Is Parent Involvement Still Important?

This response in a nationwide survey of more than 100,000 education leaders grabbed my attention:

I really don’t think schools are able to adequately address parent involvement. We are so busy testing, retesting, and figuring out ways to improve our test scores that programs like parent involvement have become a side issue.

Unfortunately, this summarizes many of the replies and I want to explain why I believe that answer is unacceptable.

First, step back in time with me to see how I came to understand why parent involvement is so critically important to the success of public education in this nation.

A Crisis in Public Confidence

In the mid-1970s, the major concern of educators was the sinking level of public confidence in education. Alarming headlines pointed to studies showing the United States behind other industrialized nations in basic literacy. Editorials called for action “Now!” The No. 1 priority of NAESP and other education organizations in those years was rebuilding public confidence.

In 1979, President Carter, reflecting this anxiety, established a cabinet-level Department of Education. Still, the crisis continued. The 1983 report, A Nation At Risk, famously stated, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Targeting School Performance

Schools responded vigorously. Academic “rigor” and “relevance” became the watchwords of public education. Literacy levels improved and our students’ performance began to compare favorably with that of other countries. I felt then that public confidence would grow and that support for our schools would improve. I was wrong.

Opinion polls throughout the 1980s continued to show declines in confidence, despite the unprecedented effort and dedication by educators. The accusations and attacks actually got worse. What more could we possibly do?

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Focusing on the Family

And then it dawned on me: No matter how hard we work to improve education, we can never do the job alone! Working with business and community leaders was not enough. The only way that schools could ever succeed was by enlisting the active involvement of parents in the education of their children.

The landmark Coleman Report, published in 1966, had already told us that. Up until then, we thought that differences in schools—resources, teachers, and other school factors—were the main reasons why children in some schools did better than children in others, as measured by achievement test scores and other factors. But Coleman found that differences in families were much more important than differences in the schools children attended. Studies ever since confirm this.

Parents know more about their children than any school ever will and they have far more “learning time” with their children than the school does. It is primarily at home where children learn the critical values and attitudes that influence their ultimate success in life. Parents’ influence on the school success of their children is profound and research shows that, with just a little help, encouragement, and direction from the school, parents can contribute even more to their children’s success.

What’s Wrong with This Picture?

Today, decades-old concerns about the perceived failures of education have found political focus in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which demands “accountability” as measured by “adequate yearly progress” on standardized tests. But even as schools today are making unparalleled efforts to meet NCLB’s demands, the criticism continues.

How can critics pontificate about the need for school reform—and never once mention the role of parents?

Just as it is foolish to measure the quality of a school by the results of one test on one day each year, it is also unacceptable for any school to focus so hard on those test scores that parent involvement becomes a side issue. Long after better school accountability measures are eventually adopted, parent involvement will continue to be critically important.

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For More Information

For additional information and to read John Wherry’s blog, “Speaking of Parent Involvement,” visit www.parentinstitute.com.
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