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Parents are partners in education

Most teachers and principals recognize the importance of partnerships in building a thriving classroom. Partnerships with local businesses can provide resources and expertise that enrich student experiences. Partnerships with area colleges can offer opportunities for advanced learning.

But don't overlook the most important partnership of all — the one with parents.

When parents and teachers work together, the impact on students is phenomenal. Test scores go up. Attendance improves. Discipline problems go down. Graduation rates improve.

The research is really clear that when parents get involved in their child's education — whether through volunteering or participating on school committees or helping with homework — children do better in school. Parent involvement sends a powerful message to children that their parents care about their education and are willing to invest their personal time in making it better.

Savvy teachers make it a priority to develop opportunities for parents to get involved both in their child's individual learning and in their classrooms. They quickly discover that students aren't the only ones who benefit. Parents who are heavily involved in their schools tend to like and respect the teachers. They are more likely to support teachers with their time, energy and resources.

Teachers who encourage parent involvement typically find that the parents can provide valuable information about their children, from medical and social history to personality traits and what motivates them. This insight can be used to better understand students and shape curriculum and assignments that are more meaningful.

There are some shared beliefs that contribute to building a successful collaborative relationship with parents, according to research outlined by the Institute for Student Achievement. A key one is that families are equal partners in helping their children be successful in school. By sharing information and opinions, teachers and parents can jointly make decisions in the best interest of the student.

It's also important to recognize that both in-school and out-of-school times and experiences influence a student's school performance. Decisions made at school affect home, and vice versa.

The Institute for Student Achievement outlines other beliefs that are associated with positive family-school relationships:

1. **Family-school relationships should be focused on student progress and success.** The

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reason for educators and families to coordinate and collaborate is to enhance learning opportunities, educational progress and school success for students. So family-school interactions should focus on what each partner can do to improve the development and learning of children and youth.

2. **Sharing information about child behavior across settings is valued.** Children don't necessarily behave the same in school and at home. Educators believe that sharing information with each other can be useful for assessment and intervention planning.
3. **Collaboration has a positive impact on student learning.** By working together, teachers and parents can accomplish more than either home or school can accomplish alone. They can reinforce equality (the willingness to listen to, respect, and learn from one another) and parity (the blending of knowledge, skills, and ideas to enhance positive outcomes for children).
4. **Families should be active partners in decision making.** Schools should avoid such practices as making decisions in separate meetings prior to meeting with parents. By recognizing parents' expertise, teachers seek input from them on a regular basis and include them when addressing concerns about student learning.
5. **Problems are solved mutually without blaming each other.** When students are experiencing school difficulties, two-way communication between schools and parents is necessary. They realize that they see the children's behavior in their respective settings and withhold judgment until both sides have had an opportunity to provide input. Blame is not attributed to only the family or only the school.
6. **Problem solving is based on a positive, strength-based orientation.** Families and school personnel operate from a non-deficit model, and they focus on the strengths of individuals (educators, parents, students). School personnel view parents as resources for addressing educational concerns. Collaborative problem-solving efforts help to foster optimism about what school personnel and families can accomplish by working together.
7. **Family-school relationships are cultivated and are sustained over time.** Family-school relationships are an ongoing process. Families and educators work together within and across school years to address mutual concerns and provide mutual support for enhancing the learning progress of children and adolescents. Thus, educators realize that working as partners with parents this year will strengthen the partnership in subsequent years.

While schools do well to cultivate multiple partners in education, the one with parents should always top the list. Parents and schools working together on behalf of students are a powerful combination.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant