

BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND HOME: A SAMPLE OF BEST PRACTICES HOW TO IMPROVE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

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SUMMARY: Many teachers believe that their learners would perform better in school if their parents were more involved in their children's education. The challenge faced by many teachers is how to create and sustain that involvement.

There is a sizable body of research literature reporting that, no matter their income or background, learners with involved parents are more likely to have good results, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behaviour, and adapt well to school.

Schools that work, adopt different strategies to enhance parental engagement in their children's schooling. These practices are organized under six categories in Epstein's framework of six types of parent involvement:

☞ Parenting

☞ Communicating

☞ Volunteering

☞ Learning at home

☞ Decision-making

☞ Community collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Every learner has unlimited potential. It is for this reason that teachers are always looking for ways to improve education for their learners. Teachers in schools that work understand that one of the fundamental ways of improving education for their learners is to encourage parental engagement.

Leading experts in parental involvement have provided empirical evidence that a parent's role in a child's life has far-reaching impact. These experts argue that learning should not end when a child leaves school at the end of the day. They maintain that, with parents on board, learning must continue beyond the walls of the classroom.

While parental involvement is extremely important for a child to do well in school, many teachers find it difficult to engage parents. They experience the frustration of trying to involve parents and getting little response. This leads to some teachers concluding that parents do not care about their children's education.

Some parents feel uncomfortable in their children's schools or do not know how to support their children at home to ensure that they stay on course and are not distracted or dissuaded from reaching their academic potential. Some teachers, on the other hand, feel threatened, intimidated or under attack when parents are actively or highly involved in their children's education. Why do teachers in schools that work¹, value parental involvement?

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za.



BENEFITS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Many studies show that parental involvement activities that are effectively planned and well implemented result in substantial benefits to children, parents, teachers and the school. Researchers report that parent participation in their children's schooling frequently:

☞ Enhances children's self-esteem and improves behaviour

☞ Improves children's academic achievement

☞ Keeps parents in the loop and helps parents to develop a positive attitude towards school

☞ Improves parent-child relationships

☞ Allows parents to monitor school and classroom activities and ensure that the child completes schoolwork

☞ Helps parents see what their children are learning in the classroom on a day by day basis

☞ Increases chances for learners to complete high school than learners whose parents are not involved

TYPES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Epstein, an American leading expert on parent involvement, has divided school parent involvement programs into six broad categories:

- ☞ ① **PARENTING:** Schools help families with their parenting skills by providing information on children's developmental stages
- ☞ ② **COMMUNICATING:** Schools communicate with parents about their child's progress and provide opportunities for parents to communicate with the school
- ☞ ③ **VOLUNTEERING:** Schools offer opportunities for parents to visit their children's school or recruit and train them to work at the school
- ☞ ④ **LEARNING AT HOME:** Schools and teachers share ideas to promote at-home learning through high expectations
- ☞ ⑤ **DECISION-MAKING:** Schools include parents as partners when making important decisions that affect learners
- ☞ ⑥ **COMMUNITY COLLABORATION:** Schools have two-way outreach strategy in which the community is involved in schools

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT ON LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT

A review of literature on the topic reveals that many studies confirm that the involvement of parents and families in their children's education is critical to learners' academic success.

Findings from different meta-analyses indicate that, regardless of family background, parental involvement is associated with higher learner achievement outcomes. That is, the results of learners whose parents are highly involved in their education are substantially higher than that of their counterparts whose parents are less involved.

As summarised below, different studies show that Epstein's types of parental involvement (PI) impacts on learner academic achievement in varying degrees, i.e. some have stronger effect than others:

TYPE OF PI	NATURE OF IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Learning at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher learner achievement ☞ Extensive outreach to parents of low-achieving learners involving sending materials home, meeting face to face with parents and maintaining frequent telephone contact when their children had problems leads to improved learner achievement in reading and maths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Other types of PI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Other areas of parent involvement (PI), including, parenting, communicating, volunteering, decision-making and community collaboration produce fewer long-term effects

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Empirical evidence is clear: The results of parental involvement are undeniable. But how can teachers improve it? In other words, how do teachers in schools that work bridge the gap between home and school?



Schools that work have employed several strategies to increase parental involvement in school. These strategies are organised under Epstein's six broad categories of parental involvement. They are as follows:

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

Schools that work communicate with parents about their children's progress and provide opportunities for parents to communicate with the school. To do this, these schools:

- 🕒 **Hold an open day prior to school opening** at which parents can meet their children's teachers, tour the school building and meet other parents
- 🕒 **Have an open-door policy for parents** because parents never know what the teacher's comfort level is with parent engagement
- 🕒 **Maintain regular communication** between the school and parents through such activities as phone conversations, email, report pick-up day, parent newsletters, learner performance accounting sessions or other forums
- 🕒 **Keep parents regularly informed about learner progress** (in the language that they understand) and what parents can do to advance that progress:

We soon realised that some parents did not come to school when we invited them to monthly sessions to provide feedback about how learners had performed because they could not read and understand the reports. So, we decided to do something about it. We prepared our reports differently so that even the most illiterate gogo [grandmother] can understand how her grandchild is progressing at school, and it worked! (Teacher, School KV-Quintile 2)

- 🕒 **Communicate school policies to all parents** in the language they understand:
We explain to parents what a bachelor, diploma or certificate pass means. (Teacher, School LN-Quintile 1)
- 🕒 **Schedule meetings to accommodate working parents:**
The Principal makes sure that he calls meetings at the time that suits most parents. (Learner, School FC-Quintile 3)

- 🕒 **Create a family suggestion or comment box** (electronic and onsite) for parents to ask questions, raise concerns and make recommendations anonymously:

We learn a lot from comments that parents drop in the comment box. (Teacher, School EI-Quintile 2)

- 🕒 **Brief parents on the purposes of testing**, methods of reporting and interpreting results, and activities that can help improve results. See Policy Brief N-04 (Effective use assessment to advance learning) how some schools do this.

- 🕒 **Connect with families during home visits:**

Many of our learners don't stay with their biological parents. Therefore we have to visit learners where they live to find out whether they are doing their schoolwork and are not getting out of hand. It's quite demanding. (Teacher, School KZ-Quintile 1)

EXTENDING LEARNING AT HOME

Schools that work collaborate with and empower parents to extend learning at home. To do this, they:

- 🕒 **Develop activities for parents and learners to work together** to extend school work into the home and support classroom learning
- 🕒 **Encourage parents/families to talk to their children about their school day** and check the work they did at school, including homework
- 🕒 **Advise parents to provide a quiet place** and a regular time for homework and other learning activities:
We have an agreement with parents—you may call it a contract. Part of the parents' responsibilities is to make sure that in each day at a particular time at home the TV, cell phone and iPad are off. During that block time, learners do their homework or study. (Teacher, School MK-Quintile 1)
- 🕒 **Invite parents to collaborate with teachers on developing an educational plan for their children.** Currently, in most schools, this type of joint planning is reserved for the parents of children with disabilities, but it need not be so.
- 🕒 **Provide information to parents in a non-threatening environment about the high expectations** and standards learners are expected to meet at each grade level, and specific ways for parents/families to support



the expectations and help children learn at home:

We have an intervention programme in each term. We call parents to discuss the intervention programme, especially for those who are underperforming. We try by all means to bridge the gap between high-performing and low-performing learners. (Principal, School EH-Quintile 3)

- 🕒 **Assign homework that requires family participation.** Teachers know how to develop homework assignments that involve parents. These teachers assign home activities that are interesting and meaningful—not trivial tasks that parents and children have to “get through.”

DECISION-MAKING

Schools that work include parents as partners when making important decisions that affect learners. To do this, they:

- 🕒 **Create roles for parents on all decision-making and advisory committees,** properly training them for the areas in which they will serve (e.g., budget or school safety).
We involve the parents when the Grade 9s have to choose the subjects. We have parents’ evening and the Grade 9 parents are invited to the school to get information about the subjects, what subjects are needed for different career paths before learners can choose subjects. (Teacher, School GQ-Quintile 1)

VOLUNTEERING

High-performing schools create a welcoming school climate and offer opportunities for parents to visit their children’s school or recruit and train them to work at the school. To do this, these schools:

- 🕒 **Take concrete steps to eliminate the barriers** which may keep certain parents from participating in the school
- 🕒 **Identify volunteer interests of parents,** their talents, expertise and availability, and match these to school programmes, needs or a school-wide list of volunteer activities
At the beginning of the year, teachers discuss learner expectations with parents. They also outline specific ways parents could volunteer

to help. Teachers have sign-up sheets available at school, and offer opportunities for both working and at-home parents to participate at school. This approach makes parents feel welcome at school.

PARENTING

Some schools that work provide information to parents on children’s developmental stages. To do this they:

- 🕒 **Provide workshops and materials for parents** on typical development and appropriate parent and school expectations for various age groups:
You must appreciate that we teach learners who come from child-headed families. They have become ‘parents’ to their younger siblings. We work with our sister departments like Social Development, Health and Home Affairs as well as other agencies to support all parents with parenting skills. (Principal, School LH-Quintile 3)

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Schools that work create linkages with the larger community around them. To do this they:

- 🕒 **Reach out to all stakeholders** by making sure that the school’s partnership committee coordinates, assesses and leverages resources and/or support from the broad range of sources that are currently available within or connected to their school in order to support the schools’ development efforts.

CONCLUSION

“Make parents welcome and valued, and they will come,” says one principal. Each school is unique, and it is not possible to develop one prescribed plan for parental involvement that is appropriate for all schools. The strategies suggested in this policy brief are not listed in order of priority and are not exhaustive but they provide a framework for how schools can connect with parents, engage parents in school educational activities and sustain parent engagement in those activities.

