

Preface

Why reach out to families? Most teachers know that connecting with families would reap many positive results, but they struggle with how to make the connection. Perhaps at no other time in our society have we been more aware of the need for teachers and families to work together in support of children. We have become increasingly aware that far too many children feel alienated, lonely, and angry. The message seems clear: The time to establish caring connections is now. We simply can't afford the potential cost of waiting.

This book is based on a five-year study in which we worked closely with the families of our students. Through our work, we have come to believe all parents care about their children and want them to learn, and we believe they want better for their children than they have for themselves. Many see schools as the "ticket" for their children's entry into middle-class life as well as the chance for them to grow into independent decision makers. What some parents often do not know is how to help their children succeed in school. Some may have different goals for their children than the schools have. And, since many parents had negative experiences in schools themselves, they may feel uncertain about how to ask for help and often unwelcome when they do. We believe it is the responsibility of the schools to find ways of reaching out and making connections, yet we also recognize that this means identifying and overcoming the barriers that have impeded such efforts in the past.

Time is a barrier that must be addressed. Teachers are already overburdened with expectations to teach in new ways, participate in curriculum renewal, and help all students achieve at high standards. Raising expectations about connecting with families is not realistic without a corresponding revision in school- and district-level policies about teachers' time. Past practice and long-held assumptions have created barriers as well. Traditionally, we have viewed schools and teachers as holding the knowledge children must learn. Family knowledge, especially about experiences and skills not typically included in the curriculum, has been ignored or even viewed as a deficit in children's readiness for school. Reaching out to families, then, will be meaningful only if teachers overcome this barrier and decide they have much to learn and families have much to teach.

Perhaps the most challenging barrier is acknowledging that many teachers would face personal challenges in the effort to connect with families. As long as the families "look like" their own, this might not be such an issue. But, teachers will need to think deeply about how they would respond to this question, "How comfortable do you feel with

people who are not like you?" The families of children in our nation's classrooms reflect differences in many ways: ethnicity, class, language, sexual orientation, religion, and cultural practices. While no one can know everything about these differences prior to getting involved in connecting with families, beginning the process requires that one have an attitude of respect for and appreciation of differences and a willingness to learn more.

We believe this book can be a wonderful resource for elementary and middle school teachers interested in building positive and strong relationships with their students' families, particularly teachers whose classrooms reflect a diverse student population. It is for the teachers interested in creating more meaningful classroom instruction that reflects the knowledge children bring with them from home. Principals, other district-level administrators, and parents will also find value in this book through the tips for providing support, resources, and time. The detailed, comprehensive examples of ways in which teachers can reach out to the families of their students include some that take no more time than writing a quick note and others that suggest more comprehensive change efforts. In each case, however, the book provides enough information to guide the teacher, yet allows for necessary or desired modifications. The entire book is applicable to practice.

This book is organized for teachers to use as they need it. We expect some practitioners to try out some strategies and not others, and to adapt strategies to meet the needs of their own students and situations. Yet, the book is very carefully orchestrated to reflect the cohesiveness of the ideas. In Chapter 1, we outline our vision and provide background that supports the ideas in the book. In Chapter 2, we begin by expressing the necessity and the strategies for building trust with families, for without trust, none of the family involvement attempts will be successful. Trust building requires respectful and open-minded attitudes about the families of our students, and we begin by sharing ways we have developed these attitudes ourselves. In addition, we believe that trust is essential for maximum student achievement, as the disposition and will to engage in academics is often a result of positive relationships.

Chapter 3 deals with communicating, in positive ways, with the families of our students. We provide numerous examples of how elementary and middle school teachers communicate with families in innovative ways that invite participation. Our examples illustrate how we help parents help their children, and how we build trusting relationships so they can ask for help when needed. Good communication is essential for students to reach their highest levels of achievement.

Chapter 4 deals with the implementation of Family Workshops, an exciting opportunity for teachers and families to meet in a social situation for academic purposes. We have found that these events work best when trust has been established, but that they also encourage further trust, if the families have a positive experience. As with all our strategies, our ultimate goal is higher student achievement, and this goal is reflected in the academic focus of these workshops.

Chapter 5 deals with Family Visits. In this chapter, we detail how trust is built through the visits, and how we as teachers discover information about our students that is critical to their academic and social

development. We detail steps teachers can take to initiate this very difficult, but worthy endeavor. We explore the academic benefits that result from this practice.

Chapter 6 extends from Chapters 2 through 5 in that we focus on instructional practices that are built from the trust, communication, Family Workshops, and the Family Visits we have developed with and for families. We illustrate example after example of the many ways that classroom instruction can be contextualized in the lives of our students, and how this pedagogy is illustrative of the professional teaching and student learning standards of several national organizations. Our goal is to maximize achievement through our work with families, and this chapter highlights how we do this.

Chapter 7 rounds out the book with examples of innovative homework ideas involving families. But we do not operate on the assumption that this, or any of the other practices we advocate, is easy. We show the struggles we have had with the issues and examine our own successes and failures in dealing with these struggles. It is our hope that practitioners select from this book what works best for them with the continued goal of doing this work to maximize achievement for all their students.

Knowing the challenges that this effort might require, why do we feel so passionate about its importance? The alienation of children and youth mentioned above provides a sufficiently compelling reason. We believe we have a moral obligation to apply our most creative and sophisticated thinking to this problem, and the ideas contained in this book offer several possibilities.

However, other reasons also motivate us. We believe, for example, that family connections provide teachers with a knowledge base from which to build meaningful, authentic instruction. Children engaged in learning that matters to them are likely to be more successful and to achieve at high standards. We believe they will be happier, more emotionally healthy, and more productive. Our hope is that they will also be more compassionate and committed to making the world a better place for everyone. These are lofty goals indeed, but we can think of no reason not to try and many reasons to make the effort.

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