

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Parents as Mentors: Help Parents Support Student Success Transcript

Narrator: A mentor is someone who advises, encourages, and helps a less experienced person to succeed. In this podcast, one of a series of podcasts about parent involvement, we will examine ways parents can serve as mentors to guide other parents—to help them build capacity for the kind of ongoing parent involvement that leads to improved student achievement. In similar ways, state-level educators can mentor districts and schools in how to build networks of parents focused on supporting student success.

The key reason to get parents involved is to help children be successful in school and in life. One way to encourage parent involvement in schools is through parent mentors. How have schools made that happen? Let's listen as Anne Henderson, author and consultant in the field of parent involvement, describes how one school has been successful.

Anne: “My wonderful colleague, Karen Mapp, with whom I wrote *A New Wave of Evidence*, did her doctoral dissertation at the O’Hearn Elementary School in Boston, which is a Title 1 school serving a low-income area with a high number of special education kids because they are a full inclusion school. And they are one of the highest achieving schools in Boston. So how did they get there, given their population? Karen decided she had to find out, and she did her doctoral dissertation on it. And she decided that the different practices that that school used to engage families, she called it the joining process, and she looked at all the different things they did and saw that they fell into three different groups.

The first is welcoming; that is all the things that you do to make families feel like they are part of big family at the school, that they belong there, they’re really welcome and comfortable. They have parents that do home visits to new parents and say, ‘I’m going to be your buddy for the next few weeks to help you fit in at the school and introduce you to people’. They take books and learning things when they make those home visits. And then, when they have any kind of activity at this school it is like a party. They have food, they have fun, kids come, there are games, there are musicians in the community, they come and they’ll have a nice little jazz combo going as you come in, so it’s not just the usual cattle herd back-to-school night that I was talking about. It is a fun thing; everybody is invited. There is no ‘in crowd.’ You come; you are welcome. Somebody greets you as soon as you go through the door. And parents at O’Hearn say again and again, ‘We are like a family. I feel like this is my family.’ That is why the kids do so well because they really love it there. And they connect, they bond to that school and they learn and they do well.

And then the second element of the joining process is what Karen calls honoring—and that is respecting people and valuing them and letting them know that they’re somebody important and special who has something to offer. Every family has something they can contribute to the school and to their children’s learning. We have to find out what that is and bring it in and make it part of the school community. That goes for honoring families’ cultures as I was talking about a little while ago.

And the third element is connecting, and that has to do with helping parents know one another, so they're building what researchers call their social capital, their network of connections that they can draw on, and also connecting through their children to other people in the school and to what their children are learning. So the connecting piece includes that 'linking to learning finding' that I was discussing earlier. So those three things comprise the joining process. And I think schools can be very intentional about putting together practices and programs that would make up their joining process. But when they do that they have to involve their families."

Narrator: Welcoming, honoring, and connecting—these are the three elements that this school has put into practice as the school community works on building relationships that lead to greater parent involvement. One of the things that O'Hearn Elementary does to create this parent-friendly environment is having parents mentor other parents. The parents greet other parents, they serve as parent buddies to help new parents become familiar with the school, and they share their unique talents and skills with others.

This school recognizes that parents connect with other parents in ways that staff members might not. After all, parents are likely to see each other in the grocery store, at their children's sporting events, and at church. Their conversations often center on what is happening at school with their children. Parents who have accurate information about what is happening in the school can serve as advocates for the school. Parent mentors will share their knowledge and enthusiasm for involvement in their children's education with other parents and will support other parents as they increase their involvement in the children's education.

Michael Armstrong of A.B. Combs Elementary in Raleigh, North Carolina, tells about the role parent mentors have in improving student achievement at his school.

Michael: "Our parents are involved with student learning first by being aware of what the expectations are and our staff members providing in every language that is in this building, providing accessibility to all of the parents, a timeline of how to actually help their individual child at home. That is the first thing. Parents want to help their individual child. And then from there we have different mentor programs set up, different after-school programs, where the parents who are being successful at that can coach and mentor other parents in those same kinds of programs."

Narrator: Latonia Meeks, a parent from A.B. Combs Elementary, describes how the Combs' Achievers after-school program at her school capitalizes on the unique skills of parents to help them feel honored and respected.

Latonia: "If you would like to volunteer for Combs' Achievers, that parent who may be non-English speaking will volunteer to teach your child that language while you assist their child with the homework."

Parent-to-parent communication, like is happening at A.B. Combs, is an excellent way to create a welcoming atmosphere and help parents feel invited. How does this happen? How can schools create and sustain parent mentors? Cindy Baumert, cochair of the Kentucky Commissioner's Parents Advisory Council, has an answer.

Cindy: “Plan for, recruit, and support adults who want to mentor families who need help supporting the academic success of their child.”

Narrator: While there are many different ways that parent mentors can contribute in a school, school and district staff will need to support parent mentors by providing training, resources, and clear expectations. Mentoring is a skill that must be learned. Providing parents with the skills they need to be successful mentors will help a parent mentor program to be successful.

Let’s listen as Eddie Woods, a parent trained through the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, describes how he has used the training he received to reach out to other parents by beginning with the students.

Eddie: “My name is Eddie Woods. I do mentorship for these guys as well as worrying about them on a regular basis. Part of the thing, I meet with them to basically get their feel for it, and I meet with their parents as well so they can tell me their take on what is keeping the kid from succeeding. As a matter of fact, once I was trained in the CIPL training, the training struck me as being something that was a piece of work or a model that you could use to train other people so instead of doing trainings, I would suggest things that I had picked up from my CIPL training. And then the parents would see, ‘Well, this is a doable kind of a thing. I can call the school, I can talk to the teacher about setting up a conference or what have you. They look at it from that standpoint and so now we got two components of support. Two pieces of support for a kid automatically. And what we found out was that, contrary to what a lot of folks think about kids who might be struggling academically, was that they care a lot about their child’s success. They don’t know exactly what to do a lot of times when it comes to the school so they don’t know how to approach being involved in the school.”

Narrator: What Eddie discovered was that the training he received not only taught him what to do, but prepared him to share that knowledge and information with other parents. This can help build the partnerships necessary for increased parent involvement and improved student achievement.

SEAs can assist their schools and districts in implementing the strategies mentioned in this podcast. For example, SEAs can provide professional development resources to district and school leaders to help them learn the strategies and methods for training parent mentors. Providing forums for schools that have strong parent mentoring programs to share their successes and lessons learned can help other schools and districts get started. In addition, providing links to outside agencies that offer resources to schools on parent training might help schools and districts who are interested in parent mentoring to get started.

We hope this podcast helps you to consider ways parent mentors could be utilized in schools to further parent involvement. Keys to the successful use of parent mentors are planning and training. Helping parents to build on what they already know and are doing to support their child’s learning and then teaching them to share that knowledge and information with other parents can build the partnerships necessary for increased parent involvement and improved student achievement.

Join us for the final podcast in this series on parent involvement in the schools, where we will focus on next steps for educators who are ready to get started!

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