Research Brief

Parental Perceptions of Long-Term Involvement with Their Children's Schooling

By Susan Elaine DeMoss, Courtney Vaughn, and Michael Langenbach

Although people may disagree about what role a parent should play in school, all agree they should be involved. Goals 2000 states every school will support partnerships that increase parental involvement and participation. Various states have legally mandated parent involvement in the public schools at all levels, underscoring the belief that excellence cannot be pursued by schools alone (Kimmel, 1983).

Parent Activities

The literature describes several types of parental involvement. Such activities fall into two categories—decision making and child support/advocacy at school.

Parents may serve on school boards, site planning committees, and parent organization boards that have a say in making school policy, or they can create home environments that nurture learning and provide knowledge and skills to aid the student in school.

Parents also monitor homework, volunteer for school projects, and attend school functions (Miller, 1986; Henderson, 1993; Steely, 1994; PTA, 1995).

The relationship between a student's academic success and parental involvement has been confirmed (Dixon, 1992; Loucks, 1992). Henderson (1993) found the type of parent involvement was not as important as the fact that it took place and was long-lasting. When parents and educators work together, students' academic skills increase and behavior problems decrease (Wagonseller, 1992).

Parents play a crucial role in the student's socioemotional development (Eccles and Harold, 1993). Parent involvement enhances pride in the school and the community, and increases the financial stability of the school (Stouffer, 1992). Improved attendance, lower dropout rates, motivation, and self-esteem are also related to parent involvement.

As students progress through school, however, parent involvement decreases, typically at times when pre-adolescents and adolescents need them the most (Southwest

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Educational Development Laboratory, 1986; Wheeler, 1992; Eccles and Harold, 1993).

While parent involvement decreases at the secondary level, little research has been done that examines reasons for the decrease. As students progress through school, they want greater autonomy and peer influence begins to dominate their lives. Consequently, parents may be more willing to turn their children over to the schools and hope for the best (Jackson and Cooper, 1992).

Barriers to parental involvement exist at all levels. Time, feelings of inadequacy, misunderstandings, lack of child care, language and cultural differences, intimidation, lack of transportation, scheduling conflicts, and not feeling welcome are some of the barriers (Loucks, 1992; Steely, 1994; PTA, 1995), but these barriers do not completely explain the decline at the secondary level, or how it might be slowed or even reversed.

Methodology

Because many barriers to parent involvement have to do with parental perceptions of the accessibility of their children's teachers and administrators, we conducted a study of selected parents' assessment of their own involvement from their children's elementary through secondary years.

Of special interest to us was the question "Did this activity decrease over time, as suggested in the literature? And if so, why?"

We selected 11 participants, three men and eight women. Together, they represented three races (American Indian, African-American, and Caucasian). One woman and one man were single; the rest were married. The participants represented several socioeconomic groups, and were mostly in their 40s or early 50s.

Each of the participants provided narratives about their involvement with their children, particularly relating to schooling. We asked them to reflect on why their activity intensified or waned at certain points, particularly focusing on children who were about to or had recently graduated.

Thematic Responses

The overwhelming type of parental involvement that our participants discussed fell under the advocacy/support category. Liz* was the only exception, and her decision-making role in her older child's schooling was extensive. Only Norma and Grace reported such declines.

The narratives of Shirley, Trudy, Mike, Teresa, Meg, and Peggy indicated their overall involvement never changed, although their interactions with specific school tasks such as homework varied over time. John, Liz, and Jack traced an increasing involvement with their children, particularly during the senior high school years.

Real names are not used.

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Declining Involvement: Too Many Demands

Norma and Grace, who were divorced during part of their children's school years, were not able to maintain consistent parental support. Both Norma, a Caucasian who never graduated from high school, and Grace, an African American, could be characterized as working class. Although they made efforts to be involved parents, they found it difficult to keep up over time.

Guilty over having divorced while her children were young, Norma "worked at a minimum wage job, so I could be with my kids, and I don't regret it for one minute." Although Norma's childhood family had participated in weekend family camping trips and, in general, seemed to be close, her parents did not allow their children to express their individuality. She did not want that to happen to her three children. Norma remembers being terrified of school:

> I hated it.... I was petrified of schools. I cried every day coming home.... I hated to go to school, and I was determined they [her children] weren't going to. So...when they'd come home we'd discuss school every day. You know, a part of our day was to take time to do that.... We had time where we sat and talked about what they did at school and went over papers and things.

But time wore her down, and the older children began helping the younger ones with homework. When her oldest child as an early adolescent expressed embarrassment at his mother attending school functions, Norma began to stay home.

Grace is also single but has five children, one of whom is autistic. She cannot afford a car. Two of her children had graduated from high school, and as she traced her involvement in his and her other children's schooling, we noted a decline as her youngsters moved out of geographically accessible neighborhood grade schools and into more distant middle level and high schools.

When her children were young Grace served as a teacher's aide. She has had to rely on older children to help younger ones with their homework, and she quit going to school functions when, as adolescents, her children showed embarrassment at her presence. Yet, she emphasized the importance of a high school diploma to all her children, especially her girls. In general Grace believes all her children have responded to her urgings.

Consistent Involvement Despite Adolescent Protest

All middle to upper class Caucasian women, Trudy, Peggy, Meg, Shirley, and Teresa maintained a fairly consistent advocacy/support role in their children's lives, even when faced with adolescent protests. All but Trudy were housewives for much of their children's school lives.

Although Mike, a married, American Indian school counselor never was as active as the women, he also sustained his involvement over time.

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Teresa acquiesced to her youngsters' protests at her interaction with them during junior high school days, but she regained a foothold a few years later. All six recognized that their children needed their support whether they requested it or not.

Trudy and Peggy reported the most dramatic cases of children shunning their parents during early adolescence. Trudy remembers:

> One time Bill was even going to run away, because he did not like us bothering him.... I think they started realizing that about [the] end of junior high [I was] *always* going to ask, "Where we're going? What we're going to do? Who we're going to be with? What happened at school?" So I don't know if they always told the truth or not, but they thought it was easier to just comply and tell me something, pacify me then to where before it just would...turn into a "gosh you have to know everything?"

Although her son complained, he still volunteered "our house for everything. He would volunteer our house without telling us. I remember the night we were having a party at our house and we didn't know about it."

Peggy quit working for 10 years to stay home with her children. She, too, ignored her adolescent son's rebuffs, explaining:

> In junior high... Clayton...went through a spell where he did not want us around. It was a time when he was finding himself, and we were infringing on his space. I was glad to have friends who had older children, so they would help understand what was going on. I can remember Clayton wanting to run away from home.

Like Bill, Clayton's resistance diminished by high school. He became very active in student council and, as a result, Peggy and her husband chaperoned the prom. She believes he was glad they were there and even a little proud.

Both Trudy and Peggy remained committed despite what they described as junior and senior high school educators' lack of interest in their students' lives. Trudy, not the teachers, was the one who instigated conferences. "I don't feel like a lot of times the secondary teachers care. If the kids don't get it, well, it's the kid's fault," she observed. Peggy agreed that middle level and high school open houses, which were intended to replace parent-teacher conferences, were innocuous and unhelpful.

Meg, a housewife during part of her three sons' school lives and Mike, a school counselor with three children, also mentioned adolescent rebuffs and noted that middle level educators' attitudes aggravated the situation.

To teach her children responsibility, Meg allowed them to work on homework more independently as time went on, but she remained interested and involved. When they did not talk about life at school, she questioned their friends.

Mike remembers when the lower secondary schools made little effort to engage parents at the same time one of his children was resisting her parents' attentions. This did not stop him, and he believes all his children liked it.

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Shirley argued that, as an active PTA member, she viewed most parents as the culprit, because "They lose interest as children become more self-reliant."

Teresa and Shirley taught school early in their married lives but quit to raise their children. They tell similar stories of fairly consistent involvement. Both women are active in elementary homeroom activities and in PTA, primarily fund-raising efforts. Teresa found school interaction easier when her children attended a small country grade school. She even "bowed out" of her three sons' school lives for a time at the onset of their adolescent years.

Shirley, on the other hand, believes that it is parents who first lose interest. She did sense distance from her two daughters at one point but was determined not to react in kind. In high school she remained interested in their many activities.

As noted earlier, all the continuously involved participants were married, and the wife seemed to play the stronger support role. Even Mike, the only male, admitted that his wife attended many more parent conferences. Other women made excuses for their husbands.

Clearly, in all the participants' marriages the agreement seems to have been that the woman would take major responsibility for the children, and each participant seemed satisfied with that.

Increased Involvement: A Matter of Survival

John's, Jack's, and Liz's narratives describe bonding experiences with their families and children that relate to increasing involvement with their children's educations at home and at school.

Interestingly, these participants were different in many respects. John and Liz were married, but Jack was single. John is an American Indian, Liz and Jack are Caucasian. All three are educated and middle class. But Jack received his degree late in life and his income has volleyed from subsistence to middle class levels. What all three participants had in common was family tragedy that brought them into their children's school lives more intensely than before.

A former minister and now a high school principal, John has been married for more than 20 years. He and his wife have two children, a girl and a boy. John has not always taken the more stereotypical male advocacy/support role. His daughter was a Brownie for a short period of time, and, "I had no problem with picking the Brownies up, having the Brownies at the house, [or] taking desserts."

Both educators, John and his wife always monitored their children's homework and kept a lot of magazines and books around, encouraging them to read in their spare time. John always felt a part of his children's school communities, concurring with Teresa that "It's parents that become disinterested at the secondary level that makes conferences a poor deal. Most of the time at the secondary level parents are there because there are problems."

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When John's daughter was 11 she was diagnosed with cancer. For five years he and his family lived with the fact that her illness might be terminal. They traveled to hospitals together and stayed in Ronald McDonald Houses. Through it all they cried, hoped, prayed, and laughed. John remembers:

> We always knew [when] we had a big examination and we always all got to stick together.... I mean many times we were going into the leading oncology, one of the leading oncologists in the world, where all four of us are tromping into his office. And we just said, "you know if we're going to get some bad news, then we're going to receive it together."

John's daughter lived, and his involvement with her and his son deepened as they grew older. John is convinced that children do well in school and in life when their parents are involved with their activities. This belief ensured participation even during those early adolescent years when his daughter, "didn't want us to be around as much..., but that didn't last very long because she knew that we were going to be there."

Jack's son and daughter have needed him a great deal during their adolescence, so they have not expressed much chagrin at his interest in their lives. He did graduate from high school and attend college for a time but dropped out after he married. He did not return until his divorce. Jack's early involvement in his children's schooling was extensive. His wife was out of town a lot, and he worked at night. Thus, he was at home after school to help with homework and interact about the day.

When Jack's wife left him, he retained custody of the two young teenagers. Jack reasoned that he must become even more involved with his children to keep them emotionally on track while, at the same time, he went back to college to earn bachelor's and master's degrees. He and his children went to school together, while he worked as a salesman at night. He recounted:

> My involvement intensified tremendously, with Haley especially, because I was very fortunate to get her linked with [the local university], and she practiced [flute there] every day. So here's the way my schedule went, it was real simple. I got the kids up and took them to school every day.... Then I went straight to my classes. I was still finishing up my undergraduate. So I would go to classes during the day, and but I worked it around their...school.

After his daughter's music practice, Jack fixed dinner for himself and the children, checked on their homework, and then went to work. Although Jack by no means conforms to the stereotypical parent, he confides that he has failed to interest his son in any cocurricular activities other than art, "but I guess that's okay, I mean, as long as he's happy." Jack credits the educational success he and his children have had, partially, to his parents' financial assistance. But all in all, when his children needed him, Jack was there.

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Like John and Jack, college-educated Liz was doggedly determined to be involved in her two daughters' lives, inside and outside school. A brilliant child, Liz had attended a private school where her parents "paid good money to let other people educate me. I only remember my mother going to school one time to protest any of her three children being put in a certain English teacher's class. Dad was never there."

Liz stopped working when she became pregnant with her first child. She began attending the gatherings of a neighborhood parent (largely women's) school support group. She frequently volunteered in her children's schools from pre-school through high school, often showing up unannounced. "The teachers just got used to seeing me," Liz laughingly recalled. She coached science projects such as Odyssey of the Mind and often helped with homework, although she became a practicing midwife when her younger daughter was a few years old.

Liz's heightened involvement occurred when her older daughter reached high school. Identified as Talented and Gifted (TAG), her daughter was placed in a TAG magnet school within a public high school. The racial composition of the TAG group was one-third Caucasian, one-third African American, and one-third Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian. The high school in which the youngsters were placed was populated almost exclusively by African Americans.

The school district originally had stated that the TAG school would function fairly autonomously within the high school, but during the first year of its existence, this status started to crumble, evolving into the TAG students attending a few different accelerated classes and being verbally and physically harassed at school by picketing parents, city politicians, and some students from the larger high school community.

Liz and her husband formed a multicultural parent group to protest the dissolution of the magnet school. They attended school district site-based management meetings, but believed that school officials did not really want their input. School officials and politicians had promised to support them and then reneged on those commitments, sometimes accusing one of Liz's minority associates of having "white aspirations for his kids."

Clearly the district in which Liz lives was unprepared to deal with what some sociologists view as a class struggle for control of inner-city schools. But the serendipity for Liz was the bonding that she and her daughter have experienced amid the adversity.

Findings and Implications

The majority of participants consistently provided advocacy/support to their children throughout their school lives. Because most of the participants were married, with child care handled by the wife, the sample was certainly not represen-

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tative of the national parent population.

Grace and Norma represent another quite common type of parent, divorced women, and their ability to engage in their children's school lives diminished over time. Yet, at least partially due to the support of Jack's parents, his involvement with his children increased, rather than decreased, after his divorce.

The second major finding was the absence of any real decision-making parental involvement in their children's schools. Only one participant, Liz, described such involvement, and it was primarily negative. Even the participants who were involved in organizations such as PTA and served on school committees reported their major activities were raising money for designated projects, not making decisions about those projects or how schools might be organized or managed, or what and how students would learn or be taught.

Conclusions

If school reform is to occur, if schools are to become more democratic, then parent involvement, particularly at the secondary decision-making level will have to increase. Our study suggests there is a critical mass of parents who are willing and able to take on active roles in school affairs. Moreover, irrespective of race or gender, not all the middle to upper-class parents acquiesced to their adolescents' objections to their continued involvement in the youngsters' school lives.

This does not mean the working-class parents were indifferent, but instead were overburdened. More efforts should be made to involve parents who may be handicapped by heavy familial responsibilities and financial constraints. Rides to school may might be made available, and short workshops to acquaint untutored parents with the workings of city and state government and the school district. But school officials must sincerely want parental input, not just solicit them to bake cookies.

Although teachers and administrators were not queried here, it may be that educators rely too much on assumed parental indifference, especially at the secondary level. Clichés usually have some basis in truth, and the cliché of secondary teachers being more interested in academic subjects than children may explain these parents' perceptions of the secondary schools' indifference toward overall growth and development of adolescent children.

Without exception the parents we interviewed were concerned with the overall growth and development of their children. They tended to see the school levels split along this perspective: the elementary teachers/administrators had an interest in the "whole" child, while the secondary personnel seemed to focus on progress in mathematics, English, or geography. Such perceptions must change. It is up to educators to take the next step. ***~B***

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Scholarships for Children of Public School Employees

The Horace Mann Scholarship Program is beginning its fifth year of providing college scholarships to high school seniors who are children of public school employees. The scholarship program includes one $20,000 scholarship, three $4,000 scholarships, and eight $1,000 scholarships.

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