

Families – An Essential Ingredient for Student Success and Excellent Schools

By Otha Thornton, President of National PTA

Researchers Keith Robinson and Angel L. Harris recently released the results from a study on family engagement. The findings of the study appear to challenge the traditional view of the importance and positive impact of family engagement on children's academic achievement. Actually, the findings highlight a lot of what is already known about effective family engagement. It's the type of engagement that matters the most when it comes to student achievement.

Robinson and Harris assert that family engagement activities including observing a child's class, helping students choose high school courses and helping children with homework do not improve student achievement. Existing research, however, demonstrates that children do best if parents play a variety of roles in their learning. When parents engage a number of ways, students attend school more regularly, earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education ([Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. \(2002\). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*](#)).

In a 2010 study on school improvement, illustrated in the book [Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago](#), family engagement was identified as one of five essential supports for school turnarounds. The seven-year study specifically evaluated school improvement in low-income elementary schools in urban Chicago. The researchers found that elementary schools with strong family engagement were 10 times more likely to improve in math and four times more likely to improve in reading than schools weak on this measure. The study demonstrates that, for school improvement to be successful, schools must treat family and community engagement as an integral part of the school improvement process.

Existing research also shows that no matter a family's income or socioeconomic background, family engagement is an essential ingredient for student success.

The Impact of Family Engagement

Family engagement is not limited to helping children with homework, attending meetings at school and checking in with teachers. It also encompasses advocating with local school boards and state and federal government to ensure schools have the resources they need to provide a world class education to every student.

As the leader of the nation's oldest and largest child advocacy association, I have spoken with parents, teachers and administrators across the country and seen firsthand the positive impact of family engagement on children's academic achievement.

"Nobody knows my son better than I do, and I can advocate for him and be the support and the voice that he needs. Working together with his teachers, we make a stronger team on his behalf. I want to know what is going on in my son's classroom, and I think it is important that his teachers know what is going on at home. Together, we provide him with the support he needs to excel," said parent Jenni Brasington of Chandler, Ariz.

"Parents, school staff and students working together have moved our school from a C rated school to a B rated school. And our PTSA provides resources and programs, like a Career and College Night and Teen

Safe Driving Program, that have changed students' lives. We can't do what we do without positive family engagement in our school," said Kathie Green, parent and co-president of Northrop PTSA in Fort Wayne, Ind.

"When parents have the information they need to navigate complicated educational systems, support their child's learning outside of the classroom and feel like a valued partner with educators, children grow and are successful. We've also heard from teachers who have a renewed energy for the profession when they successfully connect with families and build positive relationships," stated D'Lisa Crain, administrator for Washoe County School District in Reno, Nev.

Building Effective Family-School Partnerships

Even Robinson and Harris agree that some forms of family engagement do have a positive impact on children academically; it depends on the ways in which families are engaged.

Recognizing the important role families play in student achievement and school improvement, the Department of Education recently released the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#). The framework is designed to support schools and districts nationwide in effectively engaging families. The model encourages schools to link student learning to family engagement through meaningful activities that are tied directly to curriculum or student achievement efforts.

It is critical that meaningful partnerships are established between families and schools in every district and every school. The [National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#) provide a clear path for what parents, schools and communities can do together to support student success.

And it is important that family engagement strategies are tailored to meet the unique needs of every family.

I believe in the power of family engagement and the importance of family-school partnerships to help every child succeed academically and reach his or her full potential. It is my hope that even more parents take the time to get involved as it is proven to make a difference for children, schools and communities.

Otha Thornton is president of National PTA, a nonprofit association dedicated to being a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities and a strong advocate for public education. In addition to leading National PTA, Thornton is a senior operations analyst with General Dynamics and a retired United States Army Lieutenant Colonel.