

10-1-2008

Family and Consumer Sciences--A Valuable Resource to Public Schools in Parent and Community Engagement

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Recommended Citation

Rodman, J., Sheppard, C., & Black, J. (2008). Family and Consumer Sciences--A Valuable Resource to Public Schools in Parent and Community Engagement. *The Journal of Extension*, 46(5), Article 21. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol46/iss5/21>

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October 2008 // Volume 46 // Number 5 // Ideas at Work // 5IAW2



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Family and Consumer Sciences--A Valuable Resource to Public Schools in Parent and Community Engagement

Abstract

By working with the Parent Involvement Committee of P-16 Leadership Council, a Family and Consumer Science Extension agent was able to help facilitate building community capacity through networking and collaboration to support and educate parents through family engagement. Implementation of these goals incorporated parent involvement research components of collaborated community services, providing support and services to families, parent and child rearing skills, shared information and resources, and encouraging support of children's learning. Specific information on the role of the Extension agent is included.

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Authorities have documented the importance of improved interactions of parents and education institutions in achieving student success. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, Epstein's (1987) concept of overlapping spheres of influence, and the school development process of Comer, Haynes, Joyner, and Ben-Avie (1996) make a case for all the stakeholders to be involved in the education of children.

The National Network of Partnership Schools supports parent involvement in the general categories of family partnership developed by Epstein (1997). This includes: parenting and child-rearing skills, effective communication, volunteer work, home learning activities, decision making, and collaborated community service. Weiss and Brigham (2003) favor engaging families by encouraging support of children's learning, providing support and services to families, and gaining general family involvement. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) stress relationships, collaboration, shared resources, and partnership as essential in developing relationships between school and family for enhanced student learning and development.

Positive outcomes from active parent engagement in education include: higher grades and test scores, improved attendance, an increase in positive attitudes and behavior, decreased placements in special education, higher graduation rates, and increased enrollment in post-secondary education (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000). The impact of this body of research is reflected in requirements of Section 1118. Parental Involvement of Title I — Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, often

referred to as "No Child Left Behind" <<http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg2.html>>.

This article describes how the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Program of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service of Bexar County (San Antonio) worked in partnership with public schools, higher education, and community agencies to engage families and assist in creative ways to meet the federal legislation requirements for parent involvement.

Current Challenges to School/Family Engagement

A confluence of changing developments nationwide is creating challenges for public schools in strengthening school/family connections. Challenges include: increasing numbers of economically disadvantaged students, inadequate funding, changing demographics, and the need to address state and federal mandates, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Recognizing not only the implications for the public schools but also higher education, The Texas A&M University System created a P-16 (Preschool through college) partnership involving three school districts in South San Antonio. Goals of the partnership include increased student performance, improved graduation rates, and increased college participation.

As identified by partnership schools, family and community engagement was a key to facilitate improved student success. However, the schools indicated lack resources to adequately address the critical area. The FCS program of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Bexar County, an agency of The Texas A&M University System, was identified as key to facilitating work in this area.

Role of FCS in Facilitating School Family Engagement

Under the facilitation and coordination of FCS agents, a Parent Involvement Committee was formed. Members include public school adult community education liaisons, university representatives with background in guidance, and FCS agents. Two major goals emerged: 1) building community capacity through networking and collaboration and 2) supporting and educating parents through family engagement. Implementation of these goals incorporated the previously discussed parent involvement research components of collaborated community services providing support and services to families, parent and child rearing skills, shared information and resources, and encouraging support of children's learning.

Building Capacity with Community Resources

The three school districts involved in the partnership are largely rural, lack mass transit, and have large Spanish-speaking populations. High levels of poverty have existed in the area for decades. Recognizing that basic family needs of shelter, food, and safety (Maslow, 1987) must be met before educational goals can be achieved, the committee focused on building community connections among service providers, families, and schools to provide a working network of services to support families. Several strategies were implemented to draw upon community resources. These include:

- **Identification of community resource agencies:** Representatives of the agencies meet quarterly with school personnel to network and share resources. Service gaps are identified and resources targeted to cover areas of need.
- **A Family Agency Resource Guide:** A Family Agency Resource Guide listing community resources was developed, and 200 were distributed to all agencies, principals, social workers, nurses, and community liaisons. Donations were obtained for printing. Extension staff formatted the guide and assisted with updated printings.
- **Student Help cards:** Student Help cards were produced with the support of the donors. The cards list agency hotlines and key numbers for "Help for Your Family, Help for Your Friends and Help for Yourself." 14,000 cards were printed in Spanish and English in wallet size for easy and discreet use and distributed to the high school students and families. Extension developed the cards and obtained donations for the printing.
- **Resource Fairs:** Resource fairs were held at the high schools during lunch periods. These fairs were organized using the "health fair" model. Agencies that participated brought information to high school students to share with families and support teenagers who act in adult roles. Information was provided to 1,200 people ranging from information on dental health, food stamps, and utility services to college information. FCS staff provided assistance in recruiting the agencies using skills in facilitation and knowledge of available resources and helping the schools organize and advertise the events. Evaluation techniques include documentation of agency involvement, expansion of services, and annual partnership surveys. Anecdotal information obtained from participants and documentation of services provided by the agencies has also been used.

Parent Engagement Through Learn and Share

A second area of focus identified by the Parent Involvement Committee was parent engagement.

To enhance student success, the committee chose to encourage and support parent involvement via a Learn and Share format. This Learn and Share program focuses on developing the skills and attitudes of English Language Learner families.

Parents are recruited with the help of the school bilingual/ NCLB contact. Topics presented are based on needs expressed by parents, including money management, child development, child and family safety, community resources, as well as school success topics. Most of the topics exist in materials of current FCS programs and were adapted by the agent. The series of presentations were formatted in packets as printed slides from a PowerPoint presentation, with English on one side and Spanish on the other. Parents are asked to share what they have learned with others.

Learn and Share introduces the concepts of a Master Volunteer Program. Parent skills are being developed in the "learn and share" concept until the parents are ready for a more comprehensive Master Volunteer program. The format also provides parents the opportunity to practice English-language skills. Qualitative evaluations are conducted at each session.

Success in initial pilot programs and the ability to align the program with NCLB parental involvement requirements has led to school district support for shared funding for a half time position, hired and supervised by the Extension Agent and Family Life Specialist. Funding is provided from Title I and Title III funds.

Conclusions and Implications for FCS

The families and agencies involved in this partnership want to help and volunteer. By adapting current volunteer programs or designing new models, FCS can empower parents and others to be more engaged with the schools, thus supporting the parent involvement research. These opportunities create new audiences and partnerships for FCS while providing much needed support for the fabric of our society, our nation's public schools.

Though participation in a holistic and systematic P-16 model, Extension has the expertise and capacity to adapt existing resources in family consumer sciences that can be used to strengthen families and promote academic success. By being proactive to the needs of growing populations that have diverse needs (Bilingual/ESL, Economically Disadvantaged, Immigrant, Limited English Proficiency, and Title I families) and creating culturally and literacy level appropriate materials, Extension can play a major role in helping schools and communities meet these critical needs.

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