Why Parent Engagement/Involvement is Important

What's the most accurate predictor of academic achievement? It's not socioeconomic status, nor how prestigious the school is that a child attends. The best predictor of student success is the extent to which families encourage learning at home and involve themselves in their child's education.[1]
When parents are engaged in their children's school lives, students have the home support and knowledge they need to not only finish their assignments, but also develop a lifelong love of learning.
Teachers who focus on parent engagement often see a profound change in their classrooms. The more parents involved in their children's education, the better their entire class's motivation, behavior, and grades become.
Encouraging parent engagement is more than common courtesy. It's one of the best ways to create a positive learning environment for every student. To create a community built on parent-teacher relationships in your school, find out what parent engagement is and how to nurture it.

What is Parent Engagement?

According to experts, the definition of parent engagement is parents and teachers sharing a responsibility to help their children learn and meet educational goals. Parent engagement happens when teachers involve parents in school meetings or events, and parents volunteer their support at home and at school. In this way, they make a commitment. Parents commit to prioritizing their child's educational goals, and teachers commit to listening and providing a space for collaboration with parents.

Parent engagement in schools is different from parent involvement, though both are useful. Parent involvement is when parents participate in school events or activities, and teachers provide learning resources or information about their student's grades. Unlike in parent engagement, teachers hold the primary responsibility to set educational goals. They relate to parents not as a partner but an advisor who guides them through academic support for their child.
It helps to think of parent involvement as the first step to parent engagement. While teachers can advise parents on some things, parents also have important information about their child that teachers might not know. Both can bring perspectives to the table that enrich a student's learning experience. Neither is complete without the other. As noted by Larry Ferlazzo in his article "Involvement or Engagement?": "A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth—identifying projects, needs, and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears—listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about."[2]
After the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB), our focus as educators shifted from parent involvement to engagement. We begin by giving parents resources, inviting them to activities, and helping them monitor their children's progress. Then, we partner with them to set goals for their students and find ways to strengthen our classrooms. When we engage parents in the learning process, our school communities are all the more enriched for it.

Why Parent Involvement is Important

Parental involvement and engagement in education matters now more than ever because it's in decline. In 2016, research showed a drop in parents who believe that intimate parent-teacher communication is effective.[3] Parents now prefer remote methods of communication, like online student portals, and they are less likely to attend parent-teacher conferences or school activities. This shift is sudden and concerning due to what it means for parent engagement. While digital tools can help families stay informed, students are missing out when parents don't offer their time and support.

The factors behind this change in parent involvement at school are multi-faceted. Some parents have scheduling or transportation issues that make volunteering or attending parent-teacher conferences tough. Others, like low-income or minority families, feel that staff makes them uncomfortable or shows a lack of cultural awareness.[4] If a parent-teacher relationship wasn't established early in the year, parents also may not know whether they're welcome at school. Some groups, however, are more at-risk for low parent engagement. Parent involvement is lowest in families below the poverty line or with older children, as well as parents who do not speak the area's primary language or did not graduate high school.[5]

Parent involvement in schools is the first step to parent engagement and, ultimately, parent partnership. When parents and teachers work together to establish a thriving classroom, the effect on their students is profound. Students with engaged parents don't just have high test scores: their attendance, self-esteem, and graduation rate rise, too. Parent-teacher relationships are more than an optional classroom benefit. They are key for helping students on a personal and classroom level reach their academic potential. If we as educators don't make a space for parent partnerships in our schools, we're limiting our classroom's capacity for growth.

Parent Engagement and Student Success

Children with engaged parents are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades or test scores [8]
- Graduate from high school and attend post-secondary education [9]
- Develop self-confidence and motivation in the classroom [10]
- Have better social skills and classroom behavior

They are also less likely to:

- Have low self-esteem
- Need redirection in the classroom [11]
- Develop behavioral issues

Across fifty different studies on parental engagement, educational researchers found a connection between family involvement and academic achievement.[6] And the earlier educators establish parent engagement, the more effective they are in raising student performance. Parent partnerships formed during elementary school years build a strong foundation for student success and future engagement opportunities.[7]

Parent engagement also decreases chronic absenteeism, or missing more than twenty days of a school year. When teachers engaged with parents through home visits, for example, student absences dropped by 20%.[12] Even after accounting for grade level and previous absences, students with engaged parents report less days of school missed overall.[13] Two-way communication between parents and teachers commits students to daily attendance and raises class participation levels.

Students aren't the only ones who benefit from family engagement: parents and teachers do, too. Teachers can prepare parents to help with homework or academic concepts. And engaged parents tend to think highly of teachers, which improves teacher morale. Knowing more about a student's family life can also help teachers prepare lessons that better fit that student's needs or interact more efficiently with families. And because students receive more support, classrooms with engaged parents perform better as a whole.[14] When parents and teachers team up, everyone wins!

How to Increase Parent Engagement

It's never too late to build the foundations for parent-teacher communication in schools. But the sooner you do, the more equipped your students will be to reach their academic potential.

Try these parent engagement strategies to transform involvement into parent partnerships:

- Give parents your contact information and get to know them early in the school year. That way, when they have questions, they'll feel comfortable reaching out
- Provide opportunities for parents to connect with the school. Volunteer shifts, class activities, or parent-teacher committees are all great engagement opportunities
- Share your classroom goals or expectations openly with parents, and ask them to do the same
- Connect with parents in-person as much as possible. Use emails, texts, or apps to keep parents up-to-date on upcoming class events
- Address common challenges that inhibit parent engagement like scheduling conflicts or an intimidating atmosphere