



BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR LEARNING

Based on *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, written by Jennifer Ballen and Oliver Moles, for the national family initiative of the U.S. Department of Education. Published in September 1994.

Web prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education for the U.S. Department of Education and the National Parent Information Network.

This Web provides:

- A review of the past 30 years of [key research findings](#) on the importance of involving families in their children's learning.
- Examples of family involvement efforts that are working.
- Concrete ways in which different participants in the family involvement partnership can help achieve success.

Links within this document will bring you to:

- The seven (7) **chapters** of *Strong Families, Strong Schools*.
- The [reference list](#) of *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, where you will find additional links to **ERIC abstracts**.
- **Other Web sites** related to families and family involvement in education.

Chapter 1: **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**: The benefits are numerous and lasting.

Families can help their children at home:

- [Read together](#)
- Use [TV wisely](#)
- Establish a daily [family routine](#)
- Schedule daily [homework times](#)
- [Monitor](#) out-of-school activities
- [Talk](#) with children and teenagers
- Communicate [positive behaviors](#), values and character traits
- Expect [achievement](#) and offer praise

Families can help their children at school:

- Require [challenging coursework](#) for middle and secondary school students
- [Keep in touch](#) with the school
- [Ask](#) more from schools
- Use [community resources](#)
- Encourage your [employer](#) to get involved

Chapter 2: SCHOOL-FAMILY **PARTNERSHIPS**: Schools must welcome parents and recognize their strengths.

Schools and families can work together to make schools safe.

- Establish [family-school-community partnerships](#)
- Make learning [relevant](#) to children
- Emphasize [early childhood education](#)

Families and schools can also team up to overcome barriers between them:

- Recognize parents' [disconnection](#) with public education
- Train [teachers](#) to work with parents
- Reduce [cultural](#) barriers and [language](#) barriers
- Evaluate [parents' needs](#)
- Accommodate families' [work schedule](#)

- Use [technology](#) to link parents to classrooms
- Make [school visits](#) easier
- Establish a home-school [coordinator](#)
- Promote [family learning](#)
- Give parents [a voice](#) in school decisions

Chapter 3: [COMMUNITIES](#): Communities connect families and schools.

Community groups can increase family involvement in children's learning.

- Combat [alcohol, drugs, and violence](#).
- Reinforce successful [child-raising skills](#)
- Provide [mentoring](#) programs
- Enlist community [volunteers](#)
- Utilize [senior citizen](#) volunteers
- Offer [summer learning](#) programs
- Link [social services](#)
- Encourage [parental leadership](#)

Chapter 4: "FAMILY-FRIENDLY" [BUSINESSES](#)

Chapter 5: [STATES](#) CONNECTING FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS:

Many states have developed family partnership programs.

- [South Carolina](#)
- [California](#)
- [Utah](#)
- [Wisconsin](#)
- [Idaho](#)
- Promote [connections](#) between families and schools.

Chapter 6: MAKING [FEDERAL](#) POLICIES AND PROGRAMS SUPPORTIVE:

All agencies of the federal government can provide leadership to strengthen parental involvement through their policies and programs.

- [Goals 2000: Educate America Act](#)
- [Family Involvement Partnership](#)

- [Title I](#) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- [School-to-Work Opportunities Act](#)
- [Other](#) family involvement programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education

Other federal departments support the family involvement initiative.

- [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)
- [U.S. Department of Justice](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [U.S. Department of Defense](#)
- [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#)

Chapter 7: [CONCLUSION](#)

Urban/Minority
Families

UEweb

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Strong Families, Strong Schools



KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three factors over which parents exercise authority- student absenteeism, variety of reading materials in the home, and excessive television watching -- explain nearly 90 percent of the difference in eighth-grade mathematics test scores across 37 states and the District of Columbia on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Thus, controllable home factors account for almost all the differences in average student achievement across states ([Barton & Coley 1992](#)).

Although math and science performance of American students on NAEP and math scores on the SAT have shown improvement in recent years, NAEP reading scores and SAT verbal scores have remained flat. Reading is more dependent on learning activities in the home than is math or science ([The College Board 1994](#)).

Studies of individual families show that what the family does is more important to student success than family income or education. This is true whether the family is rich or poor, whether the parents finished high school or not, or whether the child is in preschool or in the upper grades ([Coleman 1966](#); [Epstein 1991a](#); [Stevenson & Baker 1987](#); [de Kanter, Ginsburg, & Milne 1986](#); [Henderson & Berla 1994](#); [Keith & Keith 1993](#); [Liontos 1992](#); [Walberg, n.d.](#))

The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children ([Anderson et al. 1985](#)).

International comparisons show the high academic success of students from Asian countries, which many attribute to the priority their families give to education ([Stevenson 1993](#)).

Family involvement COULD DOUBLE THE PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN STUDENT LEARNING.

If every parent of a child aged 1 through 9 spent one hour reading or working on schoolwork with

his or her child five days a week, American parents would annually devote at least 8.7 billion hours to support their children's reading ([U.S. Department of Education 1994a](#)).

In money terms, if the children's teachers spent the same time one-on-one, the cost to American taxpayers would be approximately \$230 billion more in 1991 -- about the same as what the American public pays yearly for the entire K-12 public American education enterprise. In practice, however, only half of parents with children under age 9 say they read to them every day ([Gorman 1993](#)).

Family involvement is one of the BEST LONG-TERM INVESTMENTS A FAMILY CAN MAKE.

The difference in lifetime earning between a student who did not graduate from high school and one who did is over \$200,000. The difference for a student who received a bachelor's degree or more is almost \$1 million ([The U.S. Census Bureau 1994](#)).

There is **public support** for greater family involvement in learning:

Forty percent of parents across the country believe that they are not devoting enough time to their children's education ([Finney 1993](#)).

Teachers ranked strengthening parents' roles in their children's learning as the issue that should receive the highest priority in public education policy over the next few years ([Louis Harris and Associates 1993](#)).

Among students aged 10 to 13, 72 percent said they would like to talk to their parents more about schoolwork. Forty-eight percent of older adolescents (14-17 years old) agreed ([National Commission on Children 1991](#)).

Eighty-nine percent of company executives identified the biggest obstacle to school reform as lack of parental involvement ([Perry 1993](#)).

But if family involvement is so important, why isn't more of it happening? Aspects of modern life stand in the way.

Time. With the rise in two-breadwinner families, one-parent families, and the need for family members to hold more than one job, families have many demands on their time. 66 percent of employed parents with children under 18 say they do not have enough time for their children ([Families and Work Institute 1994](#)). For example, many children are left at home alone, unsupervised or watching television for hours a day. Working parents are often faced with trying to complete all household duties in the limited time available. Teachers also are strapped for time. Although some would like to make home visits to families or talk more with students' parents, many teachers are parents themselves and have families to attend to.

Uncertainty about what to do and their own importance. Many parents today are unsure how to help their children learn ([National Commission on Children 1991](#)). Some are simply not prepared to be parents. The number of teenage parents has risen dramatically in recent years ([Snyder & Fromboluti 1993](#)). Other parents may have had bad experiences with school themselves and are reluctant to return to school even as a parent, or they may feel intimidated and unsure about the value of their contributions compared with those of a teacher. Yet many parents say they would be willing to spend more time on homework or other learning activities with their children if teachers gave them more guidance ([Epstein 1987](#); [Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms 1986](#)). But teachers also need guidance. Although teacher certification requirements in about half the states mention the importance of working with families, very few states require extensive coursework or in-service training in working with families ([Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan 1994](#)). Few teacher preparation programs address techniques for communicating with families, and many teachers and other school staff may simply not know how to go about involving parents more in their children's learning.

Cultural barriers. The families of the children being educated in America's schools today are extremely diverse. Many immigrant families do not speak or understand English. This language barrier may be a special problem for low-income families who have little or no education themselves. The 1980s saw the number of poor Hispanic and Asian immigrant children increase dramatically ([Morra 1994](#)). Families also have different views on schools, teaching, and their own role in their children's education. Teachers may be unable to communicate with non-English-speaking parents. Even those family members who speak English but have little education often have difficulty in communicating with schools because their life experiences and perspectives are so different ([Comer 1988](#); [Moles 1993](#)).

Lack of a supportive environment. Nurturing families has not been a priority on the American agenda. More and more parents face the difficult task of raising their children alone. More children than at any time since 1965 live in poverty ([Children's Defense Fund 1994](#)). Low-income parents have less contact with schools than do their better-off counterparts ([Moles 1993](#)). They need support from all sectors of the community if they are to become more involved in their children's education. Schools need to establish clear school and district policies on family involvement and reach out to all parents on a continuing basis, providing personal contact, literature and classes on parenting, literacy training, and parental resource centers. Religious and civic organizations need to encourage parents as they guide the growth of their children. Communities also must work with families to make the streets safe for children and provide constructive after-school and summer experiences. Employers need to be supportive of their employees who are parents, allowing more flexibility in work schedules as well as more options for part-time employment.

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Strong Families, Strong Schools



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Strong Families, Strong Schools



Family Involvement

Families can help their children both at home and at school. When families are involved in their children's education in positive ways, children achieve higher grades and test scores, have better attendance at school, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behavior, graduate at higher rates, and have greater enrollment in higher education ([Henderson & Berla 1994](#); [Becher 1984](#)). Parents can emphasize good work habits, value learning and good character, set high expectations for their children, stay informed about their children's progress, and monitor their children's activities.

Although most studies have focused on younger children, the benefits of involvement can extend far beyond the preschool and elementary school years ([Henderson 1987](#)). For high school youth, parents can monitor homework and encourage participation in wholesome extracurricular activities, provide a sense of proportion to TV watching and video games, talk often to teachers, be active in parent-teacher associations, and help their children develop plans for careers and further education.

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress support the efforts of families at home. Three factors over which parents can exercise authority -- student absenteeism, variety of reading materials in the home, and excessive television watching -- account for nearly 90 percent of the difference in the average state-by-state performance of eighth-graders' mathematics test scores among 37 states and the District of Columbia. In other words, most of the differences in achievement observed across states can be attributed to home practices. This means that families can improve their children's achievement in school by making sure their children attend school regularly, encouraging their children to read at home regularly, and turning off the TV ([Barton & Coley 1992](#)).

Studies also show a strong relationship between the number of higher-level courses taken and student achievement and college entrance test scores. Parents, with the assistance of the school guidance counselor, can encourage their children to take the appropriate preparatory courses in middle and junior

high school (i.e., algebra, keyboard skills) and challenging sequences of courses in high school (i.e., chemistry, calculus, third and fourth years of the same foreign language, advanced placement courses, and advanced technology and computer courses).

What families do to help their children learn is more important to their academic success than how well-off the family is ([Walberg, 1984](#)). A national study of eighth-grade students and their parents shows that parental involvement in students' academic lives is indeed a powerful influence on students' achievement across all academic areas ([Keith & Keith, 1993](#)). Higher achievement results, in part, from the increased amount of homework completed by students with families who are more involved in their education.

Parents benefit as well. They develop a greater appreciation of their role in their children's education, an improved sense of self worth, stronger social networks, and even the desire to continue their own education. They also come to understand more about their schools and teaching and learning activities in general ([Davies 1988](#); [Henderson & Berla 1994](#), [Liontos 1994](#)). Teachers report that they are encouraged by strong support from involved parents to raise their expectations for both children and parents.

Research and accounts of good practice point out many steps all families can take to improve the learning environment at home:

Read Together.

Although math and science performance of American students on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and math scores on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) have shown improvement in recent years, NAEP reading scores and SAT verbal scores have remained basically the same. Reading is more dependent on home learning activities than is math or science ([Mullis et al. 1994](#); [College Board 1994](#)). Children's success in school can be linked to reading to children and listening to them read. The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children ([Anderson et al. 1985](#)). If every parent of a child aged 1 through 9 spent one hour reading or working on schoolwork with the child 5 days a week, American parents would annually devote at least 8.7 billion hours to supporting their children's reading. In money terms, if the child's teacher spent the same one-on-one time, the cost to the American taxpayer would be around \$230 billion -- about the same as what the American public pays yearly for the entire American K-12 public education enterprise ([U.S. Department of Education 1994a](#)).

In practice, however, only half of parents with children under age 9 say they read to them every day, and only 13 percent read with their children aged 9 to 14 daily ([Gorman 1993](#)). Parents can also take their children to the library, help them get a library card, and help them find books on their interests and hobbies. The availability of reading material in the home, whether owned or borrowed from the library, is directly associated with children's achievement in reading comprehension ([Lee & Croninger 1994](#)).

Use TV Wisely.

Most parents (73 percent) want to limit their children's television viewing ([Finney 1993](#)), but parents who are at work or occupied elsewhere cannot easily do this. Forty-four percent of seventh-graders recently reported watching three or more hours of television a day ([Puma et al. 1993](#)). Although moderate amounts of viewing do not interfere with schoolwork, academic achievement drops sharply for children who watch more than 10 hours a week, or an average of 2 hours a day ([U.S. Department of Education 1987](#)). The quality of the television programs selected is also a concern. Although the evidence is not conclusive, possible effects on children who view television violence include less sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others, greater fear of the world around them, and increased likelihood of engaging in aggressive or harmful behavior ([Murray & Connborg 1992](#)). Families can limit the amount of viewing, help children select educational programs, watch programs together, and discuss them ([ERIC 1990](#)).

Establish a Daily Family Routine.

Studies show that successful students have parents who create and maintain family routines ([Clark 1988](#); [U.S. Department of Education 1987](#)). Routines generally include time for doing homework, doing chores, eating meals together, and going to bed at an established time. Routines are important to make life predictable and satisfying for all family members. Discussion of daily events at mealtimes, for example, is an important routine.

Schedule Daily Homework Times.

Students with low test scores who spend substantial time on homework get as good grades as students with more ability who do no homework ([U.S. Department of Education 1987](#)). Spending more time on homework has the greatest effect in the upper grades ([Cooper 1989](#)). Parents can help by setting a regular time for homework each day; providing a quiet, well-lit place for study at home or encouraging children to study at a local library; and discouraging distractions from phone calls, radio, and television. Parents can encourage all children's efforts to learn, be available for questions, and spend time discussing what was learned. A parent does not have to know all the answers; demonstrating an interest is more important. Students can call on other family members, teachers, or librarians if more help with a certain subject or assignment is necessary.

The informal education that takes place in the family is not merely a pleasant prelude, but rather a powerful prerequisite for success in formal education from the primary grades onward.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, developmental psychologist, Cornell University

Monitor Out-of-School Activities.

Families can help children spend time constructively by guiding the use of leisure time, including time spent in TV viewing and time spent with friends. For example, regular phone calls from a working parent to an older child at home each afternoon can keep parents informed about and involved with their children's plans and activities. Monitoring after school activities may also be important in curbing sexual activity, drinking, and drug use by adolescents, especially where drugs and violence are serious concerns in the neighborhood. Positive extracurricular community activities can be learning experiences and fill idle time ([U.S. Department of Education 1990](#)). Community youth organizations, religious groups, arts and cultural institutions, school clubs, colleges and universities, and after-school programs should all be viewed as resources to help families and children.

Talk With Children and Teenagers.

Children and adults can learn a great deal about each other just by talking about their daily lives, current events, family history, and other common interests. Studies show that frequent, open family discussions are associated with higher student achievement ([Barton & Coley 1992](#), [Epstein 1991a](#); [Leler 1983](#), [Singer et al. 1988](#)). Parents can get to know the friends of their teenagers, discuss school and outside activities with them, keep teenagers involved in family activities, and stress the importance of the teenagers as role models to younger siblings. An important part of discussion is listening; parents need to listen to and acknowledge their children's concerns and worries in order to help their children resolve them more effectively.

Communicate Positive Behaviors, Values, and Character Traits.

Families are still the most important influence on children's lives ([Ingrassia 1993](#)). Talking directly to teenagers about sex, drugs, and alcohol is one way to save their lives. Values instilled by parents -- honesty, belief in the work ethic, responsibility for one's actions, and religious principles -- are twice as important for school achievement as family economic or educational background ([Hanson & Ginsburg 1985](#)). By talking about the importance of these values, parents help their children learn to make good decisions. By acting on such values, parents serve as important role models to their children.

Expect Achievement and Offer Praise.

Parents need to set high standards for their children's schoolwork and to encourage the children to work hard to achieve those standards. Standards should be realistic, however, or students may be inclined to give up ([Scott-Jones 1984](#)). Families who praise children's skills and efforts, show interest and concern, and reward success tend to have children who are successful in school ([Clark 1990](#)). Parents who demonstrate warmth and also set limits have children who are more socially and academically skilled than do parents who emphasize mainly the warmth or the limits ([Baumrind 1989](#)).

Families can make a difference by the things they do with the school as well. Here are some ways:

Require Challenging Coursework for Middle and Secondary School Students.

Parents have a responsibility to encourage their children's school to offer and enroll students in a challenging sequence of courses in preparation for postsecondary education and a promising career. Taking "gatekeeper" courses, such as algebra and geometry, early in the high school experience is strongly associated with college enrollment. The differences in college enrollment rates between white and minority students are virtually nonexistent among the students who took both algebra and geometry in high school ([Pelavin & Kane 1990](#); [Pelavin Associates 1993](#)). For students in special education, a strong transition plan can help them succeed in the world beyond school. Research shows that a comprehensive program of challenging courses, high standards, and career counseling will improve the likelihood that students will be academically successful. In addition, the integration of vocational and academic education appears to be a promising instructional strategy to help students understand abstract concepts through real-world situations. Parents can also encourage the school to provide on-the-job training and internships in vocational activities for students who are not headed for postsecondary education.

Keep in Touch With the School.

Families who are consistently informed about their children's progress at school have higher-achieving children ([Henderson & Berla 1994](#)). The partnership between parents and teachers is key to creating a climate at home and at school that is conducive to learning. Parents cannot afford to wait for schools to tell them how children are doing. Visiting the school and talking to teachers or having a phone conversation are good steps. Parents need to check on whether their children are assigned meaningful homework in appropriate amounts and are challenged to do their best. If children are not being challenged academically, families need to find out how they can change this situation.

Parents have to understand the hierarchy of education. If the principal isn't responsive, then go higher. Go to the superintendent. Go to the division of high schools or the community school board. Participate in your community school board elections, which not enough parents do at all, especially in the big cities. They have to understand that there are individuals who are higher up that are accountable to them.

Andrea Schlesinger, student representative, New York City Board of Education

Ask More From Schools.

To keep informed about and involved in what is going on at their children's school, families can work with the school to incorporate new ways to get more involved. Some examples are establishing homework hotlines, volunteering on school planning and decision-making committees, and creating family resource centers ([Moles 1993](#)). Parents also have a responsibility to insist that schools raise the standards of education, educate their children at a world-class level, and work toward achieving the National Education Goals. Parents should compare their school's goals and standards against the National Education Goals and against emerging academic and occupational standards.

Use Community Resources.

Using community resources includes taking advantage of local enrichment programs and mentors and seeking community services when needed. Family-oriented community resources may include health care services, housing assistance, adult education and family literacy, employment counseling, and exposure to arts and cultural institutions. Youth-oriented community resources include after-school and summer learning programs, recreation centers and sports teams, community service activities, and religious youth groups. High-achievers are more likely than other students to participate in activities and to know persons who can buffer family and community difficulties ([Clark 1990](#)).

Encourage Your Employer to Get Involved.

Parents can encourage their employers to play a proactive role in the education of their children. Businesses can adopt policies that allow families to spend more time in their children's schools; form partnerships with schools; donate money, supplies, or expertise; or sponsor career exploration days for students. Businesses can also become part of a school-to-work program and encourage employees to serve as mentors to help introduce students to various occupations.

Families can take many actions at home, with the schools, and in the community to strengthen their children's academic achievement. When families have difficulty doing what is needed, schools, organizations in the community, and religious institutions can help provide assistance and draw families into partnerships around common concerns.

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School-Family Partnerships



Schools must become places where families feel wanted and recognized for their strengths and potential. Too often families do not feel welcome, a fact that the president of the National Education Association, Keith Geiger, has acknowledged: "The sad fact is that in many instances parents don't feel as if we welcome them in school" ([Education Daily 1994](#)). Schools that help families feel welcome and show them how to improve learning at home are likely to have more support from parents and motivated students ([Bempechat 1992](#); [Epstein, 1991a](#)).

The role of parents in the education of their children cannot be overestimated. by becoming involved in their local school community, parents can provide the essential leadership which will lead to improvements in educational opportunities for their children.

[Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund](#)

Studies show that school practices to encourage parents to participate in their children's education are more important than family characteristics like parental education, family size, marital status, socioeconomic level, or student grade level in determining whether parents get involved ([Dauber & Epstein 1993](#)). At the same time, schools need to make a concerted effort to help low-income families become involved, because they often wait for an approach from the school. Such families may also have increasing difficulty in helping children with their academics as children advance in age and in grade ([Lee & Croninger 1994](#)). Children from low-income families who are at risk of failing or falling behind can succeed academically if their parents are taught home teaching techniques ([Radin 1969, 1972](#); [Bronfenbrenner 1974](#); [Scott & Davis 1979](#)).

Unfortunately, both the quality and quantity of parental contacts with the school decline as children get older. During the first grade, 52 percent of the interactions between families and schools are positive (relating to their child's good academic performance) and only 20 percent are negative (relating to their child's poor academic performance). But by the seventh grade, the proportion of positive contacts drops

to 36 percent, and the proportion of negative contacts rises to 33 percent. The proportion of parents serving as school or classroom volunteers drops as well, from 33 percent of first-grade parents to 8 percent of seventh-grade parents ([Puma, Jones, Rock, & Fernandez 1993](#)).

For partnerships to work, there must be mutual trust and respect, an ongoing exchange of information, agreement on goals and strategies, and a sharing of rights and responsibilities. Some schools have established pledges or compacts -- written agreements among students, parents, and school staff to work together to increase learning. Principals should create an environment in which teachers and staff make parents feel like full partners. But many teachers say that although they would like to work more with families, they simply do not have enough time in the day. They need to be given the time and training to work with families ([U.S. Department of Education 1994b](#)).

Safe schools and a disciplined classroom setting are preconditions for learning. Concern for these issues is overwhelming. Parents and the general public rate the growth of fighting, violence and gangs, and poor discipline as the biggest problems facing American schools in 1994 ([Elam, Lowell, & Gallup 1994](#)).

Over the past 10 years, threats and injuries to students and the theft and vandalism of student property have remained at steady but high levels ([National Education Goals Panel 1993](#)). It has been reported that nearly 3 million thefts and violent crimes occur on or near school campuses every year. This equates to almost 16,000 incidents per school day, or one every six seconds ([Bastian & Taylor 1991](#)). While the exact number of weapons brought into schools is not known, surveys indicate that approximately 20 percent of all students in grades 9-12 reported they had carried a weapon at least once during the previous 30 days, and many of these weapons find their way into schools.

Children themselves recognize the problem. Nearly one-fourth (23 percent) of America's public school students say they have been the victim of an act of violence in or around school. An almost identical group (22 percent) are somewhat worried or very worried about being hurt by someone else when they are in or around school ([Louis Harris and Associates 1993](#)). Serious discipline problems are more common than violence in the schools, however. Forty-four percent of teachers surveyed nationwide reported that student misbehavior interfered to a considerable extent with their teaching ([U.S. Department of Education 1993a](#)).

There are concrete actions that schools and families can take to make their schools safer and classrooms more disciplined:

Establish Family-School-Community Partnerships.

Schools and communities that make safe schools a priority can make a difference in the lives of families in the adjacent neighborhoods which can in turn make a difference in the school climate. Some neighborhoods characterized by high housing density, high residential mobility, high percentages of single-parent families, and neighborhood economic decline may especially need a community strategy.

These conditions make it difficult for residents to transmit positive values in natural interactions to the younger generation as neighbors are no longer able to distinguish local youth from those outside the area, and parents often do not band together to solve common problems, participate in voluntary organizations and friendship networks, and undertake neighborhood watches ([National Research Council 1993](#)). While not an easy task, it can be done.

The former principal at Spry Elementary School in inner-city Chicago launched a coordinated approach to address safety concerns in the surrounding community. Neighbors joined together to evict undesirable neighbors involved in illegal activities, abandoned lots were converted into supervised playgrounds, a preschool program was organized in the school building after elementary grade classes were dismissed, and after-school recreational activities for children and parents were begun ([Designs for Change 1993](#)).

Make Learning Relevant to Children.

Student attitudes can foster violence. Violence has been shown to be more prevalent where students felt their classes did not teach them what they wanted to learn, did not consider their grades important, did not plan to go to college, and felt they had no control over their lives ([U.S. Department of Education 1993a](#)). Students who make poor grades are more likely to be discipline problems and to commit violent acts. Indeed, students with poor grades are three times more likely than all students to threaten someone with a gun or knife and four times more likely to threaten a teacher ([Louis Harris and Associates 1993](#)). There are connections that schools, families, and communities can make to address these attitudes. Schools can make schoolwork interesting and relevant to children's lives outside of the school by making real-world connections to future opportunities and aspirations. Communities can offer activities that build on students' interests and teach them self-reliance and responsibility.

Emphasize Early Childhood Education.

Aggressive behavior in young children is related to later misconduct. This factor suggests that connecting children with family and community early on in positive ways is integral to violence prevention. Programs that attempt to make large and lasting changes in a child's prospects for improved conduct, better school behavior, and lessened delinquency do make a difference. The Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan; the Parent-Child Development Center in Houston, Texas; the Family Development Research Project in Syracuse, New York; and the Yale Child Welfare Project in New Haven, Connecticut, are illustrative of such programs sharing the common features of dealing with low-income and often minority families. Each program intervened during the first five years of a child's life and followed up with them for two to five more years. They combined family involvement and parent training with preschool education for the child, and home visits were a component in each. These programs produced less fighting, impulsiveness, disobedience, restlessness, cheating, and delinquency among children ([Wilson 1994](#)).

Schools can take a number of steps to promote partnerships with families. These can ease teachers' responsibilities or give them better ways to relate to parents.

Recognize the Disconnection.

While many parents have strong feelings of support for the schools their children actually attend, with 70 percent of all public school parents giving their children's school a grade of A or B, there still is a strong feeling of disconnection with public education in general ([Elam, Lowell, & Gallup 1994](#)). Many families feel that their interests are not fully taken into account by educators. At times, parents feel that educators talk down to them or speak in educational jargon they do not understand, while the majority of teachers feel that parents need to be more engaged in the education of their child ([Peter D. Hart 1994](#)). Educators need to be willing to recognize the extent of this disconnection as a precondition for involving families in their children's education. Schools should make every effort to communicate with parents straightforwardly and simply. To ensure that all parents have access to information, written material should be clear, concise, and easily readable. Some schools' newsletters for parents actually include a glossary of terms to help parents understand school improvement efforts.

Train Teachers to Work with Parents.

Schools and school systems seldom offer staff any formal training in collaborating with parents or in understanding the varieties of modern family life. However, both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are working to make such information and skills widely available. As explained in the previous section, there are myriad ways for families to become more involved in schools, and training can help teachers and other school staff change the traditional images of contacting parents only when a student is in trouble or when the school needs help with a bake sale.

Teacher training programs can include general information on the benefits of and barriers to parental involvement, information on awareness of different family backgrounds and lifestyles, techniques for improving two-way communication between home and school, information on ways to involve parents in helping their children learn in school and outside, and ways that schools can help meet families' social, educational, and social service needs. Individual schools can provide training to current school staff, teacher training programs can expand the range of courses taught and required, and states can change the requirements for teaching certification ([Shartrand, Krieder, & Erickson-Warfield in press](#)).

Reduce Distrust and Cultural Barriers.

Often the first time a parent comes to school is when a child is in trouble. Schools can reduce distrust and cultural barriers between families and teachers by arranging contacts in neutral settings. These might include using resource centers, offering informal learning sessions, conducting home visits by family liaison personnel, and holding meetings off school grounds. Since the first contact a parent has with his or her child's school is often negative, some districts are making sure the first contact with parents is a positive one. The city of Tacoma, Washington, has adopted a parent training program that prepares parents to participate in child-parent-teacher days at the beginning of each school year prior to the first day of classes (Lewis 1994). Schools can help reduce distrustful feelings between families and schools

by making school signs and initial contacts with parents more friendly and respectful. Many times the first thing parents see when they walk into a school is a sign ordering "Report to the main office," -- not a statement that makes parents feel welcome. Because such distrust can run deep, however, more comprehensive approaches are often needed.

The School Development Program created by [James Comer \(1988\)](#) is an excellent program designed to reduce barriers between the school and home. It assumes that many poor families and middle-class staff in schools are distrustful of each other. To counter this situation, the program attempts to engage parents in the schools through (1) encouraging parents to participate on a governance and management team that plans academic programs and improvements to school environment; (2) teaching parents how to help their children learn; and (3) sponsoring workshops, dinners, and other school events that bring parents and school staff together. These programs can improve student achievement and behavior in school and encourage families to become more involved in their communities by taking a greater interest in local elections and using community services that they previously distrusted. The program is now in operation in 375 school districts in 19 states across the country.

The largely Hispanic community of McAllen, Texas, has developed a highly effective district-wide family involvement program. Although McAllen had encouraged family involvement for years through federally funded projects such as bilingual education and Chapter 1, family involvement has been greatly expanded. The district budget for parental involvement is no longer solely supported by federal funds. The parental involvement staff consists of parent training specialists at all elementary and secondary schools, and social workers or other staff at secondary schools. Families and teachers at each building are responsible for designing an implementation plan tailored to the needs of the people in that building. Family involvement activities at each school include education programs for parents, school-home communications, volunteer opportunities, home learning, and participation in the parent-teacher organization. Almost all parents in McAllen have some productive contact with their child's school ([D'Angelo 1991](#); Hughes 1994).

Address Language Barriers.

Reaching families whose first language is not English requires schools to make special accommodations. Translating materials into their first language can be useful for these parents, but written communications alone are not enough. Ideally, a resource person, perhaps another parent, would be available who could communicate with parents in their first language either face-to-face or by telephone. Interactive telephone voice-mail systems that have bilingual recordings for families also are useful. The Junior League in Long Beach, California, greatly increased attendance at local PTA meetings by offering concurrent translations in both Spanish and Indochinese languages.

Evaluate Parents' Needs.

Schools can also bridge the distance between families and schools by surveying parents to find out their concerns and opinions about school. The Linda Vista School in San Diego, California, conducted an

extensive parent survey while beginning a comprehensive process to improve the school. To make sure that all families were reached, the school provided the survey in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Hmong, as well as in English. Including families from the beginning of the reform process helped to establish a sense of shared responsibility for school improvement. From this survey evolved the school reform process, which includes all members of the school community. Surveys can be especially helpful to assess further changes needed after a school has implemented a program promoting parental involvement.

Accomodate Families' Work Schedule.

Many schools hold evening and weekend meetings and conferences before school to accommodate families' work schedules. By remaining open in the afternoons and evenings and on weekends, schools can promote various recreational and learning activities for parents, including adult education and parenthood training, and can create a safe haven against neighborhood crime. The National Education Commission on Time and Learning (1994) recently recommended extended-day and extended-year programs to help American students learn more. The schools in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, are now open from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and there are plans to open a K-8 year-round school. This schedule grew out of a concern by parents and educators about the number of latch-key children in the community. On any given day more than half of the city's 5,000 elementary school students can be found in the extended-day program ([National Education Commission on Time and Learning 1994](#)).

These services support the family by making it possible for people to work without worrying because they know their children are involved in constructive learning.

Mayor Joe Jackson, Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Use Technology to Link Parents to the Classroom.

As much as Americans are eager to get on the Information Highway, getting an old fashioned telephone into every classroom might be one of the most effective ways to improve communication between families and teachers ([U.S. Department of Education 1994b](#)). Schools are also using a number of new technologies to communicate with families and students after school hours. One widespread arrangement is a districtwide homework hotline to help guide students with assignments. The United Federation of Teachers in New York City has operated a homework hotline for more than 12 years.

In addition, voice mail systems have been installed in several hundred schools across the country. Parents and students can call for taped messages from teachers describing classroom activities and daily homework assignments. In the "Transparent School" model, parents can also leave messages for the

teacher, and an autodialing system can place calls to any set of parents to convey changes in school- or class-related events or other information ([Fruchter, Galleta, & White 1992](#)). Early results from an Indiana evaluation show that with daily messages and active promotion, teacher-parent contact increased by 800 percent. Modest gains in homework completion also were noted ([Bauch 1993](#)).

Audiotapes and videotapes also are being used as alternatives to written communication for parents. These are especially helpful in reaching families who do not read. A Chapter 1 project in New York has worked with a local television station to produce a videotape to give parents information about the Chapter 1 program and the role that parents can play. These tapes are made available to parents in more than one language ([D'Angelo 1991](#)).

Computers can help improve children's academic achievement and bring families and schools together. Many parent centers include computer classes for parents to improve their education and job skills. The Buddy System Project in Indiana tries to extend learning beyond the classroom by placing a computer in the home of every child in Indiana grades 4-12. The home computer ensures equal access for all children to many resources and advantages afforded in the information age. During the 1994-95 school year, the Buddy System Project will serve more than 6,000 students and their families at 51 sites. Independent evaluations have confirmed the numerous and varied benefits of Buddy participation (Hill 1994).

The number of families who use the Internet is also rapidly growing, and several aspects of Internet services are becoming dedicated to families. The state of Maryland has initiated a program to offer free Internet connections to all families. Access will be available through Maryland libraries so that all families, even those that do not own a computer, can utilize Internet services ([Powledge 1994](#)).

The National Parent Information Network (NPIN) the NPIN is a national electronic information service for parents, parent educators, and others working collaboratively with families. It is being developed by the ERIC Clearinghouses on Elementary and Early Childhood Education and on Urban Education, in partnership with the National Urban League, several local housing projects, the Illinois Parent Initiative and Prairienet (the East Central Illinois Freenet). The NPIN offers a continually-expanding collection of parent-oriented materials (including short articles on child development, education, and health issues) and a question-answering service for parents. Already available to anyone with an Internet connection in the near future, NPIN will also be accessible in parent centers, public libraries, schools, social service agencies, and health clinics (NPIN information 1994).

Another service for families through the Internet is Fathernet, a compilation of information, research, opinion and policy documents related to the involvement of men in the lives of children. Fathernet, which is available through personal modems and the Internet, provides an electronic bulletin board to allow fathers and other men to exchange ideas on the role of men in children's lives (Fathernet information 1994). Another example is the Maine Meeting Place, an electronic network for people with disabilities and their families. Accessible through a phone line, this serves families throughout rural and urban Maine, with special efforts being made to provide low-cost terminals. Access to the network itself is free to all people with disabilities and their families (Maine Meeting Place 1994).

Make School Visits Easier.

Free transportation and child care can especially encourage families in low-income and unsafe neighborhoods to attend school functions. Native speakers of languages other than English, interpreters, and materials translated in their own language can help non-English-speaking parents participate in the schools more fully. A variety of techniques including letters, phone calls, and visits by program staff may be needed to recruit low-income parents and parents who lack confidence in dealing with the schools ([Goodson, Schwartz, & Millsap 1991](#); [Moles 1993](#)).

Establish a Home-School Coordinator.

A parent liaison or home-school coordinator can develop parental involvement programs without adding to the workload of teachers. Programs in 17 sites throughout Tennessee have used home-school coordinators to visit homes routinely and run weekly clubs for parents, helping to build parenting skills and trust between families and schools ([Lueder 1989](#)). Personal contacts, especially from people in the community, are important in encouraging hard-to-reach families, including immigrants, to participate ([Goodson, Swartz, & Millsap 1991](#); [Nicolau & Ramos 1990](#)). Many of the most effective parent-school partnership programs combine multiple strategies. The League of Schools Reaching Out comprises more than 70 schools in a national network. In order to expand opportunities for school-family contacts, these schools have developed resource centers for parents in schools, home visiting programs, and mentoring programs [Encourage Family Learning](#).

Traditional homework assignments can be converted into more interactive ones involving family members. For example, students might interview family members on historical events or their daily work. In the TIPS project (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork), teachers design math and science homework activities that can be sent home regularly for upper elementary students ([Epstein & Salines 1992](#)). Parents are encouraged to comment to the teacher on the student's success with each assignment. A number of school systems are working with the TIPS model.

The Family Math and Family Science programs also are used in many states (Family Math in 17, Family Science in 38). These programs place parents and their children together in workshops with stimulating joint activities to learn and use at home. Trainers include other parents, school personnel, and volunteers from churches and community organizations. Studies show that most parents who participated engaged in more learning activities at home with their children, and that more student participants enjoyed science classes ([Fruchter, Galleta, & White 1992](#)).

Give Parents a Voice in School Decisions.

The parental involvement goal explicitly states, "Parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high standards of accountability." Many parents, especially those who have limited proficiency in English or who distrust the schools, may be

reluctant to get involved to this extent. But this kind of participation is an important component of efforts to increase parental involvement. Schools can give families the opportunity to support the improvement efforts of schools and teachers.

In recent years, a number of school systems have established new governance arrangements. For example, in Chicago each school has an independent council with strong parental participation. In both California and South Carolina, school councils are required to have parental representation.

Another widespread program, Accelerated Schools, aims to eliminate the achievement gap by reordering curriculum, instruction, and school organization in low-performing schools. Parents participate in a steering committee and task forces. Initial evaluations of schools adopting this program indicate strong gains. Begun in California by Henry Levin, university-based centers now develop similar programs in other states ([Fruchter, Galleta, & White 1992](#); [Levin 1989](#)). By providing regular information and making seminars and workshops easily available to parents, school staff often facilitate the participatory decision-making process.

Thus many schools are creating new arrangements for working with parents, finding ways to make communication with families more personal and compatible with their needs, drawing on new technologies, and using parents in new ways in the schools. But these new family-school partnerships need continuing support from other members of the society, including community organizations, businesses, and government at all levels.

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Strong Families, Strong Schools



Communities Connecting Families and Schools

Forty-eight percent of Americans believe that people need support from their local communities, beyond their immediate families, to help raise their children. This proportion rises to 60 percent when those asked are single parents or lower-income persons ([Massachusetts Mutual 1989](#)). Community efforts to strengthen parental involvement can have far-reaching benefits. According to research on this topic, parents who are involved with their children's education are more willing to pay tax money to fund schools. The overall life in a community often improves, and juvenile delinquency may go down. Residents with a greater stake in the community stay longer, and better-educated residents attract higher-paying businesses and increase local tax revenue ([Davies 1988](#); [Henderson & Berla 1994](#)).

Service organizations and agencies, religious groups, and individual citizens are working to make communities safer and drug free, to reinforce skills related to good parenting, to encourage people to serve as mentors, to extend learning opportunities, to link social services with educational programs, and to train parents in leadership and child advocacy. Some organizations have a long history of activities; many have demonstrated their worth. All focus on critical needs. Communities can be a powerful influence on parents and children. There are a variety of ways that community groups can help increase family involvement in their children's learning.

Combatting Alcohol, Drugs and Violence.

Each year, thousands of our youth become involved in the use of alcohol and other drugs and engage in violent behavior. Twenty-eight percent of high school seniors reported that they had five or more drinks in a row in the previous two weeks. While drug use has been on the decline for several years, recent statistics indicate that the number of secondary school students who are using illicit drugs is increasing, while the number of students who believe that drug use poses a significant risk is decreasing. Data from the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future study indicate that slightly more than one-quarter of high school seniors, almost one-fifth of 10th-graders, and almost one-tenth of 8th-graders reported some use of marijuana in the past year. After declining for several years, the use of other drugs, such as inhalants, LSD, and stimulants, is also on the rise.

However, some prevention programs have been successful, and communities can play an important part in these programs. The most promising prevention programs are those in which parents, students, schools, and communities join together to send a firm, clear message that violence and the use of alcohol and other drugs will not be tolerated ([U.S. Department of Education 1990](#)). Schools can create clear choices and opportunities for success, they can provide role models and mentors, and working with parents, they can develop the social skills youth need to cope in today's society in a nonviolent manner. They also can provide opportunities in after-school hours and develop programs to reduce the "risk factors" for engaging in violent behavior. Solving the drug and violence problem is a tremendously complex enterprise that requires the cooperation of the entire community.

"It takes an entire village to raise a child."

African proverb

Reinforcing Successful Child-Raising Skills.

Programs for parents may offer classes, literacy training, career preparation, early childhood education, monitoring of children's health needs, and referrals for services. High-quality programs engage parents early, sometimes before the child's birth, and stress the critical early years of a child's development and the parent's primary role in nurturing that development. Communities can encourage these types of programs. The widely acclaimed 1960s Perry Preschool Project for three- and four-year-olds from low-income families found more school success among participating children and far lower future public service costs than for a similar unserved group ([Berrueta-Clement et al. 1984](#)).

This project was one of the important forerunners of Head Start, which helps parents to be better primary educators and advocates for their children. A soon-to-be-released national evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy program, which is designed to help parents prepare their children for schooling through early childhood education, parenting education, and adult basic education, reports that the vocabularies of economically at-risk children increased significantly when their parents took a substantial amount of parenting education. Children whose parents did not receive much parenting education did not show gains ([St. Pierre, Swartz, Gamse, Murray, Deck, & Nickel 1994](#)).

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is a Missouri program for parents of children up to three years old. It features regular home visits by a parent educator who discusses child-rearing skills and child development, ongoing parenting workshops, and other exchanges. Missouri legislation requires each school district to have the program. Families who are least likely to use PAT are given special attention and are referred to community services. A study of 37 diverse Missouri districts found three-year-old children scoring above national norms on measures of language and school-related success. Parent-child communication also improved, and more than half the children with developmental delays overcame them by age three

[\(Fruchter, Galleta, & White 1992 ; Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Yarnell 1991\).](#)

A growing number of programs focus specifically on getting fathers more involved with their children. Several of these were highlighted at a July, 1994, conference on fathers led by Vice President Gore. One of these, the Philadelphia Children's Network, operates a Father Reengagement Initiative, which helps men engage in activities with their children and begin to provide emotional and financial support for their children.

For school-age children, the National Urban League directs Partners for Reform of Science and Math (PRISM), a comprehensive national initiative to get parents involved in local school reforms. A network of parents serve as advocates for ways in which families and communities in the state can be involved in children's education. Attractive materials for parents depict strategies for promoting reforms, using community institutions like museums and science centers, and strengthening home learning environments. Leader's guides and videos also have been developed [\(National Urban League n.d.\)](#).

The MegaSkills Program created by [Dorothy Rich \(1988\)](#) is designed to help parents help their children develop broadly applicable skills and values like confidence, effort, and responsibility. Workshop leaders from schools, community organizations, and businesses train parents and other caregivers, who then carry out learning activities at home with their children. More than 4,200 parent workshop leaders from 45 states and more than 1,000 school districts have been trained. The MegaSkills Program has also been adopted or sponsored by 96 businesses for their employees and the community. Several studies show increases in the understanding of parents' role in education, time spent with children on schoolwork, and children's school performance [\(Fruchter, Galleta, & White 1992 ; Rioux & Berla 1993\)](#). A recent extension of the MegaSkills Program focuses on both the classroom and the family to ensure that children receive consistent, mutually reinforcing information about the importance of skills and attitudes to school success.

Family Service America, an association of more than 1,000 community-based service agencies, provides national training and dissemination for Families Together with Schools. This collaborative research-based prevention and early intervention program encourages families of children at risk of drug abuse or school failure to participate in weekly team-led meetings that promote "quality" parent-child time together (Family Service America n.d.).

Black and white leadership must see the ... connection between national and personal values, between programs and policy, between community empowerment strategies and politics, and stop the piecemeal approach to helping children and families.

Professor James Comer, family-school program developer, Yale University

Parents of children with disabilities have special concerns and often need a great deal of information about the disability of their child, about school services, therapy, local policies, funding sources, transportation, medical facilities, and much more ([Ripley 1993](#)). Several local communities have also created resource centers that are devoted primarily to families of children with disabilities. Such centers lend toys and books and provide parenting information and workshops on parents' and children's rights in special education legislation. Community-based organizations such as the ARC (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens), United Cerebral Palsy, the National Easter Seal Society, and LDA (Learning Disabilities Association of America), also provide training and support to families in almost every community (Ferguson 1994).

Provide Mentor Programs.

In mentor programs, interested persons --from college students to senior citizens -- offer emotional support, guidance, and specific assistance to young people. Because of changes in families and communities, many youth have few opportunities for contacts with adults who can help them develop into responsible adults. A number of mentor programs sprang up in the 1980s to address this need. A study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, which has organized mentors for many years, noted the importance of detailed screening and supervision of mentors to assure high rates of interaction ([Furano, Roaf, Styles, & Branch 1993](#)). The HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed) program of mentor/tutorial assistance in reading has proved successful and is used at more than 400 sites ([Sopris West 1993](#)).

In 1971 the Teaching-Learning Communities (T-LC) Mentor Program in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was established using older volunteers to give potential dropouts the guidance and motivation they need to stay in school. The program proved so successful that today T-LC operates in 12 elementary, middle, and high schools in Ann Arbor. More than 200 mentors are working with students on a one-on-one basis from one to five times a week. The majority of the mentors are senior citizens, many of whom are recruited into the program by community organizations and by enthusiastic friends who are already mentors.

Enlist Community Volunteers.

During 1987-88, more than a million people volunteered in schools. Some 60 percent of schools reported having volunteers, most often in elementary schools, suburban areas, and low-minority locations (Michael 1990). The PTA, with more than 6 million members, and the Junior League, a national organization of women committed to community service, have provided school volunteers from their ranks for many years. About half the elementary school volunteers were involved with instructional support, whereas in secondary schools the volunteers most often provided other types of help. An earlier survey estimated that one-third of volunteers were parents, one-quarter older citizens, and about one-fifth each students and business employees. A number of studies have shown positive effects on student achievement and motivation through the use of volunteers as tutors, although little is known about the effects of volunteers in other roles ([Michael 1990](#)). Drawing more volunteers to schools in minority and

low-income areas is a continuing challenge.

Youth Services in Memphis, Tennessee, is an outreach ministry of the Episcopal Church of West Tennessee that provides youth with the skills they need to earn a living and take charge of their lives. Bridge Builders is one program they operate that builds bridges of understanding, communication, and mutual respect among high school sophomores and juniors from different ethnic and racial groups. Student leaders from both public and private schools attend summer training conferences at Memphis State University and the University of the South at Sewanee, hold monthly seminars, and commit to work together on community projects over a two-year period.

Utilize Senior Citizen Volunteers.

Our senior population represents an undertapped resource of volunteers. American society today possesses not only the fastest-growing but the largest, best-educated, and most vigorous population of older adults in our history. Approximately 40 percent of Americans over the age of 60 are now involved in some kind of voluntary activity, if only for a few hours a week. Two programs, the Foster Grandparents Program and the Senior Community Service Employment Program, have components specifically aimed at helping at-risk or disabled youth to achieve at school.

In 1992, 23,000 volunteers in the Foster Grandparents Program served 89,000 children by teaching literacy, caring for abused and neglected children, teaching parenting skills to pregnant teenagers, counseling juvenile delinquents, and helping children with disabilities. The Senior Community Service Employment Program, Title V of the Older Americans Act, is administered by 10 national organizations, one of which is the American Association of Retired Persons. Under Title V, some 65,000 older adults nationally volunteer in a number of community service areas, including those similar to the Foster Grandparents Program ([Freedman 1994](#)).

Offer Summer Learning Programs.

Summer learning programs, which expand the scope of learning and employ less-formal procedures, are particularly important for low-income children who, studies show, suffer serious academic losses over the summer, largely because low-income families and communities have limited academic resources ([Heyns 1988](#), [Entwisle & Alexander 1992](#)). A number of successful summer programs with similar attributes have been identified. One in Oak Lawn, Illinois, works with 100 entering high school freshmen for six weeks each summer. In addition to helping students directly, outreach workers visit homes to build strong communication between families and schools. A full-time home-school coordinator also works throughout the year in this Chapter 1 secondary school program ([U.S. Department of Education 1993b](#)).

Link Social Services.

Because unmet health problems and welfare needs often limit children's ability to learn, there is growing

interest in making sure that parents know about and have access to community services for children and their families. A recent review shows that successful coordination of services can result in the provision of convenient and comfortable facilities, increased focus on prevention, a sustained commitment from various specialized agencies, and more participation by families in the planning process ([Chimerine, Panton, & Russo 1993](#)).

A step-by-step guide for local development of a "profamily system" of education and health services, based on the experience of seasoned practitioners and researchers, describes several community efforts ([Melaville & Blank 1993](#)). The range of services available is an issue that the local communities and parents should decide. Some communities prefer locating social services in schools; some prefer links to facilities near schools; others prefer for schools to make referrals only ([Kagan & Neville 1993](#)).

The Walbridge Caring Communities program in St. Louis, based in an inner-city school and a nearby church, provides family crisis intervention, substance abuse counseling, after-school tutoring and recreational activities, and a range of other family services. The Children's Aid Society, a private, nonprofit organization, has teamed with a New York City middle school (I.S. 218) to provide extended-day and Saturday services all year at the school. Programs include academic support, reading and math tutoring for new immigrants in their native language, a health clinic including mental health consultations, a resource center for parents, and decision-making teams of administrators, teachers, and parents. An interim evaluation of the costs and benefits of the first year's operation showed positive results ([Children's Aid Society n.d.](#)). Another program, New Beginnings, in San Diego, co-locates service agencies at an elementary school to meet family needs collaboratively.

Neighborhood organizations need to understand the concerns of young people and their parents and to involve families in planning and directing activities for youth in inner-city areas. In a three-city study, [McLaughlin \(1994\)](#) noted that leaders of successful neighborhood groups were flexible, provided a wide range of personal services and personal development opportunities, and offered a sense of security despite violence in the neighborhood.

Project SPIRIT, run by the Congress of National Black Churches, focuses specifically on instilling strength, perseverance, imagination, responsibility, integrity, and talent in young, inner-city African American males. In place since 1978, this program features daily after-school programs conducted in church facilities by older volunteers. Activities include tutoring, role-playing activities to teach practical life skills, snacks, and prayer. Weekly education sessions for parents not only provide information on child development and effective parenting techniques but also help parents become strong advocates for their children both at school and in the community ([Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1994](#)).

Encourage Parental Leadership.

Many education and advocacy organizations, such as the PTA, the National Coalition of Title 1/Chapter

1 Parents, the National Urban League, and the Head Start Parent Association, train parents to be leaders and advocates for their children. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund has developed a Parent Leadership Program. Targeted primarily on schools in southern California, this program helps Mexican American parents understand their children's school and the U. S. education system, learn how to help their children at home, become involved in school decision-making councils, and participate in parent-initiated school projects. In an advanced course, parents gain organizational skills for working with other parents. Since 1989, more than 600 parents have completed the program ([Perez-Ortega 1994](#)).

Thus various aspects of the community -- school systems, local community groups, religious organizations, individuals, and national organizations working locally -- can help strengthen children's safety and achievement and families' ability to help their children learn. Some organizations work directly with parents to build their skills and leadership. Others do what parents are unable to do: volunteer during school hours, tutor and mentor youth, or run summer learning programs. Some programs deal exclusively with education, while others address concerns about the safety and welfare of children -- concerns that must be resolved before learning can take place. All provide important supports to families in difficult circumstances.

Other organizations can help connect families and schools as well. The work of exemplary businesses and states, as well as the role of the federal government, are described in the next sections.

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Strong Families, Strong Schools



"Family-Friendly" Businesses

Many businesses also recognize the need for parents to be involved in education. Although a number of businesses have been investing in overall school reform, many are now realizing the importance of increasing family involvement. "Family-friendly" businesses have at least one of the following policies: allowing time for employees to get involved with schools; initiating, implementing, and funding specific programs that promote family involvement in education; and providing resources to employees on how to become more involved in their own children's education.

"Flex-time"

"Flextime" can give employees some flexibility in deciding when to begin and end their workday. Employers may require employees to be at work during core hours, for example, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., but allow them to come in late or leave early. Such policies allow employees to tailor their hours to fit a schedule better for their families. Flextime is an option for 29 percent of employees in the United States, including those at the Pillsbury Company, Lockheed Missiles and Space Corporation, and Corning Incorporated ([Families and Work Institute 1994](#)).

Under another type of flextime, sometimes called "lunchtime flex," employees work longer hours from start to finish but are able to take longer lunchtimes, allowing them to visit their children at a nearby day care center or school. Forty-seven percent of employees have access to lunchtime flex. IBM and Bank of America are two examples of employers that offer a formal lunchtime flex policy.

Employers can also allow employees to work part time or to job-share. Many employees, including 19 percent of those with young children and 29 percent of women with young children, say they would happily trade a full-time income for a part-time one in order to spend more time with their children ([Families and Work Institute 1994](#)). In order for part-time work or job sharing to be viable options, employees who use them must receive prorated pay and benefits, and their contributions must continue to be taken seriously. DuPont and NationsBank both offer professional part-time work options, and the Jefferson County public school system in Kentucky currently has at least 10 job-sharing positions.

Some employers offer flexible policies specific to education by allowing parents to be late or absent on the first day of school or by allotting parents a specific number of hours or days off to participate in school activities. Some policies include not only parents but other employees as well, thus allowing grandparents, other family members, and citizens to help schools and foster children's learning.

Using the job site as a forum for parental support.

Because work occupies much of the day, many employers use the job site as a forum for parental support and education. Approximately 26 percent of large employers offer seminars, often at lunchtime, on a range of parenting issues, including parental involvement. Some employers offer national parental involvement programs, such as Parents as Teachers or HIPPI, through the workplace. Others, such as Merrill Lynch and HBO, offer libraries from which employees can borrow books or videos on parenting. Still other employers publish newsletters for parents, provide literacy training, or contract with family resource hotlines that employees can call for advice and information on education-related issues.

Child care options.

Employers can also work to improve child care options for their employees, either by providing child care through on- or near-site centers or by working to improve child care centers in the community at large. John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company offers on-site child care and school vacation programs for employees' children. Some businesses, such as Levi Strauss, help employees pay for child care through voucher programs or discounts. And 55 percent of large companies take advantage of federal tax law by offering Dependent Care Assistance Plans, which allow employees to set aside up to \$5,000 of their pretax salaries for child care expenses (Families and Work Institute 1994).

Form partnerships with schools.

Businesses can also help schools directly by forming partnerships with schools and by donating money, equipment, or special expertise. Often employees are given time off to volunteer. Employers can fund special projects -- such as newsletters, voice mail systems, and centers for parents -- aimed at improving parent-teacher relationships. Business leaders can further education reform by serving on task forces investigating new ways to improve parental involvement or by helping to pass legislation. A few employers have established schools on their grounds for employees' children. Businesses can be involved directly in educating children by participating in a school-to-work program. They can work closely with high school teachers to develop a program that provides work-based and school-based learning, and they can offer to have employees serve as mentors to teach students entry-level skills in an occupation.

Strong Families, Strong Schools



States Connecting Families and Schools

Many states have recently passed laws on different aspects of family involvement in education. Some relate to parental education or teacher training, while others require the inclusion of parents on school governing boards, parental participation in the development of local school policies, or parents' participation in the creation of policies on family involvement. Still others have adopted broader reforms such as partnerships with universities and businesses ([White 1994](#)).

Some focus on the preschool years, as does the Missouri Parents as Teachers program, while others span the range of school grade levels and kinds of family involvement. A number of states have developed family partnership programs that include small grants for new activities, parent-school coordinators, family resource rooms, and other innovations ([Epstein 1991b](#)). Several examples show how states can create multifaceted programs.

South Carolina

South Carolina is known for its grass-roots approach to engaging parents, educators, and businesses in developing and implementing a comprehensive reform package that resulted in concrete student achievement gains between 1983 and 1990. Former Governor Richard Riley involved tens of thousands of citizens in education reform in a variety of ways: A poll provided advice on the educational concerns of the parents, general public, and teachers, and on the improvements in education they would support.

Families, teachers, and other citizens and state and local leaders developed specific ideas at regional evening forums through small group discussions. Each region of the state held an "education day" inviting significant state and local leaders to visit schools, participate in TV and radio programs, and speak about the need for school reform. A toll-free hotline staffed by volunteers invited citizens to call in with ideas for the emerging state school reform package. A speakers bureau provided some 500 speeches during a five-month period leading up to passage of the reform legislation.

For several months an ad campaign encouraged citizens to participate in the effort to improve the

schools. A panel of state leaders crafted the reform plan based on the latest studies suggesting promising practices and policies and on the recommendations that came from the forums, speakers bureau, hotline, and expert testimony. South Carolina has also established a way of connecting parents and schools at the birth of a child. The state developed "birth packets" of information for parents on how to work with their children in developmental and learning activities. The packet included a letter to the parents from the governor and school superintendent welcoming their child into the world of learning.

California

To increase the skills and knowledge of educators, the California State Department of Education helped school districts and staffs develop comprehensive parental involvement programs ([Solomon 1991](#)). In several rounds of seminars across the state, leading researchers and practitioners discussed outreach strategies, home learning activities, and supportive school and district policies and actions.

Utah

The State Office of Education and the PTA in Utah cosponsored training of parental volunteers, who then trained thousands of families across the state in a Family Education Plan. Parents learned how to improve the home learning environment and how to take a greater part in their children's education. Newspaper inserts and ([Utah Center for Families in Education n.d.](#)). In addition, all schools in Utah develop with parents an individual education plan for each student.

Wisconsin

Wisconsin has actively promoted parental involvement since 1988. It has recently trained 30 teams of educators, parents, and board members from districts across the state, and given them small grants to implement their parental involvement plans. A fast-food chain and foundations have funded posters, brochures, and awards for parents. A newsletter keeps teams in touch ([Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 1994](#)).

Idaho

In 1992, the governor of Idaho recognized the importance of supporting family involvement on a statewide level when he signed an executive order allowing state employees to take one hour of paid administrative leave per week, or four hours per month, to volunteer in a school. The number of employees taking this option has grown over the past few years and has created strong working relationships between the state government and schools all across Idaho ([Andrus 1994](#)).

Family training and information centers also exist in each state to assist parents of children with disabilities. Although the services vary from state to state, parents typically receive training individually and in groups to understand their rights under federal and state law. This training helps them develop

skills to participate effectively in planning an appropriate educational program for their children.

Promote connections between families and schools.

The number of states with recent legislative action, prominent activities, and sophisticated programs suggests a growing awareness of how states can promote connections between families and schools. However, two recent studies concluded that most states do not require teachers or administrators to engage in much study of family involvement or to develop many skills to promote it in the course of their training ([Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan 1994](#); [Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield in press](#)).

Currently, only about half of the states have any teacher certification requirements regarding family involvement. Of those that do, most focus on the early childhood and elementary levels. Early childhood and elementary school teacher training programs often use more innovative ways of teaching family involvement, such as interactive work with parents, role playing, and case method teaching, rather than traditional lecture and reading teaching styles. The quality of teacher training in parental involvement is higher at earlier grades as well.

Twenty-six states also have specific coursework or competency requirements for certification in teaching special education ([Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan 1994](#)). But many states, including New York, Utah, and Wisconsin, are currently making comprehensive changes in certification requirements in the area of parental involvement ([Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield in press](#)).

Although the cost of developing parental partnership efforts is hardly prohibitive, allocations for state activities have been meager. It has been estimated that for about \$25 per student per year, a school could develop a viable parent-school program and hire a coordinator, and that \$10 per pupil at the district level and \$5 at the state level would establish a structure to improve school and family connections ([Epstein 1991b](#)).

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Strong Families, Strong Schools



Making Federal Policies and Programs Supportive

The federal government can also promote positive parent-school relationships. On July 11, 1994, President Clinton issued a directive requiring all federal agencies to "encourage and support the expansion of flexible family-friendly work arrangements, including job sharing; career part-time employment; alternative work schedules; telecommuting and satellite work locations."

Goals 2000: Educate America Act

In 1993-94, President Clinton sent to Congress, and it passed, a series of very important pieces of education legislation that emphasize strengthening parent-school-community partnerships and promoting parent involvement in learning. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act includes the promotion of parent involvement as a critical aspect of successful schools. The largest federal education program, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, after reauthorization, will increase support for activities that encourage involvement of parents in school activities and in their children's schoolwork.

Family Involvement Partnership

Working with groups of parents and citizens, all agencies of the federal government can provide leadership to strengthen parental involvement through their policies and programs. The U.S. Department of Education especially can help to draw attention to this important issue. U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, in his State of American Education speech in February 1994, emphasized the importance of family involvement. He followed that speech in September by launching a national Family Involvement Partnership. This paper provides the research base for the national partnership. Working with an informal coalition of groups dedicated to increasing family involvement and with civic, religious, and business leaders, this partnership can help to put family involvement high on the American agenda. The partnership will help families, schools, communities, and businesses to do more to increase family involvement in education by highlighting examples of successful family involvement initiatives and by providing technical assistance to communities.

The Goals 2000 legislation recognizes the need for family involvement with a new goal specifically focused on promoting increased parental involvement in schools. In addition, it provides for the creation of family information and resource centers. The Goals 2000 Act also requires that parents be represented on state and local panels designing school improvement plans and be part of grass roots outreach efforts to improve schools and student learning.

We want to set a standard in the federal government that can spread throughout the american workplace, a standard that keeps families together instead of driving them apart.

Vice President Albert Gore

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires districts and states to seek parents' input in the planning, design, and implementation of local programs. There must be annual meetings, timely information on student progress, and staff accessible to parents. Funds may also be used for activities that encourage collaboration between families and the Title 1 project, engage families in school activities, and provide information to parents to help their children with schoolwork. Under the proposed reauthorization of ESEA, parents and educators would develop pledges -- known as compacts -- to work together and to support learning in school and at home. The form of the compact and follow-up would be determined locally. In addition to these compacts, the reauthorization specifies that Title I funds be used not only for parent training, but for training school staff to improve communications with families as well.

The Department of Education's role in school violence prevention is likely to be expanded following final congressional action on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The ESEA's Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program recognizes the problem of violence in schools. The reauthorization of the law will expand the scope of the current act to include school violence. The new program will address the problems of violence and drug use by authorizing a formula grant program, discretionary grants, evaluation, and the development and dissemination of materials.

School-to-Work Opportunities Act

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act also encourages families to become involved in the development of local programs. The act specifically lists parents along with employers, educators, and community leaders as key players in designing and implementing a school-to-work partnership. Parents can play a critical role in encouraging schools, postsecondary institutions, and businesses to become involved in these programs.

Other family involvement programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education

A number of other programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education also have family involvement components. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Department funds family-centered programs for infants and toddlers and coordinates services across disciplines and agencies as well as programs for preschool and school-age children with disabilities. For example, the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) provides free information on disabilities and disability-related issues. Some of the Department's bilingual education programs focus on family literacy and parental involvement. The Even Start program funds local projects linking early childhood education (up to seven years of age) with parenting education and basic adult education to help low-income families improve their lives.

The Department of Education also provides assistance to schools to help them be more family friendly. Technical assistance centers under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provide an array of services, including information and assistance to school systems on parental involvement issues. The Department plays an informational role by sharing successful examples of programs that can help schools, districts, and states find exemplary models from around the country, and funds research on new ideas and practices to improve parental involvement. The Department also helps families to pay for higher education through grants and low-interest loans, or for technical education through the new School-to-Work law.

Finally, the Department of Education recognizes the need to make itself a family-friendly workplace. In this effort, the Department holds lunchtime seminars on parenting and working with schools, stages an annual Parenting Fair, and allows its own employees to have flexible schedules to spend more time at home when their children are not in school, or to go to their children's schools for events. All employees are invited to volunteer at local schools, and the Department matches the leave time that they use to volunteer, for up to four hours per pay period.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

While the U.S. Department of Education will be a key partner in the national initiative to support family involvement, all federal agencies can help. In September 1994, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a brochure called "A Parent's Guide to Healthy Meals," which encourages parents to get involved in their children's school meals programs.

U.S. Department of Justice

In the Department of Justice, the National Institute of Justice implements evaluations of school-based violence prevention strategies. The Department of Justice is also teaming up with the Department of Education to support the National School Safety Center (NSSC). NSSC develops materials and training curricula and provides technical assistance to state and local educational agencies on issues related to safety, discipline, violence, and drug-use prevention.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

The Department of Health and Human Services has myriad programs that support families and children in learning. In particular, the Administration on Children, Youth and Families awarded 32 three-year grants to community partnerships in order to demonstrate a variety of successful approaches to supporting children and families as they move from the Head Start program through kindergarten and the first three grades of public school. Family involvement is a critical aspect of this enterprise: individual transition plans are developed for each child and family between Head Start and kindergarten, and each grade through third grade; individual family support plans are also developed; supportive service teams of family service coordinators make periodic home visits with teachers; parents undertake the local governance of the project with a voting parent membership of at least 51 percent; and a family outreach program is included that draws up a plan for involving families in the management of the local programs.

U.S. Department of Defense

The U.S. Department of Defense, through each branch of the service, provides families with a number of supports that are recognized through the official organizational structure. One Army community family involvement project, administered locally by the Family Support Division at Ft. Hood, Texas, is a partnership with the Killeen Independent School District. Together, they have piloted a parent involvement program that makes attending parent-teacher conferences twice every six weeks a soldier's duty. In the commanding general's directive, he noted, "Parental involvement does make a difference in a child's education and has lasting effects on his or her future." Parents learn about their child's progress, share concerns with their child's teacher, and hear comments about their child during these 20-30 minute conferences. Preliminary data indicate great gains in achievement since the program was implemented. In school year 1994-95, the program expanded to more than 60 Adopt-a-Schools partnering with FT. HOOD 2000.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is working to establish safe study areas for students and families in housing projects. One example of this effort began in 1986 when the Omaha, Nebraska Housing Authority and the Omaha Public Schools began a program that provides study halls, computers, mentors, and academic and recreational volunteers for the large number of young people in housing projects at risk for dropping out of school. Other links between the housing projects and the schools have been established. After a child is absent for two days, the school calls the parent and the housing authority staff. Families can be evicted from the project if their children do not attend school. Home visits are arranged to identify the root of the problem. Parent-teacher conferences are often held at the housing project. The greater Omaha community has arranged to reward project children with perfect school attendance and provide scholarships for graduating seniors. The U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services are also working with HUD to fund study halls and coordinate services in housing projects.

All areas of the federal government can help reduce barriers that prevent greater family involvement in children's learning, and the federal government can draw attention to this important issue.

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Strong Families, Strong Schools



Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this fast-paced time, with the pressures of international economic competition, and an increased focus on technology, parents, educators, businesses, local communities, states, and national governments are all struggling to encourage improvement in education to help our children prosper.

One means of helping us achieve this goal -- family involvement in education -- has existed for generations. Family involvement complements exciting developments underway in our schools today to improve student learning. New reform efforts, such as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, encourage and promote family involvement in school improvement efforts.

Families need to be involved in improving learning in the home and in every school across this nation if our children are to become more competent scholars and more successful and productive citizens. Families can reinforce learning in their homes by being involved in their children's schools, by encouraging their children to take challenging courses, and by expanding their own parenting and literacy skills.

As this review of research and promising practices on connecting families and schools demonstrates, the task is formidable, yet clearly attainable.

It is formidable because families in today's modern society face increased demands on their time, growing competition for children's attention, and economic burdens that force more parents to work outside the home, and severely limit the time they can spend with their children. These challenges are complicated by the lack of communication between schools and families and by the fact that often schools' practices fail to meet the needs of many students' families.

At the same time, however, there are signs that connections between schools and families can be made stronger. Whatever their struggles, parents from all walks of life want their children to succeed and want to work with schools to achieve that success. We know how parents can help educate their children for

success in school and in the future. Many families are already doing this, and with encouragement and help, many more can do the same.

Schools can and do play a key role in strengthening these connections. Parents turn to schools for guidance. When teachers and administrators are committed to drawing in parents, student achievement improves. As this paper has shown, a number of promising initiatives have demonstrated innovative ways to bring more families into the education process. Through these efforts and others like them, schools stand to gain even greater support of parents and see more student progress.

The complexity of raising and educating children today requires support from all parts of the community. Programs sponsored by community groups and businesses, religious institutions, community-service organizations, and human service agencies are important in strengthening links between families and schools. National voluntary organizations must continue to lend their support. And cities, states, and the federal government need to expand their commitment to these efforts.

For the good of our next generation, all of us must work together to build on these existing promising efforts. We must create sound approaches where needed, and extend them to communities across the nation.

There are no quick fixes. Any effort to give parents more opportunities to help their children learn will require a shift in public attitudes regarding the importance of learning, a willingness of educators to fundamentally rethink the role of parents and school-family relationships, and the cooperation of the entire community. This paper seeks to stimulate this effort by beginning a national dialogue with parent, education, religious, business and community organizations on how we can work together to strengthen families and schools to help our young people develop the skills and character to be productive citizens and good and responsible neighbors. If we truly want to see our schools improve, our students accomplish more, and our nation become more creative, productive, and prosperous, we can do no less.

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