

## Appendix B1

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# PARENTS AS ADULT LEARNERS WORKSHOP

## Deconstructing Parent Involvement

### PRESENTATION GOALS

- To anticipate learning needed to prevent and solve a problem
- To seek authentic feedback from stakeholders (Educators, parents, policymakers)
- To advance collective awareness and thinking about an important topic
- To expand thinking about what parent involvement could look like

### CONTEXT

This is a presentation for parents, teachers, school administrators, and educators preparing future teachers, and policymakers, with the goal of answering the question “*Why are so few parents involved in their children’s schools and how can we improve this situation?*” This is a conceptual focus that can influence practice by utilizing a meaning-making process based on adult learning theory to bring about a shift in how we view parent involvement. Before working with any group using this process it is important that you do your own thinking about the potential mismatch between traditional parent involvement activities and what parents need as adult learners. Before any kind of systemwide paradigm shift we need to progressively involve parents and teachers in this dialogue.

## THE PROCESS

I have found success in placing a concept like “parent involvement” in the center of a web and then asking homogeneous groups (as a first step) and then mixed groups to bring their own experiences to this concept as a starting point. I begin with like groups where people know and hopefully trust each other as I plan to challenge their thinking on this topic which may provoke discomfort. My hope is for groups to begin to understand the *meaning of the concept for participants* starting with their own previous and current experiences. On the school side it might be seen as a good thing. For some new teachers it might mean fear of “dealing” with parents. On the parents’ side it might mean their own inadequacies in teaching math or their frustrations around being asked to get their overactive son to behave. Using the Parent Involvement Feedback Sheet (see page 5) I begin by asking: “What does it look like, sound like, feel like, etc.?” I ask participants to close their eyes and describe the first image that comes to mind. Can they hear words being spoken? Can they draw a parent involvement scene? I then ask them based on that exercise to choose words or phrases to describe parent involvement and we build a web of the term on a flip chart. Webbing or mind mapping is an intuitive process. There is no right or wrong way to do it. The web unlike a list is less linear and for many adult learners it may free them from feeling like there are right or wrong answers. I then ask the group to summarize what they learned about parent involvement from this first individual and group exercise.

Usually there is a collective awareness in parents that parent involvement is pretty formulaic, decided by the school and not exactly as they would like it to be. For some, “school” had negative connotations from their own experiences as a child or now as parents, so they kept their contact minimal. For others of certain cultural background there was no involvement expected. “*You defer to teachers—that is their job, you deal with home.*” For some teachers there was frustration that parents would not help enough with schoolwork or on the other side want to intrude too much in what was in the curriculum. After affirming the group’s work I introduce the hand-out “Standards and Guidelines for Parent Involvement” (see page 6) which presents what other stakeholders expect from parents and schools. What does it look like to them? I include guidelines from the PTA, The Department of Education, and a University Center for Parent Involvement. We can then look for commonalities between these lists and their own. We also note that there may be some differences in how certain concepts are viewed (e.g. “communication” may have very different meanings for each stakeholder). The school may decide having an open-house or sending a note home about homework might be good communication. Parents might hope it means teachers attending a discussion at a PTA meeting on the pros and cons of homework. Overall, what participants usually recall doing in their own lives is

similar to current guidelines. Our goal in this process is to introduce a paradigm shift or creative thinking about what could make things better.

I then share my own theory/insight regarding what I see as the *mismatch* between what is expected of parents and what they need as adult learners. As a developmental psychologist and parent educator I have learned about how adults think and what situations will engage them and invite participation. The handout “Some Relevant Aspects of Adult Learning” (see page 7) presents what we know from theory and research about what facilitates adult learning. Participants begin to see why current practices around parent involvement are not working as well as they could.

I then share one sheet of quotes from educators to better understand the situation and to inform and support my developing theory, which challenges what parent involvement should entail. See handout on “Some Reflections on Parent Involvement” starting on page 8. The experts are really talking about parents and teachers learning more about what each other thinks and searching for answers on what is good for children rather than have them come mostly from the school. As participants start connecting all of these pieces of the puzzle, I ask them to comment as follows:

Yes, I agree that \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

but \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

(This is part B of the Parent Involvement Feedback Sheet on page 5.) In this case I hope they will pull out the new information that makes the most sense to them, but also add their own reservations regarding how this information will be received by various stakeholders. The goal is to focus on *meaning-making, previous and current history and context*. What insights and experience do parents, teachers and administrators bring to this discussion? If they or others wanted to act on any of this new information what would their own reservations and concerns be? What would have to change first for them to be successful? Perhaps in this exercise I will learn that few agree with me and the supporting authors I have chosen to quote. Yet, seeds will have been planted for all parties including me.

I end by asking the group to write down one *action* they could take from their own standpoint to address this issue. For those who are comfortable doing so, sharing their ideas will allow the group to begin to see a new vision for parent involvement within whatever community of stakeholders one is addressing.

## COMMENTARY

This approach of using someone's experience as important information in problem solving should form a foundation for trust in the presenter's intentions. Looking at how this material is construed and the contextual factors of everyone involved is also consistent with a holistic approach to learning. Suggesting there are many options for addressing this problem is empowering and potentially also overwhelming for some learners.

The task is to uncover many perspectives or pieces of the puzzle, acknowledging that there are no easy solutions but not to overwhelm the group. The goal is that while they see the solution to the problem as multi-leveled, they can envision a sequence of activities to address these issues and they can focus on one concrete way each of them can be part of the solution. One concrete way is simply by better understanding the many factors involved. Another might be to then schedule a meeting between groups to get a better picture for how people think about a specific topic such as homework e.g. *What are teachers' goals? How does homework impact family life? What role could parents play that would be supportive but not stressful?*

Understanding others' perspectives helps one anticipate or make a plan. Another way to act is by helping me think about the issues in a new way with their valuable and unique perspective and input. Finally, when there is time, I either give participants a handout or ideally walk them through the steps in a caring decision-making process. (See Chapter 6.) It is a way of looking at any problem including this one that is respectful of adult learning and the needs of everyone involved.

## **HANDOUTS FOR WORKSHOP: PARENT INVOLVEMENT FEEDBACK SHEET**

Thank you in advance for assisting in our search for understanding regarding the challenges of successfully involving parents in our children's education.

### **Part A**

What comes to mind when you hear the words "parent involvement"? What do you see?

What do you hear? What might it look like if you drew it?

What did you learn from the collective responses of the group to this exercise?

### **Part B**

In reviewing the handouts on (1) standards of parent involvement, (2) some adult learning principles, and (3) some recent educator challenges to current parent involvement, please indicate:

What are your conclusions?

Please complete the sentence "Yes, I agree that . . . but first we would need to . . ."

### **Part C**

I can do the following action to facilitate the understanding or solution to the problem of insufficient parent involvement in our school/program. (Please use reverse side if needed.)

## **STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT**

*(From Other Stakeholders)*

### **A. Standards of Parent Involvement From the *Parent Teacher Association***

1. Communicating between home and school in regular, two-way and meaningful ways (to improve child outcome)
2. Parenting skills are promoted and supported
3. Parents assist student learning
4. Parents are welcome in schools as volunteers
5. Parents are involved in decision making affecting schools and families
6. Parents collaborate with the community (on behalf of children)

### **B. Guides for Parent Involvement From the *Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships* at Johns Hopkins University**

1. Parenting (parent education, family health services, home visits at transitions)
2. Communicating (via parent-teacher conferences and school-home mail)
3. Volunteering in the school
4. Learning at home (helping with homework and supporting student goals)
5. Decision making (parents as leaders e.g. PTA and school advocacy)
6. Collaborating with the community (to enhance school programs, family practices and student learning and development)

### **C. *Partnership for Family Involvement in Education of the DOE***

The mission: Support and strengthen schools and student achievement of higher standards.

## SOME RELEVANT ASPECTS OF ADULT LEARNING FOR PARENTS

- Adults learn more effectively through *experiential techniques of education* such as *discussion and immediate problem solving* than from directives or lecturing (Florin & Dokecki, 1983; Knowles, 1980).
- Adults have *rich experience to draw upon and integrate* to enhance learning for themselves and those around them (Brookfield, 1987; Frieri, 1970; Kolb, 1999; McCaleb, 1994).
- If adults are expected to learn something the instructors must discern that person's *readiness to learn* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Knowles, 1980).
- Adults learn best when there is a *listening-dialogue (critical thinking)-action process* involved (First & Way, 1995; Frieri, 1970; Mezirow, 1990). What does *critical thinking involve*? Brookfield (1987) describes critical thinkers as follows: They engage actively with life, are creative, appreciate diversity, and see many possibilities in life. They continually question assumptions and discard inappropriate assumptions. They consider context. Critical thinking happens in positive or negative situations. There may be inner discomfort and confusion. It is emotional as well as rational. It involves imagining and exploring options. It involves reflection leading to new understanding of self and others (pp. 7–9).
- Adults learning is enhanced when they have opportunities to *interact with peers* during the learning process (Brookfield, 1986; Brufee, 1993).
- Many adults, though temporarily dependent on others for guidance, in many situations want to move toward *self-directedness* in their learning and actions (Knowles, 1980; Maslow, 1970; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).
- Learning (Bloom's [1956] *receiving, comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating* information) is enhanced when learners can filter this information through the affective domains of their own beliefs, feelings and value systems (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964; Kypros, 1989a, 1989b).
- Adults learn best when they can effectively use the following learning strategies: *assess, collaborate, experiment, imagine, inquire, perform-simulate and reflect* (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000).
- Finally, adults are more motivated to turn their learning into action if it is internalized and *comes from within rather than from external sources* (Brookfield, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

## **SOME REFLECTIONS ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **From Gestwicki**

Personal development is a lifelong process. . . . Parents concerned with nurturing their children's development are also encountering growth in their own lives. (1999, p. 41)

### **From Comer et al.**

The best instructional methods, curricula, and equipment are not going to produce good outcomes in bad relationship environments, which are found most often where students, parents, and staff are all underdeveloped or unable to express their abilities and potential. (1999, p. xiv)

### **From Swick**

Since teacher-parent partnerships are developmental in nature and best realized through a comprehensive approach, a framework for carrying out the process is essential. The following elements need close scrutiny: teacher and parent contexts, role understandings, and an appreciation of the partnership process itself. Further, a sensitivity to each other's needs, situations, and talents is a requisite basis for a viable program. (1998, p. 2)

### **From the Coalition for Essential Schools**

"The process is simple," says Dan Rothstein, who directs the project. . . . It requires a shift from the habit of delivering information to parents towards facilitating inquiry. . . . Simple it may be, yet educators' commitment to the habits of inquiry often stops at the schoolhouse door, notes Seymour Sarason (1995) in his book *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle*. (Cushman, 1998, p. 2)

### **From Graue**

But the model is set out in terms of what parents can do to support the efforts of their children through agendas directed by the school. (pp. 5–6)

As it stands now the schools get to decide who needs to be saved and the nature of the story line. (1998, p. 12)

### **From de Carvalho**

Although families basically exist for children, they have their own needs, obligations, and policies (goals and practices) including children's house chores,

sleep time, and family activities . . . with which school homework interferes. (2001, p. 128)

### From Giles

Parents and educators also meet together to identify common concerns, decide which to focus on, and address a strategy for addressing them. . . . ECC [The Community Change Project] calls this process “indigenous invention,” explaining that “teachers, parents, children, and other community members must be the inventors of their social worlds” (Heckman, 1996, pp. 52–53). (1998, p. 3)

### From Benard

Ultimately research on resilience challenges the field to build the connectedness, this sense of belonging by transforming our families, schools, and communities to becoming “psychological homes” wherein youth can find mutually caring and respectful relationships and opportunities for meaningful involvement. . . . Building community and creating belonging for youth means we must also do this for ourselves. As Sergiovanni writes, “the need for community is universal. A sense of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values that make ourselves meaningful and significant—these needs are shared by all of us.” (1993).

We, too, need the protective factors of caring and respectful relationships and opportunities to make decisions; without these, we cannot create them for youth. (1996, pp. 5–6)

## RESOURCES

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