Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

With the end of the school year just around the corner, now is a great time to take stock of what has gone well this year—and to look ahead at what might be improved for the coming year. I want to suggest a simple and effective way to evaluate your school’s parent, family, and community involvement program—and get useful ideas for improvement in the process.

If you are a regular reader of this column, you know about the abundant research on the importance of parent involvement. Perhaps the best research summary is found in A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement. In it Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp write:

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and through life. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.1

I’m sure you have a gut feeling about how effective your school’s efforts have been this year in engaging parents to build student achievement. But an informal feeling is not good enough today. Even as many educators rail against the No Child Left Behind Act’s reliance on using just standardized tests to evaluate the success of today’s schools, most schools have no organized way at all to evaluate their critically important parent, family, and community involvement efforts.

I have created a simple assessment rubric you can use to rate your school’s program yourself. You can access the rubric at www.parent-institute.com/naesp. I’ve drawn upon the work of several states and organizations to identify eight important evaluation criteria.2 Try doing your own preliminary assessment right now by rating the eight criteria on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 signifying poor and 5 signifying excellent:

1. Our school builds productive, personal relationships with all parents.
2. Our school promotes the two-way flow of information between staff and parents about students’ academic achievement and individual needs.
3. Our school encourages, supports, and expects parents to be involved in decisions to monitor and assist school improvement.
4. Our school makes sure that each child has an adult advocate to help make sure that his or her learning needs are met.
5. Our school provides multiple opportunities to teach families how to support their child’s learning.
6. Our school works with community members to plan and implement ways to improve school success and student achievement.
7. Our school is a resource for families on developing positive parenting skills and home environments.
8. Our school works collaboratively among parents, teachers, and administrators to develop solutions to students’ needs and school issues.

In addition to rating the criterion, write ideas for improvement for each. A total score of 40-35 is excellent, 34-28 is good, 27-21 is average, 20-14 is fair, and 13-8 is poor.

Completing your own personal assessment of your school’s involvement program is essential, but don’t stop there. Ask instructional staff, parents, administrators, and community leaders to complete the rubric as well. The more perspectives you can get on exactly the same criteria, the better. On any criteria for which ratings are lower than you feel appropriate for your school, look carefully at the written ideas for improvement.

Ongoing assessment and accountability are part of the new reality in education today. And while most school leaders believe there is far too much emphasis on standardized tests, almost all agree that we need to be doing much more to engage the enormous influence of parents, families, and communities to build student achievement.

To help you get started, I will send any reader who requests it a free reproducible PDF containing the assessment rubric with separate forms for school staff, parents, and community leaders, as well as implementation suggestions. Right now is the best time to take stock of your parent, family, and community involvement program and make plans for improvement in the coming school year.

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