What may seem to be a lack of involvement by diverse families may reflect cultural differences and attitudes toward education.

For many educators, a close school-family connection has been defined in traditional terms. “Good” parents come to parent-teacher conferences, help their children with homework, and attend PTA meetings.

However, schools across the country are experiencing increasing difficulty involving families in these traditional ways. They also are finding that the growing numbers of students with a variety of ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds makes reaching out to families more complex. With some aspects of diversity—for example, parents who speak little or no English—schools have responded in useful ways, such as distributing newsletters in more than one language. But there remain substantial barriers.

Some barriers—for example, poverty and limited knowledge of the English language—are obvious to edu-

**IN BRIEF**

Schools can no longer define good parents as those involved in traditional ways. Parents of students with a variety of ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds may not come to PTA meetings or help their children with homework, but many want their children to succeed in school. Educators need to understand the role that family beliefs play in supporting children’s education and build relationships based on those beliefs.
cators. However, recent research has begun to identify less obvious but powerful barriers that impact the family-school connection.

The Hidden Barriers

McCollum uses the terms “interventionist” and “noninterventionist” to characterize patterns of parental behavior typically seen in mainstream U.S. culture as contrasted with those seen in other cultures. He talks about problems caused by the differences between these two approaches:

Educators in the United States tend to believe that parents should ideally be interventionists in their children’s learning…attending school meetings, volunteering for activities, helping their children with their homework and ensuring their children begin school knowing their numbers and letters…

Immigrant parents, on the other hand, often come from cultures where the proper role of a concerned parent is noninterventionist in nature…Parents from such backgrounds believe they should not intervene in the school’s business or question the teacher’s practices and expertise (McCollum 1996).

Since “parental involvement is not commonly sought in school systems in other countries” (Golan and Petersen n.d.), what U.S. teachers view as a disappointing and frustrating lack of engagement on the part of some immigrant parents may seem perfectly natural to those parents. However, they may be strongly supportive of their children’s education in other ways. For example, in interviewing immigrant families of highly successful children, Lopez found these families viewed involvement as “teaching their children to appreciate the value of education through the medium of hard work” (Lopez 2001). He provides the example of the Padillas—a family of two parents who did not attend high school and their five children:

Seen through a traditional academic lens, the Padillas appeared to be largely “uninvolved” in their children’s education….[However, a] work ethic was constantly communicated to the Padilla children while growing up. This communication—informed by social, cultural, and economic conditions—was the Padillas’ way of teaching their children what they felt was important to learn in life…As one of the children explained, Mr. and Mrs. Padilla expected all their five children to heed their advice, work hard, and be successful in school…(Lopez 2001).

Thus, while some families may care deeply about their children’s educational success and—from their perspective—be actively supportive and involved, they may seem detached to some teachers and principals. Educators’ frustration with these families’ seeming unwillingness to get involved can make it more difficult for schools to work on building relationships with them.

What Schools Can Do

It is important for educators to increase their understanding of the role that family beliefs play in supporting children’s education. Ferguson (2005) has found that schools experiencing the most success in involving parents with nonmainstream beliefs and experiences “build on the cultural values of families.” McCollum (1996) speaks of the need to focus on “valuing, not changing parents”:

Most programs for parent involvement are centered upon the premise that parents need to be changed in order to teach them how to work successfully with their own children. Unfortunately, this approach is a deficit approach that ignores that parents from culturally diverse backgrounds, as well as working-class parents, may have ways of interacting with their children that support learning, yet differ from the patterns exhibited by U.S. middle-class parents (McCollum 1996).

Obviously, cultural differences in defining the appropriate role for parents are not the only barriers to strengthening the school-family relationship. Adults in many immigrant families have had little experience...
themselves with formal education and so may lack the understanding of the educational system or the confidence necessary to become more involved.

Efforts to understand the culture and past life experiences of students’ families can help schools build on family strengths. An important starting point is viewing “home-school collaboration…[as] an attitude, not an activity” (Christenson n.d.). Schools taking this approach:

don’t just count the number of parents who attend the spaghetti dinner or volunteer at the book fair…Instead, they start with a belief that student success is a shared interest of both school and family, envision parents as partners in the learning process, and then identify concrete ways that partnership can be activated (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement 2005).

McCollum suggests that schools might begin by creating faculty study/discussion groups to examine “what is actually known about culturally different families, their attitudes regarding education and how they support their children’s education through the family and their informal social networks” (McCollum 1996).

Lopez agrees with McCollum’s assessment and suggests that an important aspect of the school’s role is making “a greater effort to understand how marginalized parents are negotiating the concept of involvement for themselves so they can effectively ‘partner’ with parents on the parents’ own terms” (Lopez 2001).

To accomplish this, educators may have to think outside their own cultural lenses. But there are already some areas of agreement. For example, both parents and educators want to see children benefit from education. By beginning with this common ground, educators can build relationships with families that provide important support for students.

References


WEB RESOURCES

The Web site of The Family Involvement Network of Educators of the Harvard Family Research Project includes a variety of resources. See especially “Taking a Closer Look: A Guide to Online Resources on Family Involvement” and the research-based article, “Promoting Involvement of Recent Immigrant Families in Their Children’s Education.”

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/fineresources.html

A brief booklet, Parents and Learning, presents research findings about key factors related to the role that families play in supporting their children’s learning and to the relationship between families and schools.

www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/EducationalPracticesSeriesPdf/prac02e.pdf

The National Center for Family and Community Connections at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory develops and posts research syntheses and strategy briefs focusing on family involvement in education. A recent brief is “Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?”

www.sedl.org/connections/resources.html

The Web site of the Family School Partnership Lab, a project based at Vanderbilt University, houses a variety of research papers that discuss aspects of family involvement in education and provides links to related resources.

www.vanderbilt.edu/Peabody/family-school

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