

Parents Parent, Teachers Teach

By Deborah Wadsworth

Getting parents more involved in their children's schooling has become a basic tenet among educators struggling to reform the public schools. Supporters of this movement argue it has several benefits, pointing particularly to studies suggesting that children whose parents are involved in school do better than those whose parents are not. But "parental involvement" has never been a particularly well-defined term. It can encompass a range of activities, from fostering learning at home to helping manage a school.

With a grant from Kraft Foods, Public Agenda undertook a project in 1998 to find out what parents and teachers meant by "parental involvement," and how much of it they thought was going on in the nation's schools. Beginning with 25 expert interviews and eight focus groups, we went on to survey 1,000 teachers and 1,220 parents.¹

As it turns out, our study of parental involvement in their children's education also serves as a litmus test of the quality of parenting in general. Most teachers and parents agree that the most important role parents can play in their children's education is at home, raising respectful and responsible children who will come to school ready to learn. While some types of participation at school, such as volunteering in a classroom or taking part in curriculum decisions, receive varying amounts of support, most parents and teachers see these activities as clearly secondary to getting involved at home.

Asked in the survey what was most important for them to do in the school-parent partnership, only 2% chose volunteering to raise money or otherwise helping at school, and 4% picked assisting in hiring staff and developing

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curriculum. And not many parents said they would look forward to taking on management duties at school; when asked whether they'd feel more comfortable designing school curriculum or chaperoning class trips and parties, 22% said the former, 68% the latter.

By contrast, fully 83% of parents said checking homework and encouraging kids to learn was the most important thing they could do. For the most part, they wished they could play a greater role in their children's education. But they also revealed the many challenges and obstacles that could be preventing a higher level of involvement.

Many teachers, for their part, said they were dissatisfied with the quality of parenting they saw in their students' behavior. Poor parenting might be implicated in the prevalence of "students who try to get by with doing as little work as possible," cited by 69% of the teachers as a very or somewhat serious problem at school, or "children who don't do their homework," cited by 55%. Very few teachers (15%) mentioned "students who are violent or physically threatening," or "students who come to class hungry because of poverty" (15%).

In general, teachers seem to be most concerned about parents who fail to engage their children at home. An overwhelming number (83%) said that parents who fail to set limits or create

structure constitute a serious problem; 81% cited parents who refuse to hold their children accountable. Few teachers voiced concern about parents who are overly involved: only 16% said they saw a problem with parents who are so involved in school that they stifle their children's independence or maturity. The concerns about unengaged parents were more prevalent among teachers in inner city schools, but were certainly abundant among teachers in suburban schools as well. For example, 67% of suburban teachers said that too many parents have little sense of what is going on with their kids' education.

In their answers to the survey, parents appear to have been surprisingly candid about their own performance: 71% said they wish they could be more involved in their children's education. Almost half (45%) acknowledged that their children need some or a lot of improvement in their work habits. But achieving these goals is not easy; parents said they face frequent battles over watching television and finishing homework.

One obstacle parents face may be the stress and lack of time experienced by mothers and fathers who work outside of the home. "Occasionally it's a bad parent," a Minnesota teacher said, "but I would say that many parents have job stresses that are horrendous." Indeed, only 14% of the parents who responded to the survey lived in traditional

households, where one parent worked outside the home and the other worked at home. But other surveys have suggested that Americans believe work and family do not necessarily conflict. According to a 1997 study by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 78% of working mothers consider balancing work and family to be a minor problem or no problem at all.

Perhaps more crucial may be the near-contradictory attitudes held by parents toward raising children. When it comes to supervising their kids' academic progress, parents seem constantly torn between a demanding, high-stakes approach and one that is more lenient and permissive. Asked to consider which statements come close to their own views, relatively few (27%) said it was OK to let a child skip a school assignment even on special occasions. Likewise, a majority (60%) said it was very or somewhat close to their view that they "would be very disappointed if my child got average grades in school this year."

On the other hand, an overwhelming percentage (88%) identified with the statement, "As long as they try hard, children should never feel bad about themselves because of poor grades in school." Even more (95%) agreed, to a somewhat close or very close degree, with the statement, "I want school to be a fun and enjoyable experience my kids will remember for the rest of their lives."

Further, parents do not seem to agree with teachers on how serious a distraction television and other diversions can be. Most teachers (83%) labeled as a serious problem "parents who fail to control how much time their kids spend with TV, computer and video games." And the parent survey revealed just how common these diversions are: 50% of parents said their children had televisions in their bedrooms, 27% reported telephones, and 29% computers. But the majority of these parents (62%) said

these items did not distract their kids from homework. In fact, one parent explained that such diversions may be useful: "TV is definitely a concern, but you can use it as a leverage. 'If you want to watch Rugrats, then you are going to have this much homework done.'"

While teachers have high expectations of how parents should supervise homework, they doubt many parents actually take all the trouble they should. Asked what they thought parents should do, 57% of teachers said that parents should check to see that assignments are done and done correctly. Another 30% wanted

"Teachers and parents agree that the most important role parents can play in their children's education is raising respectful and responsible children who will come to school ready to learn."

parents to help their kids do the work. Only 16% of teachers said they thought parents actually did one or the other of those things.

One reason for insufficient parental involvement in homework may be that parents simply do not know what is expected of them. (It should be noted, however, that other surveys suggest communication between teachers and parents is strong. Fifty-nine percent of respondents to a separate Public Agenda survey of parents also conducted in 1998 said that teachers would take the initiative and give a parent advice if a child were struggling. And 51% said that a teacher had suggested limiting a child's television watching or offered study tips to be used at home.)

It may also be that parents find it just too difficult to reconcile their own ambivalence about how best to help their

children. Half of the parents surveyed, for example, said that arguments about homework had led to yelling or crying in their households. And 22% of parents admitted to having done a child's homework because the child was too tired or the work was too difficult. A Birmingham mother put it this way: "I wanted this time to be quality love time, and it couldn't be because of this homework. I have stayed up at night after putting him to bed and have done projects for him, just to save that time."

The Kraft study on parental involvement in education found many teachers expressing disappointment in the level of participation by some parents in their children's education, and many parents acknowledging that they could, personally, do more. But no less a significant finding was the degree of cordiality and respect most parents and teachers, as groups, demonstrated for each other. Teachers hold in particularly high regard those parents who make an effort to be involved. A healthy majority of teachers

(61%) said they identify very or somewhat closely with the statement that "most parents try their best to help their kids succeed at school."

Parents hold teachers, it seems, in even higher esteem. Of those who had met their child's teacher, almost all (95%) said "the teacher seemed to genuinely care about my child," and almost as many (90%) said the "teacher seemed to really know how to motivate kids and help them do their best." In other words, though the parents and teachers send mixed signals about how best to raise children, there is enough mutual respect to suggest that these differences can be, and are often, overcome. ●

Endnotes

¹The results were published in *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, March 1999).