

# **Schools that Make the Grade**

What Successful Schools Do  
to Improve Student Achievement

by

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Dr. Harts is Director of Technology and Information Services for Hernando County Schools in Florida. She is a native of New York, where she attended Fordham University for her undergraduate studies. She later received her first master of science degree from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Following her passion for education and teaching young people, she then enrolled in Columbia University Teachers College, where she received a master's degree in education and a doctorate in instructional technology. She credits her humble accomplishments to her faith and her supportive family, especially her mother, Leonidas Harts, who is the wind beneath her wings; her father, Preston Harts, who is her lighthouse in the storm; her brother Preston Harts, Jr., who is her best friend; and her daughter, Katieri, who is her sole inspiration.

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## Positive Home–School Relations Correlate

with Samuel R. Bennett

*The American family is the rock on which a solid education can and must be built.*

—Richard W. Riley (1994, para. 4),  
former U.S. Secretary of Education

**Correlate Definition** In *proficient schools*, parents are cognizant of the school’s basic mission, support it, and are provided opportunities of involvement to aid the school in achieving its mission. In *advanced schools*, parents and teachers must come together as partners in an authentic relationship that builds the trust and communication required to address issues of mutual concern. (Lezotte, 1997; Lezotte & McKee, 2002)

*Our state school grade had been released showing that once again J.D. Floyd had made an A. However, the principal and I [Melissa Harts] wanted to explain to parents what the disaggregated data showed per grade level and what areas we needed to work on to strengthen student skills. We also wanted to give them strategies that could be used at home to support instruction in the classroom. Therefore, we decided to step out on a limb and have data review nights for each level hoping that the parents would be interested enough to attend and partner with us in helping their children make learning gains.*

*The day before the data review parent night presentation, the teachers and I met to review our discussion points. Some of them said to me, “Dr. Harts, we do not think the parents will come.” I remember reassuring them by saying that we had done everything possible to advertise the event, but deep down inside, truth be told, I did not believe the parents would come either.*

*We had put a reminder in our school bulletin, posted it on our school web site, advertised it on our marquee board in the parking lot, and sent a note home in each student’s backpack. It was an important meeting for us, but we kept asking ourselves if it would seem as important to the parents. As*

*the middle school assistant principal, I had planned the obligatory Power-Point presentation explaining the state's testing requirements, the grade-level expectations, and a synopsis of the curriculum for the tested areas for third and fourth grades. We required the teachers from each grade level to attend and had representation from our administration and school leadership team. The reading resource coach was there to present the part of the presentation that emphasized the correlation with the new reading series; the math resource coach had the other part of the presentation along with the job of demonstrating some of the math manipulatives that could be used at home. We also had a display table of student work, at-home practice sheets, and a list of online homework resources and study guides. The team leader was also there to answer any questions specific to the grade level or classroom instructional strategies. And, of course, we had the required coffee, tea, and pastry table, elaborately decorated as if we were expecting it to be photographed for a layout in Martha Stewart Living magazine.*

*Our goal was to demystify the test-taking requirements, arm parents with enough information to be prepared to assist their students at home, and bridge the communication gap between school and home that had grown so wide in the previous year of pointing fingers due to the stress of accountability. To our relief, at the scheduled 6 p.m. hour, streams of parents filled the cafeteria—and to our amazement, they stayed until the end of our presentation, asked pertinent questions, and some remained for coffee and pastries and an opportunity to speak individually to the teachers.*

*It was not the food that brought in the parent crowd. They were hungry for information on how to help their children and, in turn, support what teachers were doing in the classrooms. That night, they proved to us that as a group, parents do care; they will take the time out of their busy schedules, and if we build a bridge across the communication divide, they will come. That night, we all—administrators, teachers, and parents—gained a new respect for each other and the role we all had to play in ensuring that our students succeeded and made demonstrable learning gains. That night set a precedent for how and what we communicated to parents from that point forward. We made sure that every year we held data review meetings, opened our classrooms for parent night discussions on data scores, and included data reports and analysis in our administrative parent-teacher conferences. We concentrated on providing parent nights for math and language arts, because our standardized scores were lower in those core areas. As the administrator over language arts, I made sure that parents were aware of after-school tutoring sessions, knew the tested state standards in fourth and eighth grades, and more importantly, had teacher and parent meetings on individual students where parents received prescriptive strategies for their child. The end result was that we saw an increase from 77% of the students making standards in writing from the year before (2005–2006) to 87% making standards in the 2006–2007 school year. Our language arts cur-*

*riculum did not change, nor did our instructional practices. The main factors attributed to this increase were our individualized approach to student learning and our increased communication and participation from the parents.*

*Here’s the kicker to the story: We then spiraled our strategy throughout the grade levels. We required parent data team meetings, especially for the grades preceding standardized tested areas. For example, in language arts, we required teams to meet with the parents in third and seventh grade so that those parents were introduced to the concepts expected in the following grade, had ample time to do practice exercises with their students, and were well aware of their child’s individual progress in writing at least 2 years before the statewide exam.*

## IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE HOME–SCHOOL RELATIONS

The number one predictor of student academic success as measured by the all important AYP scores is the Positive Home–School Relations correlate (Ratcliffe, 2006). Cole (2003) also identified this correlate as the number one predictor of student academic achievement, as did Scheerens and Bosker (1997) in their meta-analysis on school effects. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan highlighted these points by describing parents as teachers and noting the importance of parent–school partnerships (National Public Radio, 2010).

A study conducted by Houtenville and Conway (2008) showed that parental involvement has a strong, positive effect on student achievement. In a 2003 report, *Parsing the Achievement Gap II*, the Educational Testing Service reported national trends between students of diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Educational Testing Service, 2003). The report listed 14 factors that have been linked to student achievement. Not surprisingly, nine of those factors related to a child’s parents and home environment. This is not difficult to comprehend, because the more children see parents around schools (especially their own parents), the more they realize the importance of school. Students deduce that a parent being in a school makes it a viable place be-

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### Parent Perspective

*When parents are involved in the day-to-day activities of their child’s school, the children are able to perform better academically, not miss as many days, and have better social skills. . . . Parental involvement also doesn’t mean just moms. Dads are important too! Young boys need the influence of a male, and when they are involved with the child at school, that child succeeds. There are many ways to be involved, such as setting time aside each day to talk about school activities and what they learned that day. Help them have a scheduled homework time. Being an involved parent is a key component to the success of a child.*

—Parent and Chairperson  
of Communications  
and Public Relations,  
Parent Teacher  
Association (PTA)

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cause “my parents come here to help and support on their day off” or “my parents care enough about me to want to be a part of what I am doing and to make a contribution to an important place of learning.” For some students, a parent’s presence is a reminder that best behavior is expected and that they must pay attention to what the teacher is trying to convey. Whatever message a student takes from a parent’s presence in the school or involvement in his or her child’s learning process, the parent’s participation makes that needed difference. As Fullan (1997) stated, “Nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership. . . . These forms of involvement do not happen by accident or even by invitation. They happen by explicit strategic intervention” (as cited in Blankstein, 2004, p. 167).

On the contrary, the lack of parental involvement leaves a gaping hole in the foundation of education, affecting not only the child but educators as well. Although teachers may not readily admit this at every parent conference, they *need* parents to help. Many times, parents come in with a barrage of questions that all start with “why.” They look at the educator and expect an answer. Sometimes teachers do a wonderful job at coming up with those answers. However, the truth of the matter is that teachers do not have all of the answers. Sometimes parents have more answers than teachers do because they know their child, understand the dynamics at home, and have a history with that child that supersedes the information in the cumulative folder that is alphabetized in the front office or the synopsis given from the teacher the year before. The pieces of information that the parent provides offers clues and direction on how to teach that child, how to understand his or her needs, how to be better equipped in reaching that child so that he or she can reach his or her learning potential.

In addition, the parent also provides the necessary support at home to reinforce what teachers are doing in the classroom. Whether that support is curricular or behavioral in nature, it helps when parents ask their child for an agenda or organizer that has the child’s homework assignments or asks their child for his or her latest test material to review at home. In addition, it helps when parents discuss assignments and projects or reinforce the expectation of good school behavior and respect for self and others in the classroom.

## **STRATEGIES FOR CREATING EFFECTIVE HOME–SCHOOL RELATIONS**

There are seven types of strategies that can improve the relationship between schools and families: communication, support, attendance, planning, engagement, implementation, and involvement. These strategies are important to consider at every level of a school, and everybody has a role to play.



## What Highly Effective Superintendents and District Administrators Do

The following are strategies that highly effective superintendents and district administrators use to *communicate* in order to increase positive relationships between home and school, superintendents, and districts.

- Stress the vision of a positive, collaborative home–school partnership to all constituents, particularly parents.
- Return parent telephone calls in a timely fashion.
- Draft parent-friendly policies that solicit and encourage positive parent involvement in the school.
- Clearly and frequently communicate district events, policies, academic status of schools, and availability of help for parents such as parenting workshops.

It is important for superintendents and district administrators to support efforts made to better the home–school connection by

- Supporting community programs and partnering with civic and private organizations
- Providing in-service support for principals and teachers regarding research-based and practical strategies aimed at bolstering positive home–school relations

Finally, superintendents and districts can show their support through their *attendance*: They can attend selected schools’ PTA meetings and School Advisory Council meetings.

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### Parent Perspective

*As the parent of a high school student, communication with the school is very important. I was able to contact any teacher via e-mail with my concern, and the teacher would respond when he/she was able.*

—Parent of a high school student

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## What Highly Effective Principals and School Administrators Do

Principals can encourage positive home–school relationships by using the following *communication* strategies.

- Maintain attractive, user-friendly, and updated web sites.
- Use every means and occasion to actively demonstrate that learning is highly valued and celebrated at your school.

Through *planning*, principals can increase opportunities to improve the home–school relationship.

- Plan “edutaining” (educational and entertaining) schoolwide events such as Data Night. Include a social and refreshment component.
- Strategically plan team-building opportunities between teachers, parents, and students.

*Engaging* families in the life of the school is an important aspect of creating positive home–school relationships.

- Welcome students’ family members into the school setting. They want to learn too!
- Create opportunities for parent involvement, including all parents (where possible). Don’t forget fathers!
- Build authentic relations with parents through fun social events, collaborative work days, and school projects that include parents and children.
- Consider institutionalizing parent hours as part of the school culture and exchange for meaningful privileges such as parental voice in the selection of their child’s teacher.

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### Parent Perspective

*Communicating with my son’s teacher in multiple ways has helped in the clarification of assignments due, and what the teacher expects. Visiting during the school’s open house allows my son to show off some of his displayed classwork, and allowed me to get an idea of my son’s learning environment. E-mail, along with the web access to his grades and assignments, provide a means for answering various questions.*

—Father of an elementary school student

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### Parent Perspective

*Teachers can begin to cultivate opportunities and strategies for parent engagement both at school and at home. When a parent feels comfortable with the child’s teacher(s) and in the classroom setting, then he or she will be more likely to get involved in other school activities as well as discuss and practice strategies that will best help the child to learn and succeed.*

—Parent of secondary school student

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## What Highly Effective Teachers Do

Teachers play a major role in improving home–school relations. Some strategies they can use to *communicate* include the following:

- Treat parents respectfully as partners.
- Maintain regular and prompt communication with the home through notes, letters, telephone calls, web site links, and volunteer opportunities. (Keep all documentation.)

- Initiate positive, proactive communication with parents, including home visitation, before there are any issues.
- Begin and end parent meetings positively and professionally, communicating a caring attitude.

Teachers can *implement* their plans by strategically scheduling and planning for periodic parent–teacher conferences and involving the necessary personnel. The conferences should conclude with a clearly written action plan.

Finally, teachers can *involve* families by

- Creating opportunities for parental involvement, beginning with a back-to-school open house
- Involving the class in school events, and personally inviting parents to support them
- Involving parents in read-alouds at home and school
- Documenting parent–teacher meetings in a narrative format and soliciting parental input

### SUPPORTIVE RESEARCH

Parental involvement is one of the few areas of education where there is widespread agreement. Large urban school districts consider parental involvement a requirement for improving the academic success for large numbers of mostly low-income students (Nichols-Solomon, 2001). Parent involvement improves student attitudes toward school, homework activity, school attendance, and academic achievement (Feuerstein, 2000).

### Home Support Positively Affects Academics

Similar to most educators, Ban (2000) believes that education begins in the home. As homes are made true learning places, learning will improve in the schools. Parents need to become teachers in the home and start teaching children study skills. Cordry and Wilson (2004) wrote that parents should engage children in learning in the home prior to enrolling them in our schools. Students should arrive at the kindergarten doors with a solid foun-

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#### Parent Perspective

*It is very important to me, as a parent, to keep the communication lines open with all of my child's teachers. The primary way is the planner. Another way is the monthly newsletter. Last, is by the online grade book.*

—Parent of an elementary school student

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#### Parent Perspective

*Schools, especially secondary ones, must strive to make parent involvement more user-friendly. It has to be more open-ended, allowing parents a variety of choices in which to get involved. Most parents only have small blocks of time to give. They don't want to feel like they are signing up for a life-sentence.*

—Parent of secondary school student

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dition that has been built by the parents in the home, allowing teachers to build the educational house on top of that foundation. Riley (1994), former U.S. Secretary of Education, believes that the love of learning needs to be taught in the home in order for children to make a difference in the world. He asserted the following:

I have seen examples all over this Nation where two-parent families, single parents, step-parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are providing strong family support for their children to learn. If families teach the love of learning, it can make all the difference in the world to their children. (as cited in *Family Involvement Partnership for Learning*, 1998)

Several factors influence parental involvement, including a parent's confidence level, ethnicity, and educational and socioeconomic background. According to the *Family Involvement Partnership for Learning* (1998),

Family involvement in education can mean: Reading a bedtime story to your preschool child . . . checking homework every night . . . getting involved in PTA . . . discussing your children's progress with teachers . . . voting in school board elections . . . helping your school to set challenging academic standards . . . limiting TV viewing to no more than two hours on school nights . . . getting personally involved in governing your school . . . becoming an advocate for better education in your community and state . . . and insisting on high standards of behavior for children.

Parent connectedness to school is stressed by the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.-b): "Parents need to feel connected to their children's school so they can provide encouragement to their offspring in pursuing their studies and advocate for them." Zellman and Waterman (1998) found that parents from minority groups were more involved in schools than parents from nonminority groups who were at the same socioeconomic level. Jacobson, Huffman, and Rositas de Cantu (1998) showed that Hispanic parents valued academic achievement and saw a need to help their children with learning at home. They did, however, believe they were less ready to help their children with reading and mathematics than Caucasian parents.

Hawes and Plourde (2005) conducted their study on parental involvement and the reading achievement of sixth grade students. They found many reasons why parents from ethnic minority groups did not participate in their children's education. They listed the following as barriers: "lack of education, feeling unwelcome, language difficulties, and time constraints" (p. 52). Their study found a slight correlation between the amount of parental involvement and the reading comprehension level of their children and determined that the students, themselves, could affect the amount of parental involvement happening in their education.

### **Tooling Teachers to Reach Parents**

No matter what the factors are that influence the level of parental involvement, educators must be aware of them and continue to reach out to parents for their help and support. One of the most effective ways to improve the school’s parental involvement plan is to convince teachers to buy into the program. The first line in communication for any effective parental involvement plan is the link between the parent and the teacher. Linek, Rasinski, and Harkins documented the need for the classroom teacher to support the parental involvement plan so that it will be effective: “Parental involvement appears to hold great potential for the improvement of literacy. Without the coordination and support of the classroom teacher, however, the effects of such involvement may not be maximized” (1997, p. 91).

Teachers need to understand that their communication with parents is pivotal, as it sets the tone for how the parents view the school and it provides the first building block in home–school communication. Teachers should recognize the importance of partnering with parents so that their students will benefit from the collaboration. Research by Winn, Hobbs, and Johnson (1998) shows that “parents believe teachers who encourage a great deal of parental involvement are better teachers” (p. 271). Kirschenbaum (1999) states that teachers who are more aggressive about involving parents usually are the better teachers. The more the teacher makes contact with the parent, the more the parent will participate (Feuerstein, 2000).

Christie (2005) wrote that schools should think in terms similar to President Kennedy’s famous statement, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Her paradigm was, “Ask not what parents can do for the school, but what the school can do to ensure that the treatment of each student in each classroom meets the expectations that parents have for their children” (Christie, 2005, p. 646). Schools need to recognize that some parents have higher expectations for their children than the teachers do.

As the first line of communication with parents, teachers need the tools to foster a positive partnership. They need to be given the knowledge, time, resources, and recognition to get parents involved in the educational process of their children. One college teacher education program addressed the issue of tooling or training teachers in the area of parental involvement by teaching education majors the parental involvement plan. They found the following:

Parental involvement is more than parents attending meetings and spending time at school. Parental involvement might also include the following: parents providing a home environment that supports education, schools communicating with parents about school programs and children’s progress, parents supporting school events as spectators or volunteering in classrooms as aides, parents creating and imple-

menting a home learning environment, and parents participating in leadership roles and school governance. (Winn, Hobbs, & Johnson, 1998, p. 265)

Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli, and Slostad (1999) recommend a more systematic plan to help teachers work with parents. This plan should start with teacher education programs and continue through in-service training programs for the development of veteran teachers. Unfortunately, although teachers, principals, and teacher educators understand the importance of parental involvement, most teacher education programs do not address this area with preservice teachers (Tichenor, 1998). This is an area that we need to examine as educators if we want to develop effective schools nationally.

### **Making the Parent Connection: Teamwork and Communication**

A crucial component to the parent and school partnership is that parents need to feel as though the school wants them involved in the educational process of their children. The school needs to communicate that attitude to the parents so that they can feel that they are wanted and needed in making decisions about their child's learning and school environment. Naturally, students will benefit from this, because when students see their parents involved at the school, it makes them realize that they and their education are important. In addition, when the parent becomes involved in the educational process of the child, a team is formed with a valuable support system that works for the child's benefit. By feeling welcomed, parents are able to volunteer, which communicates to the child that they not only care about him or her but are also concerned with what is happening in the school (White, 1998).

Teachers, students, and school staff should have positive input in the process of getting parents more involved at the school. The national PTA has identified six elements of effective parent involvement programs. White summarized them as follows:

1. Communicating—Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. Parenting—Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
3. Student Learning—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. Volunteering—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
5. School Decision Making and Advocacy—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. Collaborating with Community—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning. (1998, p. 8)

It is important to note here that the community at large can offer support to parents who are trying to participate in their child's education.

Making a connection with community members is helpful in expanding the support system for the parents, especially for those parents who feel somewhat helpless and estranged from the school culture. Some parents do not get involved in the school or community because of a language barrier. Involving the community in English classes for parents will improve and assist communications between parent, school, and community (Jacobson, Huffman, & Rositas de Cantu, 1998).

Schools need to become creative in making the parent connection. Many schools have gone to great lengths to make moms and dads more involved in the education of their children. Some schools bus families to school meetings, provide door prizes and dinner to families who attend, hold parent conferences at local fast food restaurants, or host monthly family nights that include pajama parties for students and their siblings (Curriculum Review, 2005). As the parent and school partnerships are developed, some barriers may persist. Schools should persist and make a strong, good faith effort to reach all parents, including those who are reluctant or who refuse to be involved. Once it is clear that certain parents just do not consider involvement a priority, then schools should focus energy on the interested parents. Curriculum Review (2005) put it this way:

If the parent says, “It’s my job to bear them and feed them, and it’s the school’s job to educate them,” you’re not going to get much help out of that parent. If the parent sees their job as a partner with the school to work together for the child’s education, then they’re going to be involved. (p. 11).

### **Parent–Teacher Conferences**

Parents and teachers need to work together so that both are strengthened and improved through the collaborative partnership. Parent–teacher conferences are beneficial to nurturing parent involvement and collaboration. When teachers have that face-to-face meeting with the parent, it becomes much more personal. The ice has been broken, and the parent is more likely to become involved at the school. Parent–teacher conferences allow for the communication of student progress in an informal setting. Brandt (2003) came up with 12 steps to improve successful conferencing:

1. Begin with something positive.
2. Create a warm and inviting atmosphere.
3. Be straightforward.
4. Be sensitive.
5. Provide parents with details and a written account of comments.
6. Create a comprehensive evaluation including many different assessments.
7. Allow time for student’s self-assessment.



8. Provide teacher evaluation of six academic areas (reading, language arts, spelling, math, social studies, and science).
9. Provide teacher evaluation of four behavior categories (organization, responsibility, conduct, and social skills).
10. Leave students out of the actual conference (but remain flexible, as some conferences may be enhanced by a student's presence).
11. Complete an action plan that becomes a student–parent contract.
12. Write a narrative of the conference.

Brandt's strategy could be a successful plan in the developmental approach to parent–teacher conferencing.

Parent–teacher conferencing can be the first line of open communication between teacher and parent. When the parent puts a face to the voice and recognizes that the teacher's goal is to help his or her child, the parent will respond in a positive way. As Bulach and Potter said, "Every educator knows the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education. In fact, a strong link between school and home is considered to be the greatest single predictor of student success" (2001, p. 37). Parent–teacher conferencing is one of the most productive ways to achieve this success.

Conferences can be both positive and negative, depending on the teacher's preparation. Poorly conducted conferences can be a waste of time and can even create negative thoughts and feelings between the teacher and the parent. When the teacher makes the best possible use of the conferences and conducts them with skill and understanding, it can be beneficial for all parties. Bulach and Potter (2001) reported several positive ingredients for a successful parent–teacher conference, including the following: 1) being honest about the student's academic performance and behavior, 2) developing an action plan that involves parents, 3) building a relationship of trust and respect, 4) seeking parent input for solutions to problems, and 5) concentrating on the most important concerns by being specific and giving clear examples.

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### Frontline Perspective

*Both in the classroom and in the lofty tower of school administration, whenever I [Martin Ratcliffe] participated in parent meetings with colleagues and parents, I adopted the attitude that parents were partners and friends and we could work collaboratively to help their children succeed in school. This attitude had served me well as a former school principal, causing my secretary to once quip, "Parents come in to your office mad, but they always leave with a smile on their face." I believe this was largely owing to my outlook regarding parents as friends and partners. Teacher–parent meetings were also productive and cordial, and usually ended with an agreed-upon action plan—and satisfied parents.*

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Follow-up is another important aspect of the parent–teacher conference. It is a good idea for the teacher to send parents a note thanking them

for coming to the conference and reminding them what plan of action was agreed upon at the conference. A telephone call a few weeks after the conference may provide the parent additional information and also be a checkup of the workings of the action plan (Bulach & Potter, 2001).

### **Making the Parent Connection: The Involvement of Fathers**

Many schools are now making strides to involve dads, because the involvement of fathers has been linked to successful achievement. A report from the National Center for Education Statistics (1997) found that the involvement of fathers was important to their children’s grades. The report showed that “when fathers get involved in their children’s education, the children are more likely to get mostly A’s in school” (p.1). Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley wrote, “Dads who stay connected—who showed up—reap the rewards when it comes to good report cards” (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

One way to involve fathers is through a program modeled on the “McDad’s club.” This club began when two fathers persuaded a school’s PTA to sponsor a dad’s club. The McDad’s club has three reasons for existence: to help the teachers in any way they can, get the dads involved in special activities at the school, and bring in special speakers that offer topics for dads. Fathers might come to classrooms and read to the children, or enjoy “Donuts with Dads” or “Lunch with Dads” programs. Children without dads are matched up with surrogate fathers so that children are not left out because of separation, death, or their fathers’ working commitments. As Elliot commented, “It’s important that children see that their dads are interested in their education as well as their moms. But I have found that without a specific invitation, dads don’t usually come to school to participate” (1996, p. 54).

Schools need to become more father friendly. Many dads are reluctant to become involved in the educational process of their children because schools have traditionally been considered to be places for women. Shedlin (2004) estimated that 95% percent of elementary school teachers and almost 60% of elementary school principals are women. Shedlin developed a plan for principals to increase the involvement of fathers in their children’s education using the following steps:

1. Articulate and demonstrate that home and school are partners in the education of children by creating specific ways to work together on behalf of students.
2. Make a concerted effort to involve dads during the earliest school years, so that from the beginning they feel welcomed and accustomed to being involved.
3. Arrange school meetings at times that dads are likely to be able to attend, even considering Saturdays as an option. (pp. 24–25)

### **Making the Parent Connection: Dual-Parent and Single-Parent Involvement**

School programs are met with new challenges today as they seek to involve diverse families: single-parent, blended, multigenerational, foster, and same-sex partners. According to Ray, “the majority of today’s children—69 percent—live with two married parents, while 23 percent live with a single mother, 5 percent live with a single father, and 4 percent have neither parent present” (2005, p. 73). However, when thinking of the families schools try to reach, it can be helpful to consider the U.S. Census Bureau’s (2004) broad definition of *family*: “a group of two people or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.” It is important to reach out to all families.

Parents who are in the middle of traumatic events in their lives, such as recent separation, divorce, incarceration, or death of a close relative, may not be capable of helping their children while they are seeking help for their own personal situations. Educators need to be understanding of that and make every effort to continue to communicate for the student’s sake.

### **Students Win When Parents and Teachers Collaborate**

If teachers can develop relationships with the parents of their students and connect with them as their allies, the children of those parents have a greater chance of success. Teachers will see success in many different areas: academics, deportment, social behavior, community service, and positive attitudes.

All children should have equal opportunity for success regardless of their gender or ethnic group. Parents, teachers, school, and community members need to work together to influence the positive learning of students. With the improvement of parental involvement, the academic and social areas of all students should improve (Feuerstein, 2000).

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#### **CASE STUDY SCHOOL 1**

Dave Dannemiller, former principal of Pine Grove Elementary, said that parental support is critical to a school making AYP. “When the parent buys in, there is an attitude that permeates through the whole building,” he said. “This was one of those gems that I had no idea had as much of an impact on the progress that Pine Grove made and that was parental involvement and school culture.” Among the ways he bolstered parental support was to invite parents to school functions and meetings. He also ensured that parents understood what school improvements were being made and made

parents feel they were an integral part of the school improvement process. He explained, “There’s that piece of the parental involvement and the involvement of the community in a leadership role, and I embrace that—and parents seem to be aware of the fact that they did have a say and that they did have some control as to what direction the school was going and they appreciated being heard.”

Dannemiller even instituted a requirement for 9 parent volunteer hours per year. Parents could volunteer to participate in parent workshops that teachers were required to offer on ways to help children academically at home, or parents could serve on various committees and school and parent organizations. In exchange, the parents who completed 9 hours would have the option of selecting their child’s teacher for the next school year, and their child would receive a school shirt similar to the staff shirts. Those who did not complete their volunteer hours did not have that option. Dannemiller said that he capped parent choice for the classes at only one third, and the other two thirds were school selected to ensure heterogeneous grouping. He said, “I know a lot of my colleagues don’t buy into parents selecting teachers and [they believe] that shouldn’t be happening because it becomes a popularity contest. But I came at it from the point of view that I would be hypocritical if I say that I want you to be involved in your child’s education, but I don’t want to hear what teacher you want for your child.”

Dannemiller said he saw his parent volunteer hours increase. He said teacher choice was on a first-come, first-served basis, and parents came in on a selected day to put in their requests. “It was like people lined up for concert tickets,” he said. “They even had lounge chairs and coffee.” Based on Lezotte’s and McKee’s (2002) definition, Pine Grove Elementary is an *advanced* effective school, because a community of parents and teachers work together to move students forward academically. The relationships between the parents and teachers are strong, because under the principal’s leadership and direction they must work together to increase student achievement. There is a strong expectation that parents will participate and be included in schoolwide decisions that will affect the growth and development of their child.

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**CASE STUDY  
SCHOOL 2**

John D. Floyd K-8 Environmental Science School, on the other hand, did not have parent involvement as strong as Pine Grove’s, which is part of why it can be considered a *proficient* school rather than advanced. Parents were

visible throughout the school as volunteers. They worked in the cafeteria, assisted in the front office, and some substituted for teachers who may have had to leave early for the day. There were fundraisers, parent meetings, and field trips. However, the former principal, Dr. Marcia Austin, admits that parent outreach could have been much stronger. Although there were the PTA and the School Advisory Council, there was room for much more parent involvement, and parents could have received more invitations for greater participation in their child's school. Austin says, "This is an area that I wish we could have done more. However, multiple means of communication is the key. Teachers made at least one phone call to every parent at the beginning of the school year. We strived to maintain an updated web site, access to online grades, newsletters, friendly reception staff, online messaging system, and timely communication about student progress or non-progress." John D. Floyd did not allow parents to choose their child's teacher; Austin explained that she did not want to encourage an environment where certain teachers were favored over others.

The leaping conclusion from comparing Pine Grove with John D. Floyd in the correlate area of Positive Home-School Relations is that the strength of parent involvement played a significant role in Pine Grove's success in making AYP. Both principals believe that parent involvement is a strong component needed in an effective school. However, at Pine Grove parents were required to volunteer and teachers required to offer parent academic workshops. The school also offered parents an opportunity to volunteer for the parent academic workshops. As Pine Grove made AYP consecutively and John D. Floyd did not, it is reasonable to surmise that its strong parental involvement was a contributing factor to students making learning gains.

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### Frontline Perspective

*Until we can go outside of our boundaries and go to where our parents are, we won't meet AYP.*

—Middle school assistant principal

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## SUMMARY

The research as well as personal experience both inform us of the overwhelmingly positive effect parents can (and should) have on the education of their children. The research, including one author's study (Ratcliffe, 2006), clearly shows Positive Home-School Relations to be the number one predictor of student academic achievement, including AYP scores. In addition, former U.S. Secretary of Education Riley (1994) reminded us that families are the foundation on which a strong education is built. Armed with this knowledge, it behooves all educators to build bridges from where

the parents are to where the school is. We must serve parents by building opportunities where they can be actively involved in the lives of their children. This is not an easy task, but it can and must happen if we are to see our students really excel at school. Implementing the strategies outlined in this chapter will assist educators with the momentous task of increasing student achievement and helping schools to make the grade.

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## CHAPTER REFLECTION

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1. Discuss your response to the chapter prompt by former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley: “The American family is the rock on which a solid education can and must be built” (1994, para. 4). Do you agree/disagree with this statement? Explain. How can schools create a forum that fosters a positive partnership with parents? Explain your response and give specific examples.
2. Summarize what the research says about the importance of positive home–school relations. Identify two or three capstone studies that reinforce the importance of this correlate.
3. Compare and contrast the strategies used by the two case study schools. Which strategies contributed to one school making AYP and the other failing to make AYP?
4. List the top five correlate strategies that you could implement to boost the presence of this correlate in your school district, school, or classroom. Why did you choose them? How would you implement them? How would you assess their effectiveness?
5. How important is the involvement of fathers in their children’s education? Explain. What top three strategies could you implement to increase the positive involvement of fathers in the education of their children? Give examples of how you would implement these strategies.
6. Give a scenario of how you have used (or could use) the strategies listed in the parent conference section successfully. What was (or could be) the outcome of the conference?

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