



Tips for Principals

Parent involvement that makes a difference



In August 2011, People for Education released a report, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*, which reviewed thirty years of research from Canada, the United States and England.

The four key things that parents can do to help ensure their children's success are outlined here, along with some tips that principals can use to support parents' efforts in each area:

1. Having high expectations of kids.

The research shows unequivocally that high parental expectations have the greatest impact on student achievement. When parents consistently communicate their belief in their children's potential and communicate that they expect them to be able to succeed academically, students do better.

To improve students' chances for success in your school:

- When talking to parents, remind them about the importance of high expectations and give them People for Education's parent tip sheet.
- Suggest your school council share this information with the parent community in school newsletters.

2. Talking about school at home.

A major study of 25,000 U.S. schoolchildren showed "home discussion"—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, being at home after school, or limiting kids' TV time or time they are out during the week.

To help parents talk with their children about school, give them something to talk about!

- Communicate frequently with parents at home, letting them know about things like new initiatives at the school, the latest research and changes to staffing.

- Encourage staff to make presentations at school council meetings about their work.
- Encourage staff and the school council to use a variety of tools to communicate with parents. New evidence shows that electronic communication is associated with higher participation and better two-way communication.
- Currently only 5% of Ontario school councils report they have all the families in the school on email lists. You can help by asking permission to share parents' email addresses with the school council.

3. Helping students develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits.

As students grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement are out of parents' control. Parents can't teach their children everything they need to know, but they can play a critical role in students' chances for success by helping to "shape" their attitudes, their sense of personal competence and their work habits including persistence, seeking help, and planning.

To support parents in this vital role, you can:

- Assure parents that they do not have to 'teach' their children. Instead, parents should focus on helping children learn to handle distractions, negotiate crises of confidence, plan ahead, ask for help from the teacher, and build a positive attitude about school as a whole.
- People for Education has tip sheets for teachers and parents summarizing the research on effective parent involvement – feel free to copy and use or distribute to parents or teachers.

The evidence is clear. Parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or reading them a story, than by “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging, or racing off to a meeting at the school.

4. Reading with children.

Parents make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children. The skills that children learn at school are vital, but the motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills children develop through conversation and reading together with adults at home are crucial foundations for successful literacy.

To encourage parents to read with their children, you can:

- Make sure your school library is open before and after school, and at lunch, and encourage families to use both the school and public libraries.
- Support classroom based book lending programs.

School practices make a difference

The good news: Schools *can* influence what parents do at home.

But educators need to be cautious about adopting parent involvement strategies that focus primarily on things like school council participation, volunteering in the school, or giving parents “homework.”

It goes without saying that it is vital to treat all parents with respect. When parents are treated respectfully by the school, it is easier for them to instil a positive attitude towards schooling in their children. And just as teachers try not to make assumptions about, or pre-judge their students, it is important not to make assumptions about parents based on things like their

participation in school events or their socio-economic status.

Use existing data to track parent involvement at home for school improvement

You can use data from EQAO student and teacher survey results for your school to set some new goals centred around supporting parents’ involvement with their kids at home. With your staff and school council, consider setting goals that include:

- Raising the percentage of kids in your school who report they talk to their parents about school almost every day.
- Raising the percentage of kids in your school who report they read at home with their parents.

According to EQAO’s most recent student surveys, less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) report they talk to a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day” about their school activities. By grade 6, that percentage drops to 38%. Only 21% of children in grade 3 report reading together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day.”

For more information:

Visit www.peopleforeducation.ca to read People for Education’s report on parent involvement, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*. You will also find resources to help you communicate with parents, the full bibliography for the report, tip sheets in 15 languages, education research, and answers to frequently asked questions.

The Ontario Principals’ Council, the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario and the Association des directions et direction adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes have jointly developed a handbook on implementing the provincial Parent Engagement and Equity and Inclusion Strategies: <http://www.principals.ca/documents/ParentEngagementHandbook.pdf>

High quality research online:

The SEDL National Centre for Family and Community Connections with Schools (<http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-syntheses.html>) and the Harvard Family have excellent, free research materials online.

