

CENTER  
FOR SCHOOL CHANGE



It's Apparent:  
We Can and Should  
Have More  
Parent/Educator Partnerships

by

**Joe Nathan and Betty Radcliffe**

October, 1994

Hubert H. Humphrey Institute  
of Public Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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## Executive Summary

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In this report, 1823 elementary and secondary school educators from 29 states offer advice to policy-makers, parents and post-secondary officials about ways to promote parent-educator partnerships. Increasing parent involvement is one of the nation's education goals and is one of the best ways to increase student achievement.

The educators work in urban and rural schools of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin.

Educators were asked to rate how effectively the teacher/administrator preparation program at their college or university prepared them "to work closely with parents."

- 45% answered "Not at all effective"
- 34% answered "Somewhat effective"
- 17% said "Effective"
- 4% reported "Extremely effective"

Educators and national authorities were also asked what skills educators need to work closely with parents, and what they considered the most effective ways to learn these skills. The major difference was in the area of making assignments which involve cooperation between students and their families. All the national authorities said this is a very important skill, but less than one third of the teachers said this is "very important."

Educators were asked "What do you think are the most important ways parents can help students do well in school?" The most frequently checked responses were

- 76%: Attending a conference with a child's teacher
- 67%: Helping the child with homework
- 65%: Telling the child regularly that doing well in school is important
- 63%: Contacting the school when problems develop

Significantly fewer educators picked "Volunteering in the school in some manner" or "Helping arrange learning programs in the community."

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## Background

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Both research and rhetoric support the value of cooperation between parents and educators. Congress and the President decided this year that increasing parent involvement should be one of the nation's major education goals. Federal Goals 2000 legislation mandates that by the year 2000, "every state will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home..." (Congress, 1994, 133)

Many educators are aware that parent involvement is extremely important. *Instructor*, a magazine read by several hundred thousand elementary school teachers, asked its subscribers to name the one thing they would like to tell national policy makers about raising student achievement. The most popular answer was "more parent involvement." (*Instructor*, 1986) A 1989 national Gallup poll of teachers asked, "What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?" The most frequently cited answer, given by 35% of the teachers, was "parents' lack of interest/support." (Elam, 1989)

This is the third report the Center for School Change (CSC) has done dealing with the issue of parent-educator partnerships. The first examined how many Minnesota college and university education departments offered courses that focused on parent involvement. The CSC found that more than half the departments did not offer any such course, and that the vast majority of courses focusing on parent-educator partnerships stressed early childhood or special education. (Hinz, Clarke and Nathan)

The second report, issued earlier this year, examined how many states require prospective teachers or administrators to study how to work closely with parents. This report reviewed the extensive research showing that increased parent involvement produces higher student achievement. (Radcliffe, Malone and Nathan, 1994) Moreover, work by scholars such as Joyce Epstein and Bob Slavin of Johns Hopkins, as well as James Comer of Yale,

demonstrate that it is possible to increase involvement of rural and inner city, low income, limited English speaking parents. This involvement in turn helps produce statistically significant increases in student achievement. (Comer, 1988, Epstein, 1989, Slavin, 1994)

An excellent resource, published earlier this year, does a masterful job of summarizing research in this area. *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, was compiled and edited by Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla. As they note,

The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. In fact, the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which a student's family is able to:

1. Create a home environment that encourages learning.
2. Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers.
3. Become involved in their children's education at school and in the community. (Henderson and Berla, 1994, p. 1)

The research Henderson and Berla summarize shows that it is possible to increase parent involvement and that educators can play a key role in encouraging these partnerships. Moreover, as Epstein points out, the best predictor of parent involvement is what the school does to promote it. (Epstein, 1989)

So, are educators learning to promote parent involvement? The report CSC issued earlier this year surveyed fifty American states and the District of Columbia. State agencies in charge of teacher and administrator certification were asked to send the CSC information about their teacher and administration certification requirements. CSC staff analyzed this information to determine what, if anything, prospective educators are required to study about parent involvement? In the vast majority of states, the answer is "not much." Specifically,

- Only seven states require prospective administrators to take a class or do something else to develop skill in this area.
- Only 15 states required most teachers to develop skill in this field.

- Even in special education, the certification area where there was most attention to a parent involvement requirement, only 26 states required prospective teachers to study this subject. (Radcliffe, Malone and Nathan, 1994)

## Introduction

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This current report builds on previous CSC work. To prepare this report, surveys were sent out across the country, to classroom teachers and building administrators. More than 1,800 educators responded. In addition, several nationally recognized authorities on parent involvement were interviewed.

Partnerships are two way responsibilities: for educators and for families. Thus, in this document, we try to answer several questions. First, a question many people asked in response to the earlier report: "What can parents do to help their children do better in school?" CSC wanted to know what educators think. We wanted to compare educators' answers with those of people who have studied successful students and their families.

Secondly, CSC wanted to know how educators assessed their own preparation in the field of parent involvement. So CSC asked educators, "Rate your own teacher/administrator preparation program at a college or university in terms of how effectively you were prepared to work closely with parents."

Third, CSC wanted to get suggestions from educators about the kind of preparation that would be useful to them. So educators were asked to rank various skills in terms of their importance for working with parents. Then educators were asked, "What are the most valuable ways to learn (these) skills?"

The 1,823 urban, suburban and rural teachers from 29 states are not a random sample of the nation's educators. However, they do come from schools which serve a variety of inner city and rural areas, and which represent different philosophical approaches. (See "Who received the questionnaire?" page 15, for a summary of educators surveyed.) As noted

later in the report, there was considerable agreement among the educators, regardless of the area from which they came. We believe that these 1823 educators represent important, thoughtful voices.

## **Educators' Reactions to Their Training Programs**

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One question asked educators about the preparation they received to work closely with families. The question was "Rate your own teacher/administrator preparation program at a college or university in terms of how effectively you were prepared to work closely with parents."

45% marked "Not at all effective"

34% marked "Somewhat effective"

17% marked "Effective"

4% marked "Extremely effective"

These low ratings were consistent across every single one of the more than 50 schools and groups which answered the question. For example, 14 Minnesota state "Teachers of the Year" responded. Ten of them rated their teacher preparation in this field "not at all effective," and four rated their preparation in this area "somewhat effective." Sixty-seven Idaho teachers answered the question. Thirty-two called their preparation to work with parents "not at all effective," 26 called it "somewhat effective," seven called it "effective" and two called it "extremely effective." Twelve Iowa teachers rated their preparation in this area. One said it was "effective," seven said it was somewhat effective, and four called it "not at all effective." Forty teachers at a Minnesota Catholic high school answered the question. Twenty-six said their preparation in this area was "not at all effective," nine reported it "somewhat effective," four called it "effective" and one said it was "extremely effective."

Idaho administrators were the group most pleased with their preparation. Ninety-three answered the question. Two called their preparation to work with parents "extremely

effective," 29 said it was "effective," 34 described it as "somewhat effective" and 28 called it "not at all effective."

As noted above, the Center for School Change does not suggest that the educators surveyed are a random sample of American educators. But we urge K-12 educators, their college and university counterparts and state and national policy-makers to carefully consider these findings. When coupled with earlier findings about the lack of state requirements for prospective educators to study ways of working with parents, we think this statistic should encourage constructive action in states, colleges and universities.

## **Training for Parent Involvement: Content**

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The following information is not intended to be an exhaustive list or discussion of the content or process by which educators should be trained to work closely with parents. We intend it to be a brief summary -- a point of departure -- based on information gathered from authorities and educators over a several month period.

Part of our research involved trying to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most important things for prospective teachers and administrators to learn about working closely with parents?, and
2. What are the most effective ways for them to learn these things?

In order to answer these questions, we asked several questions of educators around the country, as well as interviewing some of the nation's leading authorities in this area.

**Joyce Epstein** summarized what we heard from each authority. In her view, prospective teachers and administrators should

- a. Develop a rationale for why working closely with parents is important.
- b. Develop the skills and knowledge necessary to work closely with parents.
- c. Develop the attitude that partnerships with parents are both do-able and desirable.

(Epstein, 1994)

## **Knowledge of Research**

To help prospective educators develop a rationale for working with parents, authorities urge that prospective teachers and administrators should become familiar with the research in this area. (Christenson, 1994 a & b; Epstein, 1989, 1994; Majied, 1994; Henderson, 1994) They should know about the studies summarized above. Sandra Christenson, a professor at the University of Minnesota who teaches a course on the subject of School-Family Partnerships, suggested that it's important for prospective teachers and administrators to study this subject early in their training program. This is true, she believes, because it will lead to a different attitude as prospective educators take later courses. People who understand the importance of parent involvement will be motivated, Christenson believes, to think about how they can involve parents in various lessons and other activities. (Christenson, 1994a)

There are many excellent places to learn about the research. Perhaps the best recent compilation is the book, *A New Generation of Evidence, The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, edited by Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla. (Henderson and Berla, 1994). But knowledge of research is not enough.

## **Vital Skills and Knowledge**

Joyce Epstein recommends five major types of parent involvement:

1. Ensuring their children's health and safety.
2. Helping students learn at home.
3. Communicating with the school.
4. Volunteering at the school.
5. Being involved in governance and advocacy. (Brandt, 1994)

The Comer Project for Change in Education recommends that parents be involved in three basic ways:

1. All parents should support their children's education. This means that educators need to learn how to show parents what they can and should do at home to enhance their children's education.
2. Parents should be encouraged to volunteer in their children(s)' school. This means that educators must learn to provide a variety of ways for parents to volunteer, both during and outside of the school day. Educators also need to learn how to create an atmosphere in the school where parents feel comfortable.
3. Parents as decision-makers, as part of a School Planning and Management Team. This means that educators need to learn how to treat parents as partners, not outsiders or "meddlers." (Joiner, 1994)

These three central roles suggest a vast array of skills and attitudes which educators must develop in order to work effectively with parents, and thus to increase student achievement and improve student attitudes.

The first vital skill is the ability to communicate clearly and positively with parents. Joy Majied, who conducts teacher training workshops for Dr. James Comer, cited the importance of prospective educators learning to feel comfortable talking with parents. (Majied, 1994) Majied is executive director of the Washington Parent Group Fund. Ed Joiner, director of the Comer Project for Change in Education and acting director of the Yale School Development Program strongly agrees. He thinks that educators need to project "empathy and positive regard" for young people as they talk with parents. (Joiner, 1994) He believes that educators must learn how to give parents constructive, not threatening, feedback.

Majied and Joiner agree that prospective educators must talk with and listen to parents, including parents from low income and limited English speaking families. As Majied explained, "There's no substitute for talking with parents." As Joiner noted, the educators will learn what he has concluded, "Every parent wants their child(ren) to have a good life, and wants the child to get an education which will lead to this." (Joiner, 1994)

Majied believes that educators must understand the art of helping adults learn. She contrasts this with pedagogy: "When children come to a classroom for the first time, most of them are like a sponge, prepared to soak up and absorb information. But adults are different. If they don't like the way you approach them, or if they were not successful in school, they can be turned off." (Majied, 1994)

Dan Safran, director of the Center for the Study of Parent Involvement at John F. Kennedy University in California, has important insights into the kind of communication which often takes place between teachers and parents. He notes that "Teachers need to understand what lies behind certain parent behaviors in their contacts with the schools. For example, when speaking with teachers for the first time, many parents tend to be deferential, even a bit passive. Teachers, on the other hand, are perceived by parents to be confident, and at times, arrogant." (Safran, 1994)

Bob St. Clair, former president of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, believes that schools have given the unfortunate message that a parent conference is held when there is a problem. You can't just send a notice out. You may have to make phone calls. You have to make it clear to parents that the purpose is constructive. "When parents feel welcome, and when we schedule conferences at times and places convenient to them, virtually all parents come." He thinks it vital that prospective administrators learn how to get parents feeling welcome in the school. (St. Clair, 1994)

To develop the critical communication skills they need, Safran urges that educators role play: a parent-teacher conference, encountering an angry parent, encountering a passive parent, encouraging parents to participate as classroom observers, encouraging parents to perform specific "educational" tasks with children at home and in school, and encouraging parents to participate with other parents in existing school or community organizations. (Safran, undated)

A second skill educators need to learn is the ability to develop lesson plans that involve parents, regardless of subject matter. Once educators understand why this is important and how they can do it, they approach pedagogy differently. They are thinking constantly, "How

can I design assignments which will involve parents?" This is another reason Christenson urges that prospective educators be required to take a course in this area early in their training program. (Christenson, 1994b)

Majied notes, "There's not a subject that teachers can present that shouldn't involve parents." Learning to do this is one of the most important aspects of becoming a teacher. And learning how to help teachers develop such lessons is "one of the most important things an administrator can do." (Majied) Thus, it's vital for teachers to learn how to do this in their curriculum area. It's critical for administrators to understand how they can help teachers develop such lessons.

Safran notes that some of the most important parts of teacher/administrator training must be "unlearning." Prospective educators have been students and have seen how many educators dealt with their parents. In many cases, there was little outreach to parents. Thus, many educators are not good role models in this area. Safran notes that "teachers have been the traditional 'sole proprietors' of their respective classrooms . . . an adult relationship must be established with parents. Too often, many teachers forget this and 'treat parents like kids.'" (Safran, undated: p. 14)

Safran believes that the concept of professionalism in education has dangers as well as benefits. He thinks it vital that educators have "a value orientation which is non-elitist and which accepts and respects the parents and community of the children they teach." (Safran, p. 16) Safran acknowledges that schools of education must treat their own students more like adults. As he notes, "Professional elitism pales next to professorial elitism." (p. 16)

Third, authorities believe that educators must know a good deal about the families and communities which their school is serving. Joiner encourages prospective educators to study anthropology as a way to understand and appreciate the cultures of the families the youngsters with whom the educator is working come from. (Joiner, 1994)

A fourth area authorities frequently cited is knowing how to reorganize a school so that parents feel more comfortable. The process developed by James Comer includes a school governance model which includes parents in much more significant ways than is done in

most schools. (Comer, 1989) Joiner and Majied believe that administrators, in particular, must study the way schools can be changed to promote partnerships with parents.

Kronkosky notes that emerging research calls for parents to be involved "as co-decision-makers, co-learners and advocates." He agrees with other authorities that in order for educators to "work with parents as partners in these larger roles, their preparation . . . must include the appropriate knowledge, understandings, skills and experiences." (Kronkosky, 1994)

Beside a major role in school site decision-making, another major change in schools would be to start the year off with individual parent conferences, in which educators and parents meet to plan out the year. As noted below, several schools which have done this won national awards for their effectiveness. Meeting with parents before the school year requires a major reallocation of education time. But the schools which have done it report it extremely worthwhile. (Nathan, 1992)

## **Educators' Views of Skills They Need to Work Closely with Parents**

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Several questions asked educators about the skills they needed to work closely with parents, and the best ways for them to acquire those skills. One question asked, "How important are the following skills educators should develop about working with parents?" (Educators were asked to rank six skills - as very important, important, or not important)

The skills ranked as follows:

- Holding a productive, helpful conference with parents – 83% said this was very important, 17% ranked it important.
- Contacting parents when problems develop – 81% said this was very important, 19% ranked it important.
- Communicating regularly about student progress – 72% ranked this very important, 18% ranked it important.

- Helping parents understand at the beginning of the year or semester what the class goals are, strategies to be used, and methods of assessment -- 59% said it was very important, and 38% said it was important.
- Encouraging parents to volunteer in the school in some manner -- 33% said this is very important, 58% said it is important.
- Developing assignments which get families and students working together -- 32% said this is very important, 58% said it is important.

Several observations are possible from these responses. First, the fact that teachers rate highly the ability to hold a productive conference is consistent with their advice to parents, given below. Educators felt that the most important way parents can help their children do well in school is to attend conferences. Clearly, educators feel conferences are very important -- vital for parents to attend and very important for them to conduct effectively. Authorities on parent involvement agree that it's extremely important for educators to know how to conduct a conference with a parent.

However, there may be a major difference between the researchers/authorities and the educators on the issue of developing assignments which get students and families working together. This was mentioned consistently by researchers as extremely important. But less than 1/3 (32%) of the educators surveyed ranked it very important. Now, 58% of educators thought it "important." But there is a dramatic contrast between the 83% of educators who think learning to hold a productive, useful conference with parents is "very important," and the 32% of educators who think it's very important to develop assignments which get students and families working together.

Several educators commented that it is critical to "start out positively with parents. . . . The first communication with a parent should be a pleasant and encouraging one." At their schools, the first parent conferences occur in late August or early September. At one Minnesota school, educators and parents sit down to discuss what has happened over the summer, examine what the parents', students' and teachers' goals for the year are and to plan how they will work together. It's not surprising that the Barton Elementary School, in

Minneapolis, where this advance planning takes place, has been named one of the nation's outstanding public elementary schools.

This could happen at the secondary level. One of the authors worked at a K-12 public school which used this same practice of holding conferences before the school started to establish a positive working relationship. The school decided to make such planning a priority, so all faculty (including the administrator) had advising a certain number of students as part of their responsibility. This school (St. Paul Open School) has operated in this manner for more than 20 years, and was named "a carefully evaluated, outstanding innovation worthy of national replication" by the U.S. Department of Education.

Many educators commented on the importance of starting out on "a positive note" so that the first communication from school was personal, and wasn't about a problem. It's possible for individual teachers to do this. But as Edward Joiner noted, a building administrator can do a great deal to make this kind of positive start happen throughout a school. For example, a "welcome back to school" lunch or evening meeting can be scheduled for the week prior to school's opening. Conferences can be arranged to occur not just in the middle of the year, but at the beginning. A "parent's room" can be created in the school, with comfortable chairs, information to help parents, and a welcoming environment.

## **Training for Parent Partnership: Process**

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One question on the survey asked educators, "What are the 3-4 most valuable ways to learn the skills listed above?" (and discussed in the previous section). Educators had five options, plus "other" from which to choose.

- 86% marked "conversations with parents."
- 63% marked "watching videotapes about how other educators work with parents."
- 52% marked "reading materials describing how schools and teachers work with parents."

- 39% marked "practicing and having conversation/conference videotaped so that it can be studied."
- 38% marked "practicing (role/playing) in front of other educators."

Other suggestions included "visiting schools to see how they do this," "observing other educators hold parent conferences," and "talking with other educators."

There are many ways to interpret these responses. National authorities and educators agree that talking with parents is valuable. In order to learn how to communicate with parents, "There's no substitute for talking directly with parents," according to Joy Majied. She believes this is an absolutely vital part of preparation. Ed Joiner agrees, calling it "critical that educators talk directly with parents, including parents from low income families, about their experiences in schools. Joiner thinks that these discussions should help prospective teachers and administrators develop what he thinks is a critical skill: the ability to empathize with parents, and to recognize that they want the best possible education for their children. It's also clear that many educators would like to see (via videotape) real, living examples, rather than just reading about them.

Most national authorities recommend that educators role play conferences, phone conversations and other forms of communication with parents. Some educators see this as an effective way to learn, the majority don't. It is not easy to get up in front of others and "perform." Many people are reluctant to do this.

Role playing (and videotaping for later study and feedback) would be most effective in a setting where other things already had been done, and a high level of trust had been developed. Some educators suggested that role-playing be done, at least initially, in small groups within a class or workshop. This helps build skills and confidence, making it easier and more comfortable to do with others.

## Advice to Parents: What Can Parents Do to Help Their Children Succeed in School?

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A final question asked educators to advise parents about helping their children succeed in school. Educators were asked, "What do you think are the most important ways parents can help students do well in school?" Educators were asked to mark the four most important on the list and were given the option of adding something to the list.

- 76% checked "Attending a conference with a child's teacher."
- 67% checked "Helping a child with homework."
- 65% marked "Telling the child regularly that doing well in school is important."
- 63% marked "Contacting school when problems develop."
- 39% marked "Volunteering in the school in some manner."
- 13% marked "Helping arrange learning programs in the community."

Under "other," many educators urged parents to act as "good role models – show youngsters how the skills they learn in school help in life." That's how one Michigan educator put it, speaking for many others. Many educators also urged parents to take a class on how to be an effective mother or father, and to give youngsters time. As one Vermont educator commented, "be a life-long learner."

There was some variation among educators as to which action was thought to be the most important. However, the top three were almost always most frequently cited by educators, regardless of their part of the country. Their responses varied as to which they felt was most important: attending a conference, helping with homework, or telling the child that school is important. But these three suggestions were almost always the most frequently cited.

Educators added a number of suggestions to this list. The most frequent addition was, as one educator put it, "It's not enough to tell youngsters that doing well in school is important. You have to model what you want them to do. Adults should read if they want

youngsters to read. They should write if they want young people to write. They should point out how they use math in everyday life."

One Minnesota educator spoke for many that youngsters need their parents' "general involvement and interest daily." This educator recommended making "sharing about school a part of the family routine."

Other educators talked about the need for cooperative planning. A Wisconsin teacher urged developing a contract between parents, students and teachers. Another teacher wrote, "Need to plan together. More counselor/parent contact planning for the future."

Many educators think it's critical to help parents feel more comfortable with educators. As one Florida teacher wrote, "We must make parents feel that they are true partners in their child's education. I think, too often, some parents (especially poorly educated parents) feel intimidated by teachers, administrators, etc. We must contact parents with good news, not just to tell them about a problem!"

Several thoughtful educators challenged this list as "too traditional." Preston Kronkosky and David Williams of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory noted that this list did not include the kinds of advocacy and shared decision-making roles for parents which many authorities are suggesting. (Kronkosky and Williams, 1984) We agree that these items were not included on the list.

Perhaps this was a mistake. We certainly agree with these authorities that such opportunities should be available to parents. Indeed, the Center for School Change consistently has included in its grant guidelines that parents should be involved in the development and implementation of new schools. If parents are not included, the Center will not fund the project.

Some educators expressed frustration and anger. Several wrote that, as one person put it, "We have too much parent involvement. I'm a professional. Parents should leave me alone and let me teach." A Vermont teacher wrote, "Schools are becoming dumping grounds for some. I feel parents should have to attend mandatory parenting classes unless they can pass a pre-test and prove that they are indeed FIT parents. (Sic) I am tired of

reading articles that teachers/schools are no longer doing their job – educating youngsters in the basics. How can we, when we're spending our 6 1/2 hours being parents, first."

Other educators expressed more enthusiasm. "Teachers and parents must mutually support each others' situations." Another educator believes "Communication with parents is very important." "Instead of spending so much time in traditional educational philosophy/psychology classes, spend more time on areas like this." Another wrote, "My view has changed a lot. I think we need to work much more closely with parents. We teachers can't do it all, nor should we try. Let's really reach out to parents. They won't bite."

Researchers would find little in the teachers' comments with which to disagree. In summarizing extensive research, Henderson and Berla list descriptions of families whose children do well in school.

- There is reading, writing and discussion among family members.
- Parents encourage their children's development and progress in school.
- Parents express high but realistic expectations for achievement.
- Parents model the value of learning, self-discipline and hard work.
- Parents establish a daily routine. (Henderson and Berla, p. 9)

On the questionnaires, educators included many comments and suggestions which reflect these suggestions. Many educators know what parents can do to help their children learn. Part of the challenge educators face is communicating this information in a positive, helpful manner.

## **Who Received the Questionnaire?**

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The questionnaire was filled out by 1,823 educators during June-October, 1994. Educators from twenty-nine states, including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan,

Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin responded to our efforts to survey them. Educators responding included:

- 15 of the last 20 Minnesota teachers of the year.
- Participants in the Center for School Change summer conference, including educators from Bagley, Bemidji, Blackduck, Cambridge, Cyrus, Delavan, Detroit Lakes, Esko, Grand Rapids, Henderson, Isanti, LeSueur, Little Falls, Meadowlands, Nerstrand, Proctor, Remer, Rothsay, Staples, Thief River Falls, Virginia, Walnut Grove, and Westbrook.
- Participants in the Minnesota Education Association 1994 summer leadership conference.
- Participants in several workshops sponsored by the Greater Minnesota Educational Cooperative Service Units.
- Participants in the Community Learning Centers/New American Schools Summer Conference from Duluth, Fond du Lac Reservation, Meadowlands, Minneapolis, Rothsay, and St. Paul.
- Educators attending summer university courses in Idaho, Iowa and Minnesota.
- Florida educators working on innovations.
- Colorado educators helping to plan and start a charter school.
- Participants in a conference in Madison, Wisconsin on reforming education.
- Faculty members at:
  - Belle Fouche, South Dakota.
  - Bowerston Elementary, Bowerston, Ohio.
  - Cambridge Elementary School, Cambridge, Minnesota.
  - Cambridge High School, Cambridge, Minnesota.
  - Cass Lake Area Learning Center - Cass Lake, Minnesota.
  - East High School, Wichita, Kansas.
  - Expo I Elementary School - St. Paul, Minnesota.
  - Expo II Middle School - St. Paul, Minnesota.
  - Fairmont, Minnesota.
  - Harmony School, Bloomington, Indiana.
  - Highland Park High School - St. Paul, Minnesota.
  - Mary Hogan School in Middlebury, Vermont.
  - Idaho educators taking a summer school course at Boise State University.
  - Lamoni, Iowa Public Schools.
  - Iowa educators taking a university summer school course.
  - Hill Murray High School - North St. Paul, Minnesota.
  - L.R. Jackson Elementary School, West Memphis, Arkansas.
  - Key School, Indianapolis, Indiana.

- Memorial Middle School, Las Vegas New Mexico.
- Middle Earth School, Warminster, Pennsylvania.
- Minot, North Dakota Public Schools.
- Monticello elementary, middle and high school faculty, Monticello, Minnesota.
- Mounds View Area Learning Center, Mounds View, Minnesota.
- New Country School, LeSueur, Minnesota.
- Oasis High School, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.
- Park Rapids Elementary, Junior and Senior High School Faculty, Park Rapids, Minnesota.
- School for Applied Individualized Learning (SAIL), Tallahassee, Florida.
- Stilwell, Oklahoma Elementary and Secondary School Faculty.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

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There are several major conclusions from this study. First, the evidence is strong that increasing parent-educator partnerships can have a significant positive impact on student achievement. Second, educators can do a great deal to promote partnerships with parents. Third, educators and scholars are in general (although not complete) agreement about the kinds of skills educators need to work closely with parents. Fourth, the vast majority of educators do not think highly of the training they received in this area.

At the same time, some educators and authorities are troubled about parent involvement. Some educators think some parents are "too involved." Educators in some places don't like the way parents are challenging curriculum and materials. Some educators believe they are the professionals and that they should be trusted by parents. There is a strong tone of frustration and anger in some of the questionnaires.

Developing skills to work closely with parents won't help much if there is mistrust between educators and parents. It's vital for educators to know about cases where professionals have successfully reached out to parents, including parents in low income and limited English speaking communities. It's vital for educators to know about ways in which parents can be of considerable assistance to the school, beyond raising money.

One authority with whom we spoke urged greater communication about the realities of parenting and teaching. He urged that there be more honest discussion among educators

about the challenges facing parents, and among parents about the challenges facing educators. In his experience, this leads to less finger-pointing, and more honest efforts to work together, recognizing that each side has something important to offer, and each side faces tough challenges. (Joiner). We think this is an excellent suggestion.

We have several recommendations:

1. State and national policy-makers should consider whether changes need to take place in the way prospective teachers and administrators are trained.

States have considerable responsibility in this area, although there are national associations which accredit college and university teacher and administrator preparation programs. As our earlier report noted, there has been some progress regarding inclusion of parent involvement training in standards for teacher preparation. But will colleges and universities take these guidelines seriously? That depends, in part, on whether state legislators and accrediting associations regard the guidelines as important, and communicate their concerns.

We hope that college and university faculty will carefully consider the information in this report. As someone once noted, "We cannot change the past. But we can help to shape the future." Our desire is not to criticize what has happened in many preparation programs. We do urge that changes be made to incorporate strong training for teachers and administrators in this field.

2. School and district officials should consider this research.

We consistently found that almost 80% of teachers think they were not well prepared to work closely with parents. This presents an immense challenge for school districts. We hope districts will consider the value and impact of greater parent involvement, and will make this topic one of the major areas for in-service work. We also hope districts will consider recommendations of authorities and educators about the most effective ways to train educators. It would be a tragedy if districts and schools decided to focus on parent-

educator partnerships, but provided training in ways that don't help educators and parents gain the skills and attitudes they need.

3. Parent, community and advocacy groups, such as PTA and the Urban Coalition, ought to examine whether prospective as well as present educators are sufficiently trained to promote partnerships with parents.

These groups could offer to work with schools, districts and post-secondary institutions to help provide insight and assistance in planning and carrying out training programs.

4. Parents ought to consider the advice of educators.

There is a great deal of consistency between the advice of educators and national authorities. Parent actions have an enormous impact on the attitudes of their children. As noted above, student achievement will be highest if educators and parents are working together closely. This means parents, as well as educators, have responsibilities.

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## About the Authors

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## APPENDIX

## Parent Involvement Training

Thanks for your help with this survey. Your ideas will help shape recommendations the Center for School Change will make to local, statewide and national officials.

Please check if you are a teacher \_\_\_\_\_ or administrator \_\_\_\_\_

What level? Elementary \_\_\_\_\_ Secondary \_\_\_\_\_

1. How important are the following skills educators should develop about working with parents: (V = very important I = Important NI = Not important) Please put the appropriate letter in front of each skill:

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <u>83%</u> - VI. <u>17%</u> - I | a. Holding a productive, helpful conference with parents  |
| <u>72%</u> - VI. <u>18%</u> - I | b. Communicating regularly about student progress (or lack of it)   |
| <u>32%</u> - VI. <u>58%</u> - I | c. Developing assignments which get families and students working together  |
| <u>81%</u> - VI. <u>19%</u> - I | d. Contacting parents when problems are developing  |
| <u>33%</u> - VI. <u>58%</u> - I | e. Encouraging parents to volunteer in the school in some manner  |
| <u>59%</u> - VI. <u>38%</u> - I | f. Helping parents understand at the beginning of the year or semester what the class goals are, strategies to be used, and methods of assessing progress |
|                                 | g. Other  |

2. What are the most valuable ways to learn the skills listed above (please check 3-4)

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| <u>38%</u> | a. Practicing (role/playing) in front of other educators                              |
| <u>39%</u> | b. Practicing and having conversation/conference videotaped so that it can be studied |
| <u>86%</u> | c. Conversations with parents   |
| <u>63%</u> | d. Watching videotapes about how other educators work with parents                    |
| <u>52%</u> | e. Reading materials describing how schools and teachers work with parents            |
|            | f. Other:   |

3. Rate your own teacher/administrator preparation program at a college or university: in terms of how effectively you were prepared to work closely with parents. (Check one)

- |            |                         |
|------------|-------------------------|
| <u>4%</u>  | a. Extremely effective  |
| <u>17%</u> | b. Effective            |
| <u>34%</u> | c. Somewhat effective   |
| <u>45%</u> | d. Not at all effective |

4. What do you think are the most important ways parents can help students do well in school? (Mark the four most important)

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| <u>76%</u> | a. Attending a conference with a child's teacher with parents         |
| <u>67%</u> | b. Helping a child with homework                                      |
| <u>65%</u> | c. Telling the child regularly that doing well in school is important |
| <u>63%</u> | d. Contacting school when problems develop                            |
| <u>39%</u> | e. Volunteering in the school in some manner                          |
| <u>13%</u> | f. Helping arrange learning programs in the community                 |
|            | g. Other:   |

5. Other recommendations or comments you'd like to make:

Thank you very much.