



**Indicator:** Professional development programs for teachers include assistance in working effectively with families. (5184)

“Although most educators agree that family involvement is important, few enter their profession knowing how to develop excellent partnership programs” (Patte, 2011, p. 147). Dotger and Bennett (2010) propose that teachers and school leaders need both preservice training and ongoing professional development, including practice in engaging with a variety of family contexts, to develop the necessary skills to foster effective school–home partnerships. Teachers may incorrectly assume parents know how to help their children, and they may express surprise that parents find school personnel threatening (Shumow & Harris, 2000).

The major emphasis in teacher preparation programs is on the technical aspects of professional performance, not the deeply interpersonal aspects of their task. Such interpersonal aspects include empathy, communication, and in-depth knowledge of the lives of the families in which their students dwell outside the classroom. (Hiatt-Michael, 2006, p. 12)

Carefully planned professional development can help teachers learn about effective two-way communication and other components of partnering that are vital to leverage this key to student success. One study found that student performance in math and reading improved at a 40–50% high rate when teachers reached out to parents in these three ways:

- Met face-to-face with each family at the beginning of the school year
- Sent families materials each week on ways to help their children at home
- Telephoned routinely with news on how the children were doing, not just when they were having problems or acting up (Westat & Policy Studies Assoc., 2002, cited in Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 94)

Many teachers report receiving little or no preparation for working with parents during their undergraduate teacher education programs (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Patte, 2011; Shumow & Harris, 2000). In contrast, a few isolated programs do offer examples of practical, engaging course and field work that provide a solid foundation for teachers to build on when interacting with students' families (Baker & Murray, 2011; Bartels & Eskow, 2010; de la Piedra, Munter, & Giron, 2006; Katz & Bauch, 2001; Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013; Power & Perry, 2001; Sutterby, Rubin, & Abrego, 2006; Warren, Nofle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011), although the quality of parent contacts and interaction can vary by placement—urban vs. suburban, and general education vs. special education (Hindin, 2010).

Understanding what teachers believe is especially important in order to design effective professional development workshops about parent involvement....Teachers are valuable informants because they have a unique and proximal vantage point from which to observe family participation and influence on children's school. Teachers can also inform us about the strategies they find effective and the barriers that they encounter in involving parents. It is particularly important to understand these barriers when planning programs (Shumow & Harris, 2000, p. 11)

Teacher training is even more essential when the teacher and the students' families have different home cultures, even if they share the same ethnicity. In one study, teachers seemed stymied by the question about what knowledge the families or communities might have that could contribute to the school children's education, possibly indicating that the teachers held a deficit view of these families, or that the teachers perceived academic skills and knowledge as separate from typical family activities (Shumow & Harris, 2000). "The evidence did not support the assumption that teachers from the same ethnic background as the families were able to apply their tacit knowledge to parent involvement practices or to reflect the children's background in delivery of the school curriculum" (Shumow & Harris, 2000, p. 18). The Bridging Cultures Project used in-service training and action research to help a cadre of teachers learn about collectivistic cultures vs. individualistic cultures (Trumbull et al., 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Though the project aimed to promote more effective instruction, the teachers found that it also greatly facilitated improved communication and partnerships with their students' families. Kugler (2012) notes that something as basic as eye contact can easily be misinterpreted by those from different cultures—school personnel born and raised in the U.S. expect to have eye contact during conversation as a basic sign of attention and respect from the listener. However, for many people in other cultures, the opposite is true—looking away or down shows respect and deference to the speaker. Similarly, wording can be easily misinterpreted: offering a workshop or tip sheet on "parenting" may insult families ("They think we're not doing a good job! I don't want someone telling my how to raise my kids," Henderson et al., 2007, p. 83). Instead, offer suggestions for maximizing learning outside of school, and invite the families to suggest specific topics of interest. Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or low education by showing how to recognize and build on families' strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005; Moll & González, 2004). "When school staff have a better understanding of their students' home cultures, families' parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 14).

Symeou et al. (2012) reported on a professional development course that involved training teachers to use active listening and other communication skills (typically used by counselors) and provided opportunities for practice and reflection, which resulted in teachers reporting increased confidence and better communication with the parents of their students. "Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing" (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26). Positive communication sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect, including beneficial home-school relationships (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). "Every interaction between family members and school staff, therefore, is an opportunity to develop or erode trust" (Sheldon & Sanders, 2009, p. 34). Jeynes (2010, 2013) meta-analyses predict that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, hold high expectations of students, and communicate effectively and frequently will be successful. Overloaded teachers and busy parents may face a variety of barriers to beneficial communication, but wise school leaders will establish a healthy climate and find ways to promote ongoing, candid, supportive, bidirectional communication (Redding, 2006).

Most communication between the teacher and the parents revolves around disciplinary actions or student grades....Communication is a key in Epstein's six categories in developing stronger home-school relationships. Teachers can expand on this by phoning all their students' families. Should a high school teacher have over 150 students, this may seem daunting. However, it can be done by scheduling phone calls within the preparatory period and staying on the phone just long enough to introduce yourself and make one positive comment about the student, and both the parent and the student will become allies. As a high school teacher, I felt I would never be able to call all my parents. I soon realized that if I scheduled my phone calls during my prep period, I was able to contact all 160 of my student's families. Often I left messages on answering machines, and at times parents would call me back to ask questions, or to thank me for introducing myself. I found that by making positive contacts with parents, I was better able to communicate other issues later on during the school year should the need arise. (Ramirez, 2002, p. 56)

Teachers can also learn to use interactive homework, which can be especially effective in bridging home and

school with powerful, positive outcomes for students, especially when coupled with teacher outreach and invitations for two-way communication. In a randomized experimental study, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that frequent teacher phone calls and text/written messages with families increased students' engagement. Van Voorhis (2003, 2011a, 2011b) has done several studies based on TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, developed by Epstein and colleagues); Bennett-Conroy (2012) also used TIPS and teacher phone calls as the basis for a quasi-experimental comparison. In all cases, students' homework completion and parental involvement increased, and (where measured) grades improved. Reading School–Home Links, available from the U.S. Department of Education (1999), are another example of student assignments that require parent–child interaction, link to school learning, and simultaneously educate parents about school learning (Redding, 2006).

Professional development is enhanced by opportunities for teacher practice and reflection. Kyle et al. (2005) describe the reflection process:

It is just this process that enables a teacher, away from the immediacy and demands of the day, to consider decisions made, consequences, purposes, and next steps. In our study, this provided a time for the teachers to consider ways in which they did or could have connected their teaching to what they were learning from their students' families. (p. 33)

To achieve a healthy school learning community, Cavey (1998) recommends “hands-on,” interactive professional development, followed by brief refresher trainings throughout the school year and focus group discussions on implementation.

It is imperative that administrators and school boards also participate in preservice and ongoing professional development on the importance of and strategies for cultivating positive home–school relationships (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Hiatt-Michael, 2006, 2010; Sheldon & Sanders, 2009). In Bartels and Eskow's (2010) study, “participants reported school administrative support to be important for both their motivation to complete the coursework and their ability to foster change in practice” (p. 68). One education professional they interviewed said this:

Throughout all of these courses I have learned the value of forming and strengthening relationships be-

tween families and professionals. By putting aside our assumptions, we can hear the needs of each other more clearly. Additionally, I learned that families and staff have many common beliefs and that we can activate small steps in order to improve our relationships. Also, that listening is definitely important, but taking action to initiate change is what families and professionals find most significant. (Bartels & Eskow, 2010, p. 69)

**Example, Excerpt from Henderson et al. (2007, p. 60):**

Melissa Whipple, coordinator of the parent academic liaison program in San Diego, tells this story:

I was at a staff development training where teachers were discussing an issue in small groups. One teacher was very good at listening. After a colleague offered an opinion, she repeated what she understood that person had said. Then she checked to make sure the group understood the speaker's point of view.

This really let us work efficiently and avoid misunderstandings, because she could listen and rephrase the ideas of others so well. After the meeting, I complimented her on this skill and asked her if she had received it through teacher training.

“Oh no,” she said. “I used to be a bank teller. I received what they call ‘active listening’ training because people are so sensitive about their money. We were thoroughly prepared on how to discuss money-related issues with customers.”

This really struck me: if people are that sensitive about issues related to money, they must be super-sensitive about issues related to their children. Even when people share a common language and culture, we still have miscommunication. Think what happens when differences in upbringing, language, social class, religion, and personal experiences change the relationship dynamic!

Teachers deserve training to increase their confidence and capacity to have sensitive conversations with parents. Parents deserve to be treated with insight, skill, and finesse when discussing their child's education and development. If bank tellers get this training, teacher prep and staff development programs should offer it, too.

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