



Harvard Family
Research Project



FINE Forum

Academic Achievement

Family Involvement Network of Educators
Harvard Family Research Project

Issue 3, Winter 2001/2002

For questions or comments about this paper,
email hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu

About the Family Involvement Network of Educators: Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a strategic effort to strengthen family and community engagement to support children's learning and development. FINE brings together thousands of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening family-school-community partnerships. Members get the latest information about family involvement research, as well as the opportunity to connect with others in the field.

To become a member of FINE, visit our Subscription Center at www.hfrp.org/Subscribe

© 2002 President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced whole or in part without written permission from Harvard Family Research Project.

Harvard Family Research Project · Harvard Graduate School of Education · 3 Garden Street · Cambridge, MA · 02138
www.hfrp.org · Email: hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu · Tel: 617-495-9108 · Fax: 617-495-8594

From the Directors

We are at a turning point in the history of family involvement. Driven by the intersection of standards-based reform, the growing diversity of the student population, and the continuing gap in student achievement among different racial/ethnic and income groups, new forms of family involvement are emerging. While strategies differ, they share a common goal of expanding and deepening family and community roles to help students meet high standards. They also share a data-driven and research orientation, signaling the importance of information for decision making and taking action. With this in mind, we draw your attention to a special bibliography on family involvement and student achievement that we feature in New & Noteworthy.

We begin our *FINE Forum* with a Program Spotlight on The Education Trust, which uses state standards to create avenues of collaboration between parents and teachers around student achievement. Through its Standards in Practice and Parents as Standards Bearers training programs, parents and teachers gain a better understanding of the standards and the changes in instructional practice that can improve academic outcomes. The notion of leveling the playing field in educational matters is echoed in Parent Perspective, where Kelly Butler shares her ideas about authentic partnership between home and school.

In Questions & Answers we speak with Eric Cooper of the National Urban Alliance for effective education and Frankie Powell from the Maya Angelou Institute. They discuss two distinct approaches to address the achievement gap, Cooper focusing on aligning instructional practice with parental support in the home, and Powell with mobilizing community assets to enrich students' learning opportunities. In both cases, they urge action research as an invaluable tool for teacher practice as well as school-level strategic planning.

Teacher Talk presents an action research project carried out by Lara Goldstone. While teaching in Chinatown, New York, she researched communication with parents regarding New York City Language Arts Standards. As a result of this research, her school began holding parent-teacher conferences on Sundays to accommodate parents' busy work schedules, made more translators available to teachers and families, and translated state standards into Chinese.

In Lessons from Leaders three of our FINE member who are principals share innovative ways to inform and gain support from parents and the community around student performance. These principals support creative projects such as: exhibiting student work in the town hall, businesses, and libraries to demonstrate high performance; developing organizational tools to facilitate parent-teacher communication about homework; and empowering parents to develop guidelines for and award grants to other parents for student literacy enrichment.

We also have a Special Supplement in this issue on collaboration and literacy strategies.

From this wide array of ideas and strategies, some themes emerge for teacher education programs and professional development opportunities. Teacher preparation programs can:

- Foster teachers' knowledge of standards and the skills to analyze student work against state and local standards.
- Give teachers the skills to communicate academic progress effectively to parents.
- Encourage teachers to create innovative ways to report student progress and performance to parents and the larger community.
- Empower teachers to understand the importance of their instruction and the possibilities their practice holds to reduce the achievement gap.
- Instill in teachers the notion that community assets support student development and learning.
- Prepare teachers to know that they have a voice to affect classroom and school-wide practice through methods such as action research.

Teachers exercise a profound influence on student achievement. When they partner with families in this endeavor teachers become twice as powerful.

Wishing you peace this holiday season.

Heather B. Weiss, Ed.D.
Founder & Director

M. Elena Lopez
Senior Consultant, FINE cofounder

Holly M. Kreider
Senior Researcher, FINE cofounder

Maggie Caspe
Research Analyst

Program Spotlight

Featured Program: Standards in Practice and Parents as Standards Bearers, The Education Trust

Program Description

As states adopt new education standards that define the concepts and skills students must demonstrate, these standards are often inaccessible to average parents. “Schools must educate parents on standards, on what kinds of work their students will be bringing home, on what the work of their age/grade level student should look like, and on the different resources available to them and their student,” explains Kati Haycock, President of the Education Trust, a nonprofit organization that promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels.

To help both parents and teachers understand what the standards contain, how they connect to instruction, and what action can be taken to align classroom practice with the standards to improve academic outcomes for children, the Education Trust developed two programs: Standards in Practice and Parents as Standards Bearers. Both programs focus on how to “demystify” and use standards.

Standards in Practice (SIP) provides training for teachers to understand standards and to analyze their classroom assignments and the resulting student work to determine whether or not the assignments contain the knowledge students need to meet the standards. Parents as Standards Bearers is a modified version of SIP. This training for parents grew out of the belief that schools will not change unless there is a demand for change from the community. Standards are a way for parents to talk more knowledgeably and be on equal footing with teachers. Knowing about standards helps parents understand the quality of their own children's work better and become better advocates to improve the school system.

Both programs strive to help parents and educators become collaborators by raising the level of knowledge, expectation, and support about each other's work and about the purpose, content, and implementation of the standards. Parents as Standards Bearers attempts to produce parents and community members who can “hold their own” with the educational establishment when advocating for improvements in children's education. The program enables them to examine student work in reference to national, state, and local standards. Meanwhile, Standards in Practice equips schools and districts to create environments that support of high levels of school performance.

Testimonial

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Under the leadership of Superintendent Vicki Phillips, Lancaster, PA is a school district that has embraced SIP. Lancaster is an urban school system within a rural countryside of about 12,000 students. The population is approximately 47 percent Latino, 22 percent African American with a small Asian population. About 70 percent of the children receive free or reduced lunches.

Marilyn Crawford oversees the program that is currently in its third year of implementation. She says, “The problem with standards-based reform is that it is hard to explain. SIP gives teachers and parents something solid to get their hands on. SIP makes it possible for everyone to bring something to the table because we look at concrete student work and bring this work back to the systemic level. For teachers it promotes a culture of expert teachers and for parents it is like putting the standards in usable packaging.”

Cheryl Bankus, a seventh and eighth grade teacher in the program observes, “The program is based on a lot of trust. It puts teachers in a really vulnerable place. You bear your soul to your colleagues and also to parents. I've seen SIP make teaching more humane and open dialogue. You can look at each individual child and know and explain exactly where he or she is. This way parents really know that teachers know their child. It changes the dialogue you have with parents. It makes you say things such as ‘that's my fault, I didn't teach that.’ A lot of times, teachers are afraid they will say something wrong, but this levels the field and keeps the focus on student achievement.”

Program Implementation

Implementation of both programs can be categorized in several phases: demystifying standards, unlocking the power of data to understand equity issues, applying the standards to instructional practice, and using standards for advocacy.

Demystifying Standards

For both SIP and Parents as Standards Bearers, the first phase of implementation involves demystifying standards and using them as tools. Education Trust trainers go directly to school sites and explain the research and rationale behind standards and models. Because standards can be used to assess quality and provide accountability, trainers walk teachers and parents through what the local and state standards look like, and how they help ensure quality assessment of educational curriculum. Trainers provide a history of standards to help demystify the process and make them more personal. They explain that people use standards in their daily lives, usually in the context of safety and quality, and that standards do not have to be intimidating and foreign.

Stephanie Robinson, Principal Partner, and the lead person for the Trust's parent work notes that “The FDA has a set of standards that defines what quality meat looks like. Because of them, consumers understand what they are getting when they buy ‘FDA Approved Meat.’ Educational standards work in the same way. One way we make standards ‘real’ for parents is to demonstrate how standards were developed and where they came from. For example we might brainstorm with a group of parents what we think fourth graders should know about geography. We might come up with knowledge of state capitals, exports of different countries, and the list goes on. We then explain that standards evolved in this very way—from people sitting down and thinking about what children at different age levels should know.”

Unlocking the Power of Data

The next phase illustrates how data can help drive system-wide decisions. Trainers use data from the National Association of Educational Progress and demonstrate that data are not only about test scores, but also indicate the degree to which different groups of students have equitable access to the practices, resources, and investments that make a difference in student learning. The indicators include access to well-prepared teachers, challenging curricula, and effective instruction. When parents look at the data they understand more clearly the systemic changes that must be made in the educational infrastructure to achieve equity.

Robinson explains, “Using data clearly shows an achievement gap, but also what can be done to close it. We help parents to see that the gap is in part a direct result of holding students from low-income families and many students of color to lower standards. When children are not meeting standards, parents need to realize that the solution is not to lower the standards, but rather to insist that the school maintain high standards and provide the students and the teachers with the support they need to meet them. Parents should not oppose standards, but should embrace and use them.”

Applying Standards to Instructional Practice

Next, parents and teachers learn to apply the standards to educational practice. Teachers bring in assignments and student work from their classes. Parents bring in their child's homework. Teachers and parents, generally in separate workshops, go through the hands-on process of comparing actual student work against the standards.

The experience is enlightening as parents and teachers often realize what is missing in students' work. The SIP and Standards Bearers training programs are the beginning of an ongoing process of self-study. For teachers, the initial workshops are the first of many professional development meetings with their peers to examine more deeply the value of what they are teaching. This can be both a risky and vulnerable situation for teachers as they open their practice for everyone to see. The success of the self-study process depends in large part on the willingness of administrators and teacher leaders to adjust school schedules to permit teachers to meet weekly or biweekly in a safe and constructive environment. When implemented, SIP becomes embedded in teacher professional development and practice.

Advocacy

For parents, the next step is to be able to use the standards to their advantage. The Education Trust helps parents understand how to communicate with teachers and school administrators and apply effective strategies of collaboration. The standards become a powerful advocacy tool. “Parents are no longer scared of the standards, but rather are able to stay on equal ground with the teachers and school officials. We have parents come back to us and tell us that they can't be blown off any longer,” says Robinson. “For teachers standards are an instruction tool and for parents standards are an advocacy tool. The distinction is critical.”

Program Evaluation

The teacher component of SIP has been evaluated as part of team-based schooling. “Standards in Practice coupled with team-based schooling creates a structured way for teachers to have constructive engagement around teacher practice,” says Jon Supovitz, Senior Researcher, Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. The parent component has not yet been evaluated.

Program Cost

A training for approximately 60 team leaders or coaches costs \$3,000 for an Education Trust two-person team, plus expenses, and a 2-day followup visit.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Although the Education Trust does not currently use SIP with preservice teachers, the program has implications for integrating knowledge and skills about standards-based education with family involvement.

1. Provide preservice teachers with opportunities to understand and infuse high academic standards into their practice. As grading and reporting become criterion-referenced, teachers must be able to identify what they want their students to know and be able to do. To prepare preservice teachers for this, faculty can simulate Standards in Practice and develop in teachers the capacity to compare student work to content standards. In small groups, preservice teachers can develop their own rubrics for a particular subject and level, a process that helps them gain a greater understanding of how and why standards are developed. They can then compare actual student work from their field placements (i.e., student journal entries, math assignments) against the rubrics they created. For students who do not meet the developed criteria, preservice teachers can brainstorm strategies to improve instruction and to support students individually.

2. Instill the importance of gaining family perspectives on student achievement. Developing solid home–school partnerships entails teacher understanding of what parents want for their children and how teachers can support them. Preservice teachers can go out into the community and interview parents about their expectations and their knowledge about state standards. This information gathering also serves to educate parents about high standards, and the resources that they can turn to for more information. The preservice teachers can then use the data gathered for class deliberation about issues and their implications for school policy and practice.

By exposure to diverse family backgrounds and experiences, teachers are more likely to learn to tailor the way they describe their own practices. This understanding can be fostered not only through parent interviews, but also through a “family as faculty” type of presentation. In this model, parents would come to class and share their views about schooling and assessment. They may, for example, present their own childhood experiences going to school and the system of grading so that teachers can have a

conversation about comparisons with the U.S. system and its current focus on standards-based education.

3. Develop the capacity to communicate with families about standards and academic achievement. Teachers must be able to report clearly and accurately to parents a state's education standards and an individual student's academic progress in relation to those standards. A number of tools can be used to build teachers' comfort level and communication skills. These include role play to practice reporting to parents, and teaching cases to problem-solve about difficult communication related to student performance, classroom instruction and other sensitive topics. Students can use technology (e.g., voice mail and webpages) to inform parents about how classroom instruction supports high academic standards. In conjunction with their mentor teacher, preservice teachers may develop exhibits of student work illustrating the standards to be displayed in the school and community. By providing multiple opportunities for enhanced communication, students begin to overcome a major barrier to positive, collaborative relationships with parents.

For more information contact:

Stephanie Robinson
Education Trust
1725 K St. NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20006
Tel: 202-293-1217
Fax: 202-293-2605
Website: www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Parents+and+Community

For further research on this topic:

Barsdale-Ladd, M., & Thomas, K. F. (2000). What's at stake in high stakes testing: Teachers and parents speak out. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 384–397.

The Center on Educational Policy. (2001). *It takes more than testing: Closing the achievement gap*.

Making Good on the Promise: High Standards for All from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform

Public Agenda survey on academic standards

Shepard, L., & Bliem, C. (1995). Parents thinking about standardized tests and performance assessments. *Educational Researcher*, 24, 25–32.

Questions & Answers

The achievement gap connotes the wide disparities in school success among different racial/ethnic and income groups. African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians now account for one third of the 54 million children in the nation's K–12 classrooms. Students of color are more likely to drop out, have less access to advanced classes, and be taught by teachers uncertified in the discipline they are teaching. (NAACP National Education Department's "Call to Action")

Eric Cooper, Executive Director of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, and Frankie Powell, Project Director of the Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education, talked to FINE separately to discuss two distinct approaches to involving families to help close the achievement gap. We begin with Eric Cooper.

Q. What is the National Urban Alliance?

Eric Cooper: The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) is a network of consultants providing professional development for teachers through practical workshops and demonstration lessons. We had our first conference at Teachers College, Columbia University in 1991 and began to hire staff in 1993. NUA consultants go into schools and demonstrate lessons in math, science, reading, and writing with groups of students, then coach the instructional staff. We currently work in New York, Seattle, Maryland, Newark, and all of the schools in Indianapolis.

Our professional development is based on the belief that all children are capable of attaining high educational standards. NUA consultants give teachers the latest knowledge, tools, and techniques to achieve this goal and also work to lift teacher morale, understanding the challenges faced by educators today. We also believe that all stakeholders in the community must participate in improving learning and teaching and addressing the social, cultural, and intellectual needs of children and youth. Consequently, our efforts are system wide, and often engage universities, the business sector, and other stakeholders. We work to support change at the instruction and institutional level by integrating structural interventions like capacity building, analysis of school climate, how parents are engaged, and school leadership with classroom-based support.

Q: What can schools and families do to eliminate the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: Family involvement in the education of children and youth is critical to eliminating the achievement gap. Schools can no longer be isolated. Sadly, many parents in urban communities do not have the time to spend with their children on bridging the gap between school and home learning. The mother or grandmother is often holding two or three jobs and the kids return to the homes without supervision.

Yet the school community can reach out to students and their families by extending instruction from the school to the home. I know of this through personal experience as a

teacher in Harlem. I would go into my students' homes to work with them and their parents, simultaneously modeling and demonstrating how to teach reading in the context of the home. Clearly those parents of school age children who are able to spend their time supporting the learning that occurs in the home see the benefits of this interaction with their children. As the parent of a second grader and kindergarten student, I personally am aware of the importance of the home-school partnership.

Q: What is NUA's strategy to close the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: Any large-scale school effort to close the achievement gap must center on instructional and institutional change. Schools as presently constituted cannot and will not close the achievement gap. That is why they must forge partnerships with other interventions. For example, recently we formed a partnership with the International Reading Association (IRA). Our Urban Partnership for Literacy is a comprehensive new effort to improve instruction based on education reform focused on the classroom. The approach to instruction includes not only knowing how teachers should teach reading well, but also knowing how social issues impact each child's instruction and how meeting the needs of the entire child can effectively produce change.

Q: How can communities become involved in closing the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: To increase community involvement in and support for the nation's urban schools we need to create more public engagement activities. We must provide clear, accurate, and timely information about performance and practical ways of closing the achievement gaps while raising the levels for all children. There should be more movies, radio, and television spots that feature successful practices of urban education. And the entire community needs to understand that diversity helps all children develop the values and problem-solving and decision-making skills to support achievement. All parents need to embrace diversified learning communities.

Q: How should teacher education programs prepare teachers to support families to close the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: Teacher preparation must come up with unique ways to better help teachers understand culture. Teachers need to be ethnographers. When teachers go into the home and learn something about the home lives of children they teach, they can bring their learning back to the classroom to aid instruction. [See Teacher Talk in this edition of *FINE Forum*.]

Teachers also have to learn how to be advocates for children. They must explain to parents and children the issues they face - whether it's testing or other areas of academics. Teachers must help raise expectations for students and demonstrate how belief systems and expectations have been manipulated historically. Then they must empower families and show them how they can address the issues that are of most concern to them.

While the National Urban Alliance focuses on developing teachers, classrooms, and communities through reforming the instructional core, the Maya Angelou Institute of Child and Family Education uses a university-community partnership to close the achievement gap by identifying community assets for children and youth. Frankie Powell shares her ideas.

Q. What is the Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education?

Frankie Powell: The Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education is a community-based comprehensive center of child and family development located at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina.

Q: What is your perspective on closing the achievement gap?

Frankie Powell: Much of what has been done to close the achievement gap is done from a developmental and cognitive domain. Research tells us achievement is related not just to cognitive factors, but also to psychological and social ones. If we can assess how students, schools, and communities view themselves and their assets, we can use the data to drive decision making to help close the achievement gap. Respect for closing the gap really needs to begin as community-based action research where community and families are seen as partners - not as others. Families must be a part of this process from the beginning of program development.

Q: What is Partners for Academic and Social Success?

Frankie Powell: The Partners for Academic and Social Success (PASS) Project is a collaboration between the Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education and the Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools. Our approach uses a community-based action research model of data collection, information sharing, discussion, and planning. We are conducting a survey of students' views of themselves and their assets and using the data to enhance family involvement in middle schools. We are integrating a curricular intervention into the schools and then generating data about the results to better inform the decision making of school administrators.

Q: How do you assess the developmental assets of children?

Frankie Powell: We have been using the Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors survey. We took a profile of 200 7th graders and looked at what those students were saying about the community. The survey helps us to identify the assets of positive relationships, opportunities, skills, and values that enable young people to become physically, cognitively, and socially healthy adults. The survey measures four

indicators: developmental assets, deficits, risky behavior, and thriving indicators. The survey brings the student voice to the forefront of the discussion.

We anticipate that the forthcoming discussion of the results of this study with families of the participants will promote a common framework for deepening the family-school relationships. Further discussion of the results of the external assets will enable the family-school partners to use data to set priorities and strategies for programs and services. In this way, the asset framework is linked to academic success.

For more information contact:

Eric Cooper
National Urban Alliance for Effective Education
at the Council of the Great City Schools
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 702
Washington, DC 20004
Tel: 202-393-2427
Voicemail: 800-682-4556
Fax: 908-604-0711
Website: www.nuatc.org

Frankie Denise Powell, Ph.D
Maya Angelou Institute
Winston-Salem State University
Winston-Salem, NC 27110-0003
Tel: 336-750-2696
Fax: 336-750-2375
Email: powellf@wssu.edu

Parent Perspective

Featured Program: Parents for Public Schools

Parents for Public Schools is a national organization of grassroots chapters dedicated to recruiting families to stay in or come back to public schools, involving parents in more meaningful roles, and improving public schools community-wide through district level involvement. Kelly Allin Butler is the Executive Director of Parents for Public Schools and the mother of three daughters in public schools in Jackson, Mississippi.

In spite of the current emphasis on family involvement in public schools, the authentic engagement of parents is still not understood in practice. This is true, in part, because the strategies employed to involve parents still place us in traditional roles that are external to the school. Schools that continue to label parents as "visitors" will never know the power of "partners."

Parents for Public Schools (PPS) offers these suggestions for transforming relationships that lead to meaningful engagement and improved student achievement.

1. Recognize that parent involvement is fundamental to student success. Be clear in your own mind about why you want our involvement. Be specific with us about what it is you want us to do.
2. Don't assume we don't know what to do or that we're not interested. Some of us bring powerful skills and energy for change.
3. Find those of us who share your vision for change. Engage us in the big work and give us credence as legitimate players.
4. Help us to understand what you expect of our students. And help us to see how these expectations are directly linked to a high standard of learning.
5. Gain our confidence and trust by gearing your performance as if your own child depended on it. Ours do.
6. Just as with students, every parent comes with a different level of readiness. Honor where each of us is and build from there.
7. Call us with good news, not just the bad.
8. Ask us to be mentors for other parents who may not be inclined to be involved or know what to do. As parents we need to lean on, learn from, and lead each other.
9. For those of us who are reluctant to come to school to see you, come to our homes or hold a group meeting at a neutral site in our neighborhood. While this

may be a lot to ask, without it we'll never get the message about how important our involvement is.

10. Demonstrate that crossing the comfort zones of race, economics, language, and culture may be hard for you too, but worth the effort.
11. Involve more of us in planning at the school and district levels. When we are part of the process, you might stop seeing us as just part of the problem.
12. Include us in decision-making if you want us to have confidence in the decisions.
13. Focus our conversations on teaching and learning. And recognize when we are trying to focus yours.
14. Don't stop at identifying the barriers to our involvement. A school culture that truly believes the parent connection is important to student success will do whatever it takes to make it happen - including the reallocation of school and community resources.

To learn more about Parents for Public Schools contact them at:

Parents for Public Schools
1520 N. State Street
Jackson, MS 39202
Tel: 800-880-1222
Fax: 601-353-0002
Email: ppschapter@parents4publicschools.com
Website: www.parents4publicschools.com

Teacher Talk

Action Research

Action research aims to improve both practice and policy. When teachers design and implement their own research in schools, it can catalyze meaningful conversations among parents, communities, and policymakers.

The Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI) is a program under the leadership of Teachers Network, a nonprofit education organization that identifies and connects innovative teachers in public school systems. TNPI operates with the belief that teachers are natural researchers. Ellen Meyers, Director of the Teachers Network Policy Institute says, "Teachers must have a voice. Through action research, teachers have time to reflect on their practice and develop professionally. It also allows teachers to affect change on a larger scale."

TNPI, with funds from the MetLife Foundation, supports action research Fellows - teachers with full-time classroom teaching responsibilities who also research policy issues. The MetLife Fellows then develop recommendations, document their work in papers and publications, and disseminate their work locally and nationally.

Below are two action research reports by Lara Goldstone, a MetLife Fellow. While teaching in Chinatown, New York, Lara researched communication with parents regarding New York City Language Arts Standards. As a result of her research, the school began holding parent-teacher conferences on Sundays to accommodate parents' busy work schedules, made more translators available to teachers and families, and translated state standards into Chinese. She says, "Having evidence that working with parents around standards does indeed improve student achievement has helped me to prioritize working with families. More importantly, it has given me the conviction when talking to parents that they can make a difference in their children's work, even though many immigrant parents who were not educated in the U.S. are not convinced that they can help."

For further information on Action Research:

Solving Problems with "Action Research": A Conversation with Pedro Noguera, *Harvard Education Letter*.

Burnafor, G., Fischer, J., Hobson, D. (Eds) (2001). *Teachers doing research: The power of action through inquiry*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Ginns, I., Heirdsfield, A., Atweh, B., & Watters, J.J. (2001). Beginning teachers becoming professionals through action research. *Educational Action Research*, 111-133.

A Quiet, Well-Lighted Place with Books: How Communicating with Parents about the New Reading Standards Affects Student Achievement

by Lara Goldstone

Research Question

- Does communicating with parents about the English Language Arts independent reading standards, and about how parents can support their children's reading, affect student achievement?
- How can schools help to build social capital around reading?

Rationale

I teach reading to sixth graders in Manhattan's Chinatown. In all, 99% of my students speak English as a second language. They entered my classes reading about two years below grade level on average.

The New Standards for middle school require students to read 25 challenging books or texts in a variety of genres each year and to demonstrate that they have understood, analyzed, compared and contrasted, questioned, and evaluated these texts. I have found that many students are not reading outside of class, something that is necessary in order to meet the challenging reading standards. In addition, some students who do read at home are still not questioning and analyzing the texts as much as they need to.

What, I wondered, is happening outside of school that is serving as a barrier to independent reading and to in-depth questioning of the text? Since a child's environment outside of school does indeed make such a difference in a child's achievement, how can the school help to raise the social capital of that environment?

Tools

- Parent and student surveys about what students do in the evenings and what they perceive to get in the way of reading
- Interviews with five parents and their children who attended a workshop on supporting reading at home
- Notes from parent-teacher conferences in November and February
- Notes from weekly reading conferences with students in my reading class
- Student reading logs - records of their thoughts on the books they are reading independently
- Field notes from visiting after school programs

Barriers to Student Achievement of the Reading Standards

Barrier 1: Many parents were not aware of or able to monitor how their children were spending their after school time.

Possible solutions: Work with parents on limit-setting and explain to them the technology of modems and Internet software.

Barrier 2: Many students go to after-school programs that do not adequately support reading development. Those who go straight home after school often do not have a quiet place to read.

Possible solutions: Meet with the directors of after school programs and explain how they can support reading development.

Barrier 3: Parents lack understanding of how to support their children's reading development.

Possible solutions: Hold workshops for parents to explain the reading standards and model strategies for parents to support the reading standards in their primary language, such as how to start book talks at home.

Barrier 4: Students do not have access to enough interesting and appropriately-leveled books or to quiet places to read.

Possible solutions: Make sure students bring appropriately-leveled, interesting books home with them. Provide other avenues for access to books and lobby support from the whole community for more books. Talk to parents about lighting for reading.

Policy Implications

School budgeting: Money for translation of handouts, workshops, and parent-teacher conferences. Money for expanding school libraries.

School or district collaboration with after school program: Collaboration between independent after school programs and teachers to make sure programs are supporting reading.

City budgeting: Extending library hours and increasing the pace of the renovations of neighborhood branches.

School scheduling: Period for independent reading in a room where there is a large selection of books and an experienced literacy teacher with whom to confer.

Teacher contract: Per-session pay or need to have a contract that provides for extended parent conferences and preparation and delivery of parent workshops.

Professional development: Include discussion of cultural barriers such as lack of discussion about reading at home and tips for setting realistic expectations for homework.

Board of Education: Citywide ELA standards need to be translated into Chinese.

The Role of Parent-Teacher Communication in Helping Students to Reach New Standards
by Lara Goldstone, July 1999

Research Question

- What happens when I communicate explicitly with parents about the New Middle School English Language Arts Standards for Student Achievement?
- What is the impact of parental understanding of the New Standards for speaking and listening on their children's performance?

Rationale

In the increasingly diverse cultural landscape of the United States, verbal communication is more challenging and necessary than ever before. Hence, it is appropriate that the New Standards for Middle School adopted by New York City include a performance standard for speaking and listening that requires students to participate in group meetings and meet several criteria: to take turns, solicit other students' opinions and comments, offer their own opinions without dominating, respond appropriately to comments and questions, give reasons and evidence to support opinions, and clarify and expand when asked to do so (New Standards Middle School Performance Standards, p.24). District 2's ambitious work with the New Standards incorporates an approach to teaching which emphasizes discussing clear benchmarks of performance with the students, who then revise their work until it is "good enough." Though such criteria-based work has been tremendously helpful in improving my students' reading and writing, I have been disappointed in the past that most of my students have not met the performance standards for speaking and listening spelled out in the New Standards documents.

Tools

- Grades on report cards for discussion for quarters 1-3 for my 64 sixth-grade students
- Check-off sheet filled out during discussions or when listening to tapes of student discussions to see if students are meeting the criteria for good discussions
- Notes from parent-teacher conferences about student discussion. A Chinese translator was present to help me speak with most parents.
- Reflections from students about speaking
- Parent survey about student discussion from the end of quarter 2 and the end of quarter 3

Data and Analysis

Students' abilities to meet the criteria for speaking improved dramatically over the first three quarters. In general, where the standard was supported at home, students made gains in classroom discussions and were able to meet most of the speaking criteria. My data elucidated several barriers to student achievement.

Barriers to Student Achievement and Strategies for Overcoming Them

Lack of confidence about academic English: Some students do not feel confident speaking about academic subjects in English. Their silence in class baffles their parents, who hear their children prattling on socially at home and on the phone with their friends. Allowing students more time to wait until they feel more comfortable speaking English, creating a classroom environment of mutual trust and respect, giving students separate practice in English language skills, and showing parents how to practice speaking with their children even in their primary language about complex subjects might all help students who are not confident in their academic English abilities.

Cultural mismatch: Some students have been reared to believe that voicing disagreement with others constitutes disrespectful behavior or have been conditioned to be very quiet. One student wrote, "A lot of our parents tell us not to argue. That's not respectful. If I disagree with someone's answer, they might get their feelings hurt. It's like arguing or telling them they're wrong." Speaking with parents about why discussions are important in school during conferences helped some students to feel more comfortable disagreeing. Parents were able to explain to their children the difference between respectfully disagreeing in a discussion with peers and disrespectfully arguing in other situations. In addition, practicing ways to disagree politely as a class, when students did not get offended or hurt, helped students to feel more at ease disagreeing.

Shyness in front of peers: Feelings of insecurity are prevalent among adolescents whose identities are changing, and for whom peer approval is of paramount importance. Here again, creating a respectful and trusting classroom environment and having parents work with their children on self esteem are key.

Obstacles to Successful Communication with Parents

Limited access to translators: My school district does not fund a translator for our school. 90% of my students' parents speak Cantonese or Spanish. Most teachers at our school speak neither of these languages.

Limited access to translated materials: Though my district is at the national forefront of the work with the New Standards, they have repeatedly neglected to meet my director's requests for a copy of the standards documents translated into Chinese.

Cultural barriers: Though I did manage to convince some parents of the importance of speaking in class, it is difficult to go against deeply ingrained ideas about how children should behave. I believe that some parents truly wanted to help their children improve their speaking grades, but could not help their children practice speaking at home, because they were not accustomed to having discussions about academic topics with their children.

Policy Implications

My study suggests that student achievement increases when students feel comfortable speaking in front of their peers and when teachers communicate standards to parents, thereby indicating the need for policy changes at several different levels.

Pedagogy: Teachers should carefully cultivate a respectful and caring community in their classrooms. Though some teachers see such work as fluffy or tangential to achievement, it is essential in getting middle school students, especially those who are not confident in their English language abilities, to feel at ease expressing themselves.

District: Budgets should ensure funding for translators so that parents from all linguistic and cultural backgrounds can understand the standards and learn how to help their children achieve them.

Professional development: District professional development and pre-service training around standards should include discussion of cultural barriers and student discussion.

Board of Education: Citywide performance standards should be translated into languages so that all parents can read and understand them.

Contract: The teacher contract should allocate more time for parent-teacher conferences. The value of excellent communication skills for students is clear and I commend the Board of Education for its adoption of high standards. In order to level the playing field, students from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds must be given equal opportunities to achieve the rigorous criteria set forth in the standards documents. Paving the path for more teacher-parent communication with translators, conference time, and appropriate professional development is the first step to success.

For more information contact:

Ellen Meyers
Teachers Network
285 West Broadway
New York, NY 10013
Tel: 212-966-5582

Fax: 212- 941-1787

Website: www.teachersnetwork.org/tnpi

Lessons from Leaders

A high school, middle school, and elementary school principal comment on some specific strategies schools can use to support families and communities in children's achievement.

Harry Chertok from Division Avenue High School writes:

In my four years as principal of Division Avenue High School we have been very successful in supporting the needs of our parents, community, and students as we strive for excellence under the new state standards here in New York State. Over the past four years the Regents Diploma rate has increased dramatically. One of the main things that teachers and I do to support the various constituencies is to make use of technology to stay in touch with parents about their children's progress on a continual basis. For example, we have a homework hotline so that parents of students who are absent can leave messages and check on daily assignments. We also have an autodialing system used to notify parents daily when homework is not turned in on time. Our school has a policy whereby every telephone call to a teacher or administrator is returned the day it is received because we think communication to parents regarding good and bad news needs to be timely and respectful. We also give parent workshops on understanding new state standards.

To keep the larger community informed of our students' performance, we make every effort to publicize the good news in every type of media. We have student work displayed outside of the school building, in libraries, town hall, and in local businesses. As a principal, I foster relationships with the PTA and Board of Education members along with local politicians. I try to share progress with them on a year round basis and not just on formal occasions. I go to civic and religious gatherings in my community to discuss the progress of my school.

Dr. Harry Chertok
Principal
Division Avenue High School
Levittown, New York

Janice Waters from Metter Intermediate School writes:

In Georgia, law now mandates School Councils. The principal, two teachers selected by the teaching staff, two parents elected by the school's parents, and two business people all sit on the advisory board. We are finding that the council is a good communication tool with the community. As the council learns about test scores and school instructional happenings, they turn this information over to their constituencies. We also keep parents informed about promotion requirements, curriculum, testing, standards, and expectations through orientations and our school website.

Also, a new effort to help student success in our school is the use of agendas such as calendars and 'assignment space'. These organizational tools are used daily to record

homework assignments, send notes home, and create space for parents to write messages. Through higher completion rates of homework and more systematic and organized communication with the home, we feel that children have greater opportunity to succeed.

Janice D. Waters
Principal
Metter Intermediate School
Metter, Georgia

Mary Russo from Richard J. Murphy Elementary School writes

Families of students at the Richard J. Murphy Elementary School are viewed as an integral part of our school's effort to insure all students have opportunities to learn to standards. They are supported with their own learning opportunities as well. Through monthly workshops, a ten-hour per week parent coordinator, and weekly activities for parents with translators present and childcare provided, parents learn how to help their children meet standards. This year, forty percent of Murphy School parents attended at least one workshop for parents. Workshop topics include: How to Help Your Child with Reading, How to Help Your Child with Writing, What the School's Reading and Writing Program Is, How Your Child Is Tested in Reading and Writing, How to Help Your Child with Math, What the School's Math Program Is, and How Your Child is Tested in Math.

Also, using a grant from the school's business partner, Stop & Shop, parents run a small grants program for families for the purchase of books for the home. The grants are small (\$50 to \$100 each) and parents devise the one-page application form and criteria. Parents set the deadlines, rate the grants and distribute the funds to families in a simple awards ceremony.

Mary L. Russo
Principal
Richard J. Murphy Elementary School
Boston, Massachusetts

New & Noteworthy

Family Involvement and Student Achievement Bibliography

This bibliography, now in the FINE Resources section, contains selected research journal articles, books, and reports from 1995–2001 relating to family involvement and academic achievement.

Harvard Educational Review Special Issue: Immigration and Education

This special issue presents new research findings on current issues in educating immigrant children. Included are research by Marcelo and Carola Suárez-Orozco and two articles by Gerardo López and Vivian Louie on parent involvement.

iBinder

A project of the University of West Florida, this interactive website gives teachers, parents, and mentors access to various standards, strategies, and supports for children's achievement.

Just for the Kids

This website provides school achievement information to help parents understand how the schools their children attend compare to other schools across the state.

Making the Grade: The Influence of Religion Upon the Academic Performance of Youth in Disadvantaged Communities

This report from the Center for Research on Religion interprets the positive relationship of faith-based participation and student achievement. Faith-based initiatives are shown to reinforce parental support networks and values and increase social capital in the community.

Making Standards Matter 2001

The sixth report by the American Federation of Teachers on state efforts to institute a standards-based education system indicates that the standards reform movement could be in trouble without midcourse corrections.

An Idea Book for Title IX Staff: Supporting School Improvement for Indian Students, Parent Guide: Making a Difference for Indian Students: Families and Schools Honoring Achievement

These two reports by the New York Technical Assistance Center and Region II Comprehensive Center identify key areas, including family involvement, that promote school improvement around achievement while ensuring that the needs of Indian students are being addressed in the process.

A Parent's Guide to the Missouri Assessment Program

Practical Parenting Partnerships (PPP) is a K–12 family resource/parent education

program offered through the school district to parents, educators, and students. It has developed a workshop to help parents understand Missouri's standards and testing. (Click on Regional Workshop Information to learn more about the program.)

Promising Practices in Family Involvement in Schools

This monograph edited by Diana Hiatt-Michael of Pepperdine University (published by Information Age Publishing) presents views on different issues in family school community partnerships.

Setting the Stage for Success: Bringing Parents into Education Reform as Advocates for Higher Student Achievement

This report is based on The Pew Charitable Trusts' evaluation of the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (CIPL), an initiative of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.

Special Supplement

Engaging Parents in Reading Achievement: Finding Common Ground Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

A new initiative, Engaging Parents in Reading Achievement: Finding Common Ground, directs its efforts on a critical stakeholder in education reform - labor management teams. The initiative is a project of the John F. Kennedy School of Government and the Public Sector Labor Management Committee, an organization representing 29 union and employer groups with key partners such as the National School Board Association and the American Federation of Teachers. The Ford Foundation and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service provide funding for reading improvement programs in Cleveland and Toledo, Ohio, Hartford, Connecticut, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The unions and school districts are working to implement the programs collaboratively, making student achievement a focus of their work.

On November 15, teams from the five cities met at the Kennedy School of Government to share their experiences and problem-solve on implementation issues. Team members shared their current and future outreach efforts. They were asked: what are you doing to get parents involved? what else can you do to get to know these parents?

Perth Amboy members talked about creating a survey to obtain information about the parents with limited reading skills. Once they have the results they plan to create focus groups to reach out to parents of 5th and 6th grade students. They will explore the possibility of increasing the role of non-instructional employees to increase children's literacy.

Toledo members reported using the Parent-Advisory Council to conduct community forums and to add business partners.

Hartford members described the implementation of a Home School connection program to foster communication between teachers and parents; they plan to create a school climate survey to assess the needs of the students.

The New Orleans members reported that the district has hired 120 parent liaisons to develop a strong school and home connection. These liaisons work to further communication between schools and parents. Each of the schools holds a monthly parent meeting.

Cleveland team members described adapting the FAST program, which was developed by Dr. Lynn McDonald. The program begins by creating culturally representative teams based on collaboration between parents and professionals from the local school and two community based agencies. The team is then trained to conduct outreach to stressed, isolated, and often low-income families to invite them to attend a multi-family group meeting.

Team members raised important questions about their work. For example, participants discussed the challenge of engaging parents with limited English or low levels of literacy in their children's reading. To address this challenge, participants suggested the following:

- Read to children in their native language. Among parents with limited reading skills, storytelling is a positive alternative.
- Conduct broad community outreach. Some parents tend to feel more comfortable away from the school setting. It is easier for them to get involved through community-based organizations and after school programs.
- Hold a "literacy night" in the same fashion as parent teacher night. The teachers can make suggestions to encourage your children to read at home.
- Hold a "literacy tea" with both parents and children in attendance. Parents can read one chapter in a book while the student reads another.
- Engage parents in a "reading achievement" program where they can celebrate their children's achievements.

For more information on labor-management programs and joint projects that focus on student improvement in reading, contact Linda Kaboolian at Linda_Kaboolian@harvard.edu or Allyne Beach at [aBeach-PSLMC@workingforamerica.org](mailto:PSLMC@workingforamerica.org).

For Further Reading

- Anderson, S.A. (2000). How parental involvement makes a difference in reading achievement. *Reading-Improvement*, 37, 61-86.
- Bloome, D., Katz, L., Solsken, J., Willet, J., & Wilson-Keenan, J. (2000). Interpellations of family/community and classroom literacy practices. *Journal of Educational Research*, 93, 155-163.
- Collins, L. & Matthey, S. (2001). Helping parents to read with their children: Evaluation of an individual and group reading motivation programme. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 24, 65-81.
- Dickinson, D.K. & Tabors, P.O. (Eds). (2001). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.
- Duran, R., Duran, J., Perry-Romero, D., & Sanchez, E. (2001). Latino immigrant parents and children learning and publishing together in an after-school setting. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* (Jespar), 6, 95-113.
- Faires, J., Nichols, W.D., & Rickelman, R.J. (2000). Effects of parental involvement in developing competent readers in first grade. *Reading Psychology*, 21, 195-215.
- Leseman, P.P.M. & de Jong, P.F. (2001). How important is home literacy for acquiring literacy in school? In Verhoeven, L. & Snow, C.E. (Eds.) (2001). *Literacy and motivation: Reading engagement in individuals and groups* (pp. 71-93). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Reese, L. & Gallimore, R. (2000). Immigrant Latinos' cultural model of literacy development: An evolving perspective on home-school discontinuities. *American Journal of Education*, 108, 103-134.