families and schools have traditionally been viewed as the institutions with the greatest effect on the development of children. Communities, however, have received increasing attention for their role in socializing youth and ensuring students’ success in a variety of societal domains. Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence, for example, identifies schools, families, and communities as major institutions that socialize and educate children (Epstein, 1987; 1995). A central principle of the theory is that certain goals, such as student academic success, are of interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support. Similarly, Heath and McLaughlin (1987) argue that community involvement is important because “the problems of educational achievement and academic success demand resources beyond the scope of the school and of most families” (p. 579). They identified changes in family demographics, increased demands of the professional workplace, and more diversity among students as some of the reasons that schools and families alone cannot provide sufficient resources to ensure that all students receive the experiences and support they need to succeed in the larger society.

When describing the importance of community involvement in education reform, Shore (1994) focused on the mounting responsibilities placed on schools by a nation whose student population is increasingly “at risk.” She stated: “Too many schools and school systems are failing to carry out their basic educational mission. Many of them—both in urban and rural settings—are overwhelmed by the social and emotional needs of children who are growing up in poverty” (p. 2). She contended that schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students, and that these resources, both human and material, are housed in students’ communities.

Other authors also have emphasized the importance of schools, families, and communities working together to promote students’ success. Toffler and Toffler (1995) contended that school-family-community collaborations are one way to provide a caring component to today’s often large, assembly-line schools. Still others (Benson, 1997; Decker, Decker, & Brown, 2007; Dryfoos, 1998; Dryfoos & Maquire, 2002) have suggested that school-community partnerships that are focused on education improvement and neighborhood revitalization can strengthen the social networks and social capital available to students.
School-community partnerships, then, can be defined as the connections between schools and individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to directly or indirectly promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development. Within this definition of school-community partnerships, community is not constrained by the geographic boundaries of neighborhoods; community refers more to the “social interactions that can occur within or transcend local boundaries” (Nettles, 1991, p. 380).

Forms of Partnership
School-community partnerships can take a variety of forms. The most common are partnerships with businesses, which can differ significantly in focus, scope, and content. But school-community partnerships also involve universities and educational institutions, government and military agencies, health-care organizations, faith-based organizations, national service and volunteer organizations, senior citizen organizations, cultural and recreational institutions, and other groups that volunteer resources and social support to students and schools.

Partnership activities also may have multiple foci. (See figure 1.) Activities may be student-centered, family-centered, school-centered, or community-centered. Student-centered activities provide direct services or goods to students, such as mentoring and tutoring programs; contextual learning and job-shadowing opportunities; and programs that offer awards, incentives, and scholarships. Family-centered activities focus on parents or entire families, such as parenting workshops, GED and other adult education classes, parent and family incentives and awards, family counseling, and family fun and learning nights. School-centered activities benefit the school as a whole, such as beautification projects or the donation of school equipment and materials, or activities that benefit the faculty, such as staff development and classroom assistance. Community-centered activities focus on the community and its citizens, such as charitable outreach, art and science exhibits, and community revitalization and beautification projects (Sanders, 2001; 2005).

The Role of Community Involvement
Community involvement activities are an important part of a school’s comprehensive
partnership program (Epstein, 1995). Some community activities support or strengthen the five other types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, and decision making (Epstein et al., 2002). For example, community partners can provide meeting space for parenting workshops, provide interpreters for school meetings with families, supply volunteer tutors, provide information on books that families can read to and with their children at home, and provide meals to increase parents’ attendance at school meetings.

Community collaborations also can be developed to enhance a school’s curriculum, identify and disseminate information about community resources, and further its community outreach. For example, one school in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University worked with its state department of environmental protection to help science faculty integrate local resources and environmental concerns into the science curriculum. Other network schools have developed a community resource handbook for families; partnered with a local library to hold a community art exhibit of students’ work; and partnered with local hospitals, dentists, nurses, and dieticians to develop a low-cost health care site to provide preventive and maintenance health care for students, families, and community members.

**A Team Approach**

Schools in the network that have effective school-community partnerships also have effective partnership teams. The network requires that all school members create or identify an action team for partnerships. Action teams consist of a school administrator, teacher representatives, parent and community representatives, and other interested stakeholders who are responsible for planning and implementing school, family, and community partnership activities to achieve important school goals.

The team approach has several advantages over the more traditional approach of having...
a single individual responsible for implementing a schoolwide partnership program. First, it allows for multiple and diverse voices to be involved in all stages of partnership program development, from the selection of partnership goals and foci to the evaluation of partnership practices. Parents and community members can add new perspectives to educators’ understanding of the students with whom they work. These insights, coupled with educators’ professional insights and knowledge, can help all parties develop a more holistic view of the needs and talents of students. This approach not only increases the likelihood of shared ownership, which is vitally important for the success of a partnership program, but also helps to challenge stereotypical views and perceptions that can hinder collaborative efforts to improve student learning.

Further, because the work of building a partnership program is shared, a team approach reduces the responsibilities of each individual member and, consequently, the likelihood of individual burnout. Finally, because a team structure can remain constant even as members change, a team approach increases the likelihood that partnerships will become a permanent part of schools’ overall improvement program.

**What Principals Can Do**

Principal leadership has been linked either directly or indirectly to a number of favorable school outcomes, including high student achievement, teacher commitment and efficacy, and family and community involvement and participation (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Rinehart, Short, & Short, 1998). Principals can create school cultures that support collaboration by maintaining a school environment in which teachers and parents are focused on students’ academic success; modeling genuine openness to parent and community involvement; establishing an expectation for dialogue and communication among school personnel, families, communities, and students; networking with individuals in the community to inform them of the school’s needs and goals; and supporting others in developing leadership in the area of family and community involvement.

Network schools that had successful community partnership programs also had principals who exhibited these leadership qualities. Although the principals were not always members of the partnership teams, they identified school personnel who had the skills, expertise, and experience to successfully lead those teams. Further, the principals were fully aware and supportive of the teams’ efforts and provided resources, attended community partnership events, arranged class coverage for teachers attending action team meetings, and acknowledged and praised partnership efforts and successes. In so doing, they facilitated community partnership development.

Some principals not only served as internal facilitators but also helped their action teams make connections. One principal said, “My role is to connect the people in the school with the people out of the school, to be a contact person in terms of putting these groups together.”

In their role as facilitators and partners in school improvement, these principals were not threatened by the fact that other administrators, action team leaders, parents, or students had creative solutions to school challenges. For example, the principal of an urban high school described her leadership style in the following way, “I’m not one to say, ‘Well, this won’t work’ [or] ‘That won’t work’... Until we find out that

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**Because a team structure can remain constant even as members change, a team approach increases the likelihood that partnerships will become a permanent part of schools’ overall improvement program.**
it won’t work, then let’s try it.... It is obvious that what we have been doing hasn’t worked, so why should I be closed to a new idea? It doesn’t matter whether it is my idea or not. I don’t care. If you have something that is going to work, then...let’s do it.”

Even schools with successful community partnerships sometimes lacked resources, such as space and funding, that would have further enhanced their programs. When possible, principals showed their support by finding innovative ways to meet such needs. For example, one principal allowed the partnership team to renovate a storage room as space for a parent and community center that provided meeting space for the team as well as for other parent and community groups and was an important symbol of the principal’s commitment to home-school-community collaboration.

Conclusion

For all its promise, community involvement is not a panacea for the ills of many schools. It cannot replace sound educational policies and curricula, adequate funding, excellent teaching, and effective partnerships with families. It can, however, enhance the effect that these elements have on schools. When properly executed, school-community partnerships can be the little extra that makes the big difference. Such partnerships must be developed and sustained with principal leadership and support.

REFERENCES


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