

5-2022

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*Promoting Parental Involvement in  
Elementary Schools to Achieve Academic  
Success*

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Spring 2022

*Senior Capstone*

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## **Abstract**

Parental involvement in elementary schools is a vital resource for academic achievement. Schools, school districts, and the government on the state and federal level recognize the impact that parental involvement has on students and why it is necessary. Research shows that parental involvement and academic success among students are correlated. The purpose of this project is to see how public schools are promoting parental involvement and what programs are in place that get both parents and the community engaged. Through interviews conducted in my local school district I was able to see their approach firsthand and see how these schools are implementing and promoting parental involvement. Along with literature review and research my findings indicate that parental involvement improves student achievement however schools that lack programs dedicated to this matter struggle to get parents involved.

## **Introduction**

Parents are always considered a child's first teacher, so how does their involvement in their child's education affect them once they begin attending school? Having support and guidance is vital when children are first navigating the school system, however some may have more support than others for a variety of reasons. The level of parental involvement a student receives throughout their education can be an important resource for academic success.

While attending elementary school my parents were very involved in my schooling and stayed on top my academics throughout my primary years. Without realizing it at the time I was lucky enough to be apart of a district where the community was extremely involved, and it was the considered the norm to have your parents active and participating in your education. This reality of mine was beneficial to me and my peers, we were able to adjust to school easily and were at ease knowing that for the most part that our teacher, parents, and school were always collaborating on how to best support us students.

However, as I continued in life, I realized my reality was simply my own experience, and not universal. This realization piqued my interest, especially throughout my time as a Liberal Studies major when discussing all the ways public education could be improved. Looking back on all the variables that led me to succeed in my academics I realized that I had a very solid foundation in school with all the support I received early on. Now from my current viewpoint and my experience working in classrooms, courses that tackled educational issues, and just a wider worldly view in general, I wonder how public schools are supporting and promoting this resource so that all students have the opportunity to create a solid foundation in school and receive an even playing field in their education.

## Literature Review

Research has shown that students whose parents are active in their schools and education perform better in school. Parental involvement is a key resource for academic success. There are a variety of reasons for this indisputable outcome but the first to be addressed is the special role a parent plays in their child's life.

Parents are their child's first teacher and are present during their first five years of life which are argued to be the most important years in a child's development. (Jeynes 2011). Children typically do not begin school until age five after these early developmental years have passed. When a child begins to attend school there is a shift from learning from their parent to now accepting guidance and knowledge from arguably a stranger. For this reason alone, it is important that the school and teachers establish a relationship with the parent to ease this transition as well as establish a certain level of trust to fulfill a child's need for a positive learning experience.

Beginning in the 1960's the U.S Department of Education began to acknowledge the importance of getting parents involved within the schools. During the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, the "War on Poverty" and this included many trial and error educational programs such as "Head Start" and "Follow Through" (U.S. Department of Education, 1960) These programs did however spark conversation of a parent's role in their students' education. Both these programs were initiated in low-income communities in attempts to improve these schools. These programs pushed for parents to not only be involved but also be in the decision-making process of certain school decisions with parent advisory councils and instructions on how parents should be involved in school decisions. (Mapp 2012).

Mapp (2012) asserted that “through Section 1118, districts receiving more than \$500,000 in Title I funds must set aside at least 1 percent for family engagement activities and distribute at least 95 percent of those funds to Title I schools.” (p.2) So an amount of the funds is set aside in these schools to plan for and hold events and programs for parents to get involved, yet the U.S Department of Education reports that these requirements created for parental involvement is the “weakest” when addressing the compliance of Title 1.

While title 1 funding is a big part in the efforts to get parents involved within their child’s schools and districts there are other forms of engagement that exist on a large scale. The PTA (Parent Teacher Association) which is currently the largest advocacy association in the United States. The PTA is a network of schools, parents, teachers, administration, and businesses that advocate for the promotion of parental involvement dedicated to educational success. The PTA fully believes that parental involvement is key to a student’s academic success and rely largely on a 2002 study entitled *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* headed by Mapp (2002). This study looks at 80 different literature reviews and previous research studies conducted to put it into a cohesive report about the effects that Parental Involvement has on student’s academic success.

Throughout this report there are a total of four key findings that not only the PTA, but many educational institutions reference when explaining the need to involve parents. The first finding addressed is that programs that are designed for academics but also involve parents help students achieve. Whether this be parent-teacher conference nights where all three parties (parents, teachers, and students) discuss their academic performance, or something along the lines of a vocabulary activity that requires parents to participate. (Mapp 2011, p.209)

The second finding from this highly acclaimed report is that parents who are able and willing to advocate for their child, set them up for academic success. Schools are an institution that can be difficult to navigate, especially for young children. These children are finding their way among adults as well as their peers which can always lead to complications. Having a parent that is involved and will back them as well as support them through school allow students to feel confident and comfortable in their learning. (Mapp 2011, p.144)

The third finding is that no matter the race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic standing of the family, all involvement is beneficial. There are arguments that parental involvement holds a different value when comparing family dynamics. “Many studies have suggested that the parental-involvement activities that are most frequently targeted by schools have little or no direct influence on children’s educational outcomes; others have indicated that the effectiveness of parental involvement may be conditional on parents’ race and class. However, these findings may be misleading” (Domina 2005, p.234).

These claims do contain bias though, as they consider the connection between parental involvement and academic achievement ambiguous. In most studies that argue there is no connection, they fail to consider how if a child is doing poorly in school, the more likely a parent is to get involved. On the other side of that, if a student is doing well in school, a parent may not feel the need to be in constant contact with the school and the teacher (Domina 2005).

The final and fourth finding of the report *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Mapp 2011) is that involving the community can be just as important as the parents themselves. The community provides strengths in numbers and allows schools to expand and partner with other organizations throughout the community. Doing so creates more funding for the school which directly affects

after school programs, a number of new learning opportunities for students, and allows students to explore their community.

While the PTA is a large organization that aids schools in parental and community engagement, they do not exist in every school. The PTA is an established organization that requires dues and has a number of employees, it is ran like a business, though this side is not seen within the schools themselves. For this reason, however there are PTO's, which is the same as PTAs, but they are not governed by higher ups. PTOs are independent and ran by the parents, teachers, and administration that creates them. PTO's can go by a number of name's chosen by the school, it is simply an independently ran organization that advocates for the same cause, the push for parental involvement and community engagement. (Sullivan 2009).

The reason so many efforts are made in hopes of getting parents involved is because of the many benefits of this resource. First and foremost, when parents are involved, it promotes "social control" (Domina 2005, p.236). Forming relationships between parents and their child's teacher allows parents to be able to monitor their child's behavior and also so the parents get a good idea on how the classroom is ran and what is expected of them. There is also a level of socialization that comes with parent being involved. When parents prioritize spending time on schoolwork and in school with their child, it paints the picture on how important education is. Emphasizing this idea at an early age can set a student up for academic success. (Domina 2005).

Parents having a good relationship with the school also allows them to have access to additional information on how their child is doing in school. Whether that be behavioral problems or academic struggles, having the inside scoop allows parents to be aware of all the resources the school offers to address any of these issues. (Domina 2005)

Research findings through literature review (Mapp, 2011; Domina, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1960) confirmed that, it is quite obvious that parental involvement is beneficial for academic success, so why are we still pushing as schools to get parents involved? Well, there are many barriers that can stand in the way whether it be language barriers, time restraints, or family dynamics, getting parents involved can be difficult.

Language barriers is an issue that cause parents feel unwelcomed or misunderstood when navigating their children's schooling. Language barriers make communication between schools and parents difficult. They also impact students with not always having someone to ask when they need help on their homework or to help them with at home projects. The following is a quote from a study conducted *Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in Education* Zarate (2007) "When they give us a project, I sometimes feel that they're trying to find out what kind of parents we are. Some of the projects are so advanced ... [The homework] is not for the education of the child, it is to test the parents" (p.9). This feeling is not uncommon amongst Latino parents and can make them feel judged and unwelcomed in a school environment.

Another variable that impacts parental involvement is the socio-economic status of many. It isn't uncommon in today's world for households for both parents to hold jobs. These jobs are typically hourly and go through the evening while students would be working on Homework. Older students have to possibly take care of their siblings and younger students probably have a sibling not that much older than them trying to take care of them while tackling their own responsibilities. These jobs are not high paying either and financial stress can impact the entire family. "Many parents were hourly workers whose households typically required at least two wage earners. In order to visit with teachers or attend school events during school hours, wages

had to be forgone by at least one parent and, in most cases, the parents felt their employment would be at risk if they frequently submitted time off requests.” (Zarate 2007, p.10)

In Sum, parental involvement is a necessary resource for academic success but can be hard to implement because of these various obstacles. Though a daunting problem, schools are aware of these issues and are working on ways to tackle them to the best of their capabilities. In my research that is what I intend to identify.

## **Methods and Procedure**

To conduct research on the promotion of parental involvement in elementary schools three schools were selected from the local school district to participate in this research project to discover how they prioritize and promote parental involvement. I designed a set of interview questions that covered a number of topics that I came to know of in my literature research. I also created a set of survey questions to hand to the parents of three schools. My contact information was provided on the form with the desire that I would also receive the parental perspective on how they get involved in their child’s education and comment on what they wanted their school to do to improve parental involvement in schools.

Upon visiting school number one from the local school district, I was directed to one of the support staff leaders that actually heads the parental involvement and engagement of the school. Under my second school visit I was able to interview a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher that is an active advocate for parental involvement as the school did not have separate staff for this subject alone. The same remained true for my third elementary school visit where I was directed to another teacher to receive information on how parental involvement in promoted in their school.

For all these interviews I had the staff look over the questionnaire, briefly discussed the subject of my topic and went over their parental involvement programs in a general sense. I then had them fill out the questionnaire that contained my contact information and email it to me so I would have their responses in a concrete form to compare and contrast from school to school. These interview questions were designed to get an insightful response of how the school views parental involvement and if it is in the forefront of how they support their students.

The parent interviews were a slightly more difficult to conduct, I created their survey questions and handed them out to willing parents of the corresponding schools with my contact information attached for my method of receiving these responses. This method was successful for one out of the three schools consulted.

## **Results and Discussion**

For the sake of confidentiality in the schools that I interviewed I will be referring to them as School Site #1, School Site #2, and School Site #3. Throughout my interview process it was clear that the local school district does high value parental involvement and see firsthand how it benefits their students. These schools have various tactics to encourage parental involvement that differ from school to school but are effective in their own ways. Though these tactics and programs are successful the schools interviewed did express concerns and struggles about the obstacles they face when pushing for parental involvement.

Beginning with School Site #1 I found that this school asks parents to set aside at least three hours per month to be involved in school events for their first child enrolled. On top of that an additional hour is added per month for each additional child enrolled at the school. These

hours can be completed through various school events and volunteering. Though these hours are not “required” by the school they are highly encouraged and expected to be completed.

Though there is no “PTA” at this school there is an alternative that the school calls “Community Connection”. This organization helps plan fundraisers and involve parents in the school community. Though this program is active and gets parents involved, it lacks the teacher to parent relationship that PTA promotes and does not address academic goals or achievements.

The main concern for this school is involving parents that are not fluent in English. The school admits that they struggle with this and are actively trying to improve. They would like non-English speaking parents to be involved in school meetings and discussions but there is a lack of translators. Another concern this school expressed is getting employed parents involved. While there are activities that parents are welcomed to participate in throughout the school day, the school lacks in after school events and programs for working parents.

When looking at School Site #2 they have already been working on tackling the issue of language barriers with the use of technology. With the use of an app named “ParentSquare” the teacher is able to communicate directly with the student’s parent. If the parent is not proficient or comfortable with English, the app can translate the message to the parents’ language of choice.

This School also has an ELAC committee (English Learner Advisory Committee) that allows parents to learn about the programs the school offers their students. The members of this committee advise the principal and staff with strategies on how to not only teach students that are English-language learners but also how to most effectively involved their parents and families in the community.

While School Site #2 has begun to successfully tackle the issues of language barriers I found from both my school interview and my parent interview there are concerns are getting working parents involved based on their time constraints. This school sites encourages parents to get involved on campus by volunteering for field trips and in classroom activities, but this is not realistic for parents whose work schedules interfere.

When interviewing school site #3, I felt as though they best tackled the issue of involving working parents with a number of after school activities throughout the school year. With an active PTA, they are able to coordinate family events such as their Book Fairs, Spring Carnivals, Fall and Spring Music Performances, Art Showcases, Spooky Spectacular. These events work to engage the community and build strong relationships between parents, teacher, staff, and their families.

They also encourage parents who have the time to participate in many academic activities in the classroom throughout the school day so that parents are always aware of what their children are learning about and what they are working on, allowing the parents to be fully engaged in their child's schooling experience.

All of the schools interviewed offered an insightful experience on how our local community values and pushes for parental involvement and community engagement. While every school has strengths and weaknesses within their engagement programs, it is important that acknowledge all of them to see how successful they are and note what is working and what is not.

## **Problems and Limitations**

While I was lucky to interview three different staff members and two different parents, I did begin my research with a much larger research pool. Initially I visited five school from the district and was able to speak with staff member of all five schools. While 3 out of the 5 schools responded I unfortunately never heard back from the two other schools even after following up. It would have been nice to compare and contrast responses from five different schools to get a bigger picture on how the local district promotes parental involvement

Another issue I ran into was getting responses from parents, while I attempted to connect with the community it was difficult to receive parent's responses to the questionnaires, especially from the schools without a PTA or PTA meetings to attend. Unlike the teachers and staff of the school I interviewed they have no technical obligations to offer a response on this topic, so I understand the lack of response and/or the delay.

Finally, a widely relatable limitation I faced was the aftermath of COVID-19. A lot of teachers, parents, and staff (whether mentioned in the in-person interviews or questionnaire responses) claimed that their involvement programs and attendance have plummeted after the effects of the pandemic for a variety of reasons.

This did however lead the staff to mention that for the most part the school acknowledge this issue and are taking the steps to rebuild their parental involvement rates by brainstorming new ideas and events, as well as pushing attendance in the already existing programs.

## **Conclusion**

Through my literature review research, interviews with school personnel, and survey questionnaires to parents, I am able to affirm my findings. The findings revealed a clear view of how our schools are promoting parental involvement. and personal research conducted I was able to get a clear view of how our schools are promoting parental involvement. Knowing the history of how schools began implanting this resource as well as how our government funds it is necessary when looking to the future and choosing how to best tackle educational issues. Parental Involvement has a number of benefits and will continued to be explored and improved for the reason that schools know the importance of engagement.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions: School #1**

**1) How much parental involvement is expected of your student's parents throughout the school year?**

**2) Is there any level of parental involvement that is required of your student's parents?**

**3) In your opinion how well does the school coordinate programs and events to get parents involved? Please provide example of these events**

**4) Does your school have a PTA and PTA meetings and how active is this program? What does the typical attendance of these meetings look like?**

**5) How do you personally or the school in general attempt to establish relationships with your student's parents?**

**6) How do you feel the school can improve in ways to get parents involved in the school and their student's education?**

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions: School #2**

**1) How much parental involvement is expected of your student's parents throughout the school year?**

**2) Is there any level of parental involvement that is required of your student's parents?**

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**3) In your opinion how well does the school coordinate programs and events to get parents involved? Please provide example of these events**

**4) Does your school have a PTA and PTA meetings and how active is this program? What does the typical attendance of these meetings look like?**

**5) How do you personally or the school in general attempt to establish relationships with your student's parents?**

**6) How do you feel the school can improve in ways to get parents involved in the school and their student's education?**

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions: School #3**

**1) How much parental involvement is expected of your student's parents throughout the school year?**

**2) Is there any level of parental involvement that is required of your student's parents?**

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**3) In your opinion how well does the school coordinate programs and events to get parents involved? Please provide example of these events**

**4) Does your school have a PTA and PTA meetings and how active is this program? What does the typical attendance of these meetings look like?**

**5) How do you personally or the school in general attempt to establish relationships with your student's parents?**

**6) How do you feel the school can improve in ways to get parents involved in the school and their student's education?**

## **Appendix D**

### **Parental Survey Questions:**

- 1) How important would you weigh parental involvement in regard to your child's education?**
- 2) About how much time per week would you estimate you spend with your child working on homework assignments?**
- 3) To what extent do you take advantage of school events where parents are invited? Do you feel these events are well advertised?**
- 4) How would you feel about required parental involvement?**
- 5) Does your school have a PTA and PTA meeting and are you active in this program?**

