement: Initial Survey

4. Would you be interested in going to a workshop on....
- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| -helping your child with reading? | yes | no |
| -helping your child with math? | yes | no |
| -helping your child with writing and spelling? | yes | no |
| -helping your child with homework? | yes | no |
| -parenting skills (including discipline)? | yes | no |
| -learning more about test taking and the MAT7 and 4th grade ESPA tests | yes | no |

5. If you are available, would you like to...
- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| -become a school volunteer? | yes | no |
| -become a member of the Parent Advisory Council? | yes | no |
| -attend a Parents as Partners in Progress workshop? | yes | no |

6. Would you be willing to participate in meetings or workshops...
- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----|----|
| - after school? | yes | no |
| -during the evenings? | yes | no |

7. Please indicate your preference for meeting times:
 Days: _____ Time: _____

Please add any additional comments that you feel would help with planning/improving of parent involvement at MLK:

☺ Thank you for your help! I hope that you will join us this year as a parent who is involved in education. We can't do it alone. We need the help of every parent so that we can reach every child!! Thanks again for your help. Hope to see you soon!!

Mrs. Riggins/ Parents as Partners Coordinator

Appendix B

Second Measurement: Follow-up Survey

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. SCHOOL COMPLEX
School of the Arts
 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Blvd.
 Atlantic City, NJ 08401

Parent Involvement Survey



Dear Parent:

As we continue to work on making the home/school connection strong and ongoing, we ask once again for your input! Please think about the first half of this school year and consider how you have been involved in your child's education, both at home and at school. Then, take a few minutes to answer the following questions. As always, your support is greatly appreciated!!

•PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING YOUR RESPONSE.

1. Have you participated at the MLK school this year ? (examples: Open House, Parent Advisory Council, report card conferences, discipline conference etc.)

YES	NO
-----	----

2. If you answered YES to #1, please circle the letter for the way(s) you participated in school so far this year:
 - a. Open House
 - b. Parent Advisory Council meetings
 - c. report card conferences
 - d. Parents As Partners in Progress meetings
 - e. Discipline Conference with teacher --Number of time: _____
 - f. Discipline Conference with the principal or vice-principal --
Number of times: _____

3. On the average, how often do you participate in some way in your child's education at the school?
 - 1 - Less than once a month
 - 2 - Once a month
 - 3 - Once a week
 - 4 - More than once a week
 - 5 - Every day

4. On the average, how often do you help your child with learning at home?

- 1 - Less than once a month
- 2 - Once a month
- 3 - Once a week
- 4 - More than once a week
- 5 - Daily

5. Do you feel that the school does enough to get parents involved in their children's education?

YES

NO

Please list any reason(s) that you were unable to participate in school events this year:

☺ Thank you for your time!! Hope to see you at the next Parents as Partners in Progress meeting!

Mrs. Riggins/ Parents as Partners Coordinator

Appendix C

Reflective Journal Entry: Oct. 29, 1997

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Date: Wednesday: Oct. 29, 1997

•General thoughts:

I requested a meeting with X, X, and X. This type of unprofessional talk just can't continue!! But, I suppose it will with such unprofessional leadership...[What I am trying to say is] that we all have to work together when things get hectic, and people can get angry, but we don't have to take it out on each other or mess up someone else's day with it!! So, I guess overall, I did get something accomplished and I did at least get some first hand experience at problem solving, or conflict resolution. This is a very hostile climate and if this is the way it is for insider (staff members), just imagine how bad it must be for outsiders (visitors such as parents)!! No wonder it is so hard to get parents more involved. So, on I go.....Another day, another issue to handle. Is this what administration is all about??? It is not easy!!

Appendix D

Reflective Journal Entry: Feb. 15, 1998

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Date: February 15, 1998

•General thoughts:

At this point, as I look back at the projects I have been working on, and the topics I chose to tackle this year, I really feel like the issue of parent involvement must have been the most difficult thing I could have possibly selected!! It is so difficult to get every one on board (from the teachers to the administrators to the secretaries, not to mention the parents!!) and working toward the same goal...[but] it takes more than just one person's ideas, one person's vision! I have done the research. I believe in what parent involvement can do. I am committed to this notion, and quite frankly--we have tried everything else. I also think it would take an extended period of time for this new "partnership" idea to really catch on. Hopefully, this will be just the beginning of a continuing effort by the entire school community to boost involvement and work toward a closer home/school connection.

Biographical Data

Name	Janine P. Riggins
Date and Place of Birth	January 19, 1968 Camden, New Jersey
High School	Hammonton High School Hammonton, New Jersey
Undergraduate Degree	Bachelor of Arts Elementary Education American University Washington, DC
Graduate Degree	Master of Arts School Administration Rowan University Glassboro, New Jersey
Present Occupation	Elementary Teacher Atlantic City Public Schools Atlantic City, New Jersey 2nd Grade Teacher