

Family Living Programs **Building Stronger Family-School Partnerships**

Situation

When parents are involved, students get better grades, score higher on achievement tests, attend school more regularly, drop out less often, and have higher personal aspirations.¹ Yet only about one-fifth of parents consistently attend school programs. Nearly one-third of students say their parents have no idea how they are doing in school. About one-sixth of all students report that their parents don't care if they earn good grades in the following year.²

Parental school involvement is a skill that can be taught and learned. However, without special efforts, few families continue as active partners with the school during the middle school years—a time when strong, stable relationships with adults are especially important.³

Response

The Families, Schools, and Communities United for Students (US) Project builds stronger family, school, and community partnerships in Wisconsin middle schools. The project is sponsored by the participating middle school, seven county Extension offices, the Bright Beginnings and Family/School/and Community Partnerships of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The project has collected data from 1,649 parents and 297 teachers in six participating middle schools. Parents report on their perceptions of the middle school and how they get involved in their child's education at school and at home. Teachers report on their perceptions of parent involvement: how important it is, what support they receive, and what actions they take.

County UW-Extension educators build a partnership team including 20 to 30 community stakeholders. These stakeholders may include: the principal and administrators; teachers; parents; youth; school board members; school staff; representatives of school organizations such as PTA/PTO and Booster Clubs; liaisons to strategic planning committees or site councils; extra-curricular leaders; coaches; representatives of youth-serving organizations such as 4-H and Scouts; and community leaders.

County UW-Extension educators have involved 141 local citizens in a three-meeting process to:

- assess how “family-friendly” their middle school is, using a research-based checklist,
- pinpoint strengths that are present and gaps that exist,
- identify strategies for building stronger family-school partnerships, and
- develop action plans for the team's top three to five priorities to increase parental involvement.

Outcomes

The six middle schools participating in the program have taken a number of steps to strengthen parent's involvement in their child's schooling and to build stronger partnerships between families, schools and communities. The responses of these schools range from hiring a parent volunteer

coordinator to holding fun family events at the school. They include the creation of a parent handbook, a parent section in the school library, a parent newsletter on the school web site and distribution of educational newsletters reporting on local studies of parental school involvement.

Participants have benefited in tangible ways as the program has increased their knowledge of the importance of parent's involvement in their child's school. Evaluations show that participants reported knowing more after the meetings than before about the benefits of parent's involvement, the different ways parents can get involved, and how other schools have built successful family/school partnerships. On a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), the action plan developed by the group was rated 4.9. Every person involved in the pilot project said that they would recommend the process to others (100 percent response rate). Here's what US team members say about the program:

I thought the nominal group process was excellent, and that we accomplished a lot for only a few meetings.

I am impressed that we're leaving with four action plans that we're actually going to do.

This is not a separate project, but something I plan to integrate into all of my parent contacts.

Middle Schools Respond

Participating schools have responded creatively to the program by instituting a variety of events, projects and publications in order to get parents more involved in their child's schooling and strengthen the partnership between parents, schools and communities:

- Monroe County – Tomah Middle School:
 - The School Board hired a parent volunteer coordinator; in one year's time, volunteers contributed 1,503 hours — or almost 62 8-hour workdays — at the school. This is almost a five-fold increase in volunteer time from the previous year.
- Monroe County – Sparta Meadowview Middle School:
 - Students have been recognized for academic success, extracurricular activities, and team efforts.
 - Quarterly events have been held to bring families to the school; student and their parents have enjoyed popcorn parties, root beer float nights, and make-your-own sundaes.
- Iowa, Richland and Sauk Counties - River Valley Middle School:
 - A middle school parent handbook was written to help parents know what to expect of the school and their sons/daughters in middle school.
 - A parent volunteer database was developed and distributed to all teachers.
 - A pre-Super Bowl Party and a free sub sandwich dinner included a Battle of the Bands and a speaker on "Making Good Choices."
- Burnett County - Grantsburg Middle School:
 - In order to develop more stable teacher/student relationships, policies were put in place to ensure that students have the same homeroom teacher for 7th and 8th grades.
 - A directory of county services for parents was given to new families.

- Sheboygan County - Riverview Middle School:
 - A newsletter is posted on the school web site every Friday and mailed to those parents preferring hard copies. Teachers now have photos and e-mail addresses posted on the school's web site.
 - A special parent section was added to the school library.
- Douglas County - Superior Middle School:
 - A 50-page report was issued summarizing local surveys of parents and teachers.

These six middle schools have also:

- Issued four middle school reports (49 pages each) summarizing local studies of parents and teachers in Sheboygan, Sparta, Superior and Tomah. These reports describe how much parents are involved in their child's schooling, in what ways the school has been successful in involving parents, and what improvements could be made.
- Mailed two educational newsletters to 3,387 parents summarizing local studies of parent involvement, the keys to parent involvement, how parent-teen relationships change during middle school, and the school's track record in involving parents.
- Mailed two educational newsletters to 310 middle school teachers reporting local studies of parental school involvement, why it is important to involve parents, how to involve parents and what the school's track record is in building family/school partnerships.

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¹Henderson, A.T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*, Austin, TX, National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools.

²Steinberg, L. (1996). *Beyond the classroom: Why school reform has failed and what parents need to do*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

³Simmons, R. G. (1987). Social transition and adolescent development, In C. E. Irwin (Ed.), *Adolescent social behavior and health* (pp. 33-61), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.