

Getting What You Expect from Parents

Expectations have a powerful effect on what results. A good example of this is George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, and its musical counterpart, *My Fair Lady*. They show how Professor Henry Higgins turns the lowly Eliza Doolittle into a respectable lady of society by teaching her to speak like an upper-class gentlewoman and, more important, expecting her to behave like a lady.

In *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development*, Harvard professor Robert Rosenthal and elementary school principal Leonore Jacobson expand on Shaw's classic by demonstrating that what teachers believe about their students' abilities can become self-fulfilling prophecies. If teachers expect students to perform well academically, they probably will. If not, they probably won't.

Expectations also are a powerful tool for building effective relationships with parents. Some may argue that charter, private, parochial, and other schools of choice have the greatest potential for good parent involvement since parents select the school for their child and the school can make parent involvement a condition of the child's enrollment. But any school, public or private, can establish high expectations for parents. Here's how to do it.

What Schools Can Expect from Parents

First, identify the expectations you want parents to meet. While parents have great influence on their children, research finds that parent activities *directly related to student learning* have the most effect on student achievement. For best results, keep the list short and simple. Here, for example, are three suggested parent involvement expectations that reflect research on parent activities that improve student achievement:

Get involved with your child's learning at home. Know what your child is learning at school and be aware of his or her progress. Keep track of homework assignments and be sure your child is doing them. Talk about the value of education.

Encourage your child to read. Read to and with your child every day. Have lots of reading materials for your children at home—books, magazines, newspapers, catalogs, and product instruction sheets. Let your child see you reading. Take your child to the library.

Attend as many school activities as possible. Go to parent-teacher and other school meetings. Get to know your



child's teachers. Find out the best ways to stay in touch—notes, telephone, or e-mail—and communicate with them often.

Then, in newsletters, memos, meetings, and at every opportunity throughout the school year, repeat the list as you talk about parent involvement. Follow up with specific details and suggestions for parents.


What Parents Can Expect from Schools

As you present your expectations for parents, also outline what parents can expect from your school. Again, keep the list short and simple. For example, parents can expect schools to:

- Provide high-quality instruction appropriate to the needs of each child;
- Insist on excellence from all students in both schoolwork and personal behavior; and
- Welcome parents as valued partners in the education of their children.

There's a Catch

As powerful as expectations for parents can be, they won't produce results unless you *genuinely believe* that parents can and will meet them. If you really don't believe that parents can contribute to their children's learning, this attitude subtly will be communicated in everything you write, say, and do.

If, on the other hand, you have read the research and know how deeply parents want to help their children in spite of the obstacles they face, your heartfelt expectations will come across loud and clear, and you will see parents moving heaven and earth to try to live up to them. 

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Resources

- Henderson, A. et al. *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New York: The New Press, 2007.
- Henderson, A. and K. Mapp. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002.
- Rosenthal, R. and L. Jacobson. *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development*, expanded edition. New York: Irvington Publishers, 1992.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For additional information and to read John Wherry's blog, "Parents & Schools," visit www.parentinstitute.com.

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