

## *Strategy 8: Preparing educators to work with families*

### **Action Steps:**

- Provide ongoing professional development for school faculty and staff on ways to create family-friendly schools, build positive school-family relationships, and involve families in the education of their children
- Make positive interactions with families and encouragement of family involvement an expectation for new faculty and staff members
- Include parental perspectives in planning and implementation of professional development opportunities
- Provide opportunities for staff, families, and community members to come together to learn skills in leadership, collaboration, advocacy, and shared decision making



## ***School, Family, and Community Relations Course University of Rochester, Rochester, NY***

School, Family and Community Relations is a required course for graduate students earning masters degrees in school administration at the Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development. The course, taught by Dr. Howard Kirschenbaum for the past seven years, introduces administrators, teachers, and counselors to *“the dramatic changes taking place in school, family, and community relations”* (Kirschenbaum, *School*, 2001, p. 1). Students survey *“the wide variety of models and approaches taking place today for uniting schools, parents, and community institutions into meaningful partnerships for academic success and healthy development of young people”* (Kirschenbaum, 2001, *School*, p.1). They also examine *“the many theoretical, political, and practical issues associated with these new models of collaboration”* (Kirschenbaum, *School*, 2001, p. 1).

Because he works closely with the Rochester City School District on research and implementation projects involving family involvement, including assisting in developing the district’s strategic plan for parent involvement, Dr. Kirschenbaum is able to bring his own experiences into the classroom. He also invites resource people from the school and community into the classroom, including active parent volunteers, and takes the class on field trips into the community. Students are also required to go out into the community and conduct school-case studies by interviewing parents, teachers, and administrators, and by gathering information about schools previously unfamiliar to them (Kirschenbaum, *Educating*, 2001). *“It’s a lot to cover in one course,”* said Dr. Kirschenbaum, *“but I think it’s possible to give students a good feel for the newer ‘partnership paradigm’ in education and some of the theory, research, and practice associated with it”* (personal communication, August 19, 2002).

Topics covered in the course include:

- *School-family communication*
- *Partnership models*
- *Parent involvement at school*
- *Measuring and evaluating parent involvement*
- *Parent empowerment*
- *Parent rights, school choice, and related controversial issues*
- *School-linked services*
- *Community support for schools*
- *Tutoring and mentoring*
- *School-to-work programs*
- *Service learning*
- *Issues and controversies in school-community relations*

### ***Family as Faculty Project***

The goal of the Family as Faculty project started at the University of South Florida in 1999 is to “enhance home-school partnerships by providing future educators with opportunities to listen to the voices of families from a variety of walks of life” (Family as Faculty, 2000).

The program recruits and trains a diverse group of family members to give guest lectures in education classes. Family presenters focus their talks on involvement in their children’s education, sharing experiences related to barriers and successful involvement, and telling personal stories.

Topics presented by parents have included attention deficit disorder, language barriers, socioeconomic barriers, teacher conferences, and grandparent caregiving, according to project director Dr. Jane Sergay. One parent of a child with a learning disability shared a strategy with the students of videotaping interactions with her daughter to help the teacher relate more effectively with her daughter. Some parents have brought their children to classes. Other parents have agreed to role play with students in counseling education courses.

*Participating in the Family as Faculty Program is a gratifying experience.  
I have the opportunity to share positive interactions, experiences, and strategies  
with my child’s educational planning team.*

**(Phillis Guthman, personal communication, January 28, 2003)**

Parents recruited for the program are given a three-day orientation and training during which they reflect on their experiences, identify specific issues and personal stories, and consider what makes a good presentation. They also give practice presentations and give one another feedback. Parents receive a training stipend and fee for each presentation. This program is now being replicated at other institutions, including the University of North Carolina and the University of Central Florida.

The programs described above are among a growing number nationwide that prepare educators for school-family-community collaboration. The Harvard Family Research Project is also working with teachers colleges and school districts to prepare teachers to work with parents. The project maintains a web site of syllabi for teacher preparation courses in family involvement that may be accessed from <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/syllabus/index.html>.

Nationwide there is a growing recognition of the importance of training educators in school-family-community collaboration, although “*in practice* such training is not happening as widely or quickly as necessary” (Kirschenbaum, Educating, 2001, p. 188). Surveys of higher education practices over the past two decades indicate that more institutions are incorporating family involvement into teacher preparation coursework, although only a minority of institutions offer a “comprehensive program in school-family-community relations that gives educators a thorough grounding in the theory, research, and practice of partnerships” (Kirschenbaum, Educating, 2001, p. 188). An ongoing debate centers on whether colleges and universities should offer required courses in school-community-family involvement or “infuse the content throughout the curriculum,” or both (Kirschenbaum, Educating, 2001, p. 194).

### ***Policies and practices***

With the addition in 1994 of Goal 8 to the Goals 2000 legislation, which states: “Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children” (U.S. Department of Education, *Goals 2000*, 1994), more attention has been given to the growing body of evidence demonstrating the positive impact of school-family-community collaborations. At the same time, there is recognition of a “serious discrepancy” between preservice preparation of teachers and the types of family involvement activities that teachers are increasingly expected to perform (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Until recently, most state certification departments did not require courses on family involvement for preservice educators. Since the late 1990s the number of states requiring that teachers have knowledge and skills related to parent and community involvement has increased significantly, and many states have begun to mandate preservice training and ongoing professional development in family involvement and school-family-community partnerships (Kirschenbaum, Educating, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, *Preparing*, 2001; Gray, 2001). However, California is the only state thus far that has enacted legislation mandating preservice and practicing teachers “to serve as active partners with parents and guardians in the education of children” (California Education Code 44291.2, 1993).

The Massachusetts State Department of Education’s *Parent, Family, and Community Involvement Guide* (2000) recommends that training in family-school-community involvement for both preservice and practicing teachers include:

- Research findings and information on the benefits of family involvement
- Strategies for helping educators “develop the skills, sensitivity, and insight necessary to work effectively with parents representing a variety of family structures and cultural backgrounds”
- Strategies for helping school staff to create a welcoming school environment
- Methods of developing “effective parent outreach and engagement strategies, including the regular two-way communication between the school and home”
- Strategies to overcome barriers to family involvement
- Development of effective communication skills
- Models of successful school, family, and community partnerships and methods for building these partnerships
- Community resources and programs and strategies for connecting families with these resources
- Opportunities for staff, families, and community members to come together to learn skills in leadership, collaboration, advocacy, and shared decision making (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000)

The Council for Exceptional Children (2000) recommends the following knowledge and skills that new teachers need to have in order to work effectively with families:

Knowledge:

- Culturally responsive factors that promote effective communication and collaboration with individuals, families, school personnel, and community members.
- Concerns of families who have children with exceptional learning needs and strategies to help address these concerns:
- Family systems and the role of families in supporting development and educational progress.

Skills:

- Foster respectful and beneficial relationships between families and professionals.
- Assist individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families in becoming active participants in the educational team.
- Plan and conduct collaborative conferences with individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families. (p. 26)

Additional skills are recommended for early childhood special educators, including the following:

- Establish and maintain positive, collaborative relationships with families.
- Apply family systems theory and knowledge of the dynamics, roles, and relationships within families and communities.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to differences in family structures and social and cultural backgrounds.
- Assist families in identifying their resources, priorities, and concerns in relation to their child's development.
- Respect parents' choices and goals for children and communicate effectively with parents about curriculum and children's progress.
- Involve families in assessing and planning for their children's education, including children with special needs.
- Implement a range of family-oriented services based on the family's identified resources, priorities, and concerns.
- Implement family services consistent with due process safeguards.
- Evaluate services with families (pp. 50-51)

The national associations that accredit or set standards for teacher preparation programs — the **The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education** (NCATE) and the **National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification** (NASDTEC) have added or strengthened indicators addressing parent involvement. Similarly, **The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards** includes parent involvement competencies among 11 generalist standards for educators (Hiatt-Michael, *Preparing*, 2001).

In *New Skills for New Schools*, Shartrand, Weiss, and Lopez (1997) offer a comprehensive framework that “illustrates the range of training for family involvement” to prepare teachers:

<b><i>Family Involvement Framework for Teacher Training</i></b>	
<b>Type</b>	<b>Goals</b>
<b><i>General Family Involvement</i></b>	To provide general information on the goals of, benefits of, and barriers to family involvement. To promote knowledge of, skills in, and positive attitudes toward involving parents
<b><i>General Family Knowledge</i></b>	To promote knowledge of different families’ cultural beliefs, childrearing practices, structures, and living environments. To promote an awareness of and respect for different backgrounds and lifestyles
<b><i>Home-School Communication</i></b>	To provide techniques and strategies to improve two-way communication between home and school (and/or parent and teacher)
<b><i>Family Involvement in Learning Activities</i></b>	To provide information on how to involve parents in their children’s learning outside of the classroom
<b><i>Families Supporting Schools</i></b>	To provide information on ways to involve parents in helping the school, both within and outside the classroom
<b><i>Schools Supporting Families</i></b>	To examine how schools can support families’ social, educational, and social service needs through parent education programs, parent centers, and referrals to other community or social services
<b><i>Families as Change Agents</i></b>	To introduce ways to support and involve parents and families in decision making, action research, child advocacy, parent and teacher training, and development of policy, programs, and curriculum

Maintaining that “no one method of instruction can prepare teachers to work effectively with families and communities,” Shartrand, Weiss, and Lopez (1997) advocate for approaches that are “comprehensive, integrated, and varied.” Best practices they recommend include “providing prospective teachers with opportunities to develop problem-solving skills by exposing them to challenging situations that require them to negotiate sensitive issues,” and having them work in schools and communities under the guidance of experienced professionals, where they apply research skills for a better understanding of families and communities and utilize information to develop family involvement activities.

Among the nine recommendations made by the *New Skills for New Schools* study, five directly address school-family-community collaborations:

1. Make training available to elementary, middle, and high school teachers; early childhood educators receive more preservice training than other teachers
2. Improve the effectiveness of training through collaboration across subspecialties and disciplines — health and social services
3. Integrate training throughout the teacher preparation curriculum rather than treating it as an isolated component
4. Sustain teachers' knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward families through inservice training
5. Move beyond classroom-based teaching methods by offering teachers direct field experiences working with families

Ongoing professional development for teachers is needed as family structures continue to change, requiring “new or different family outreach strategies from what may have been effective in the past” (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). These trainings may include topics such as strategies for contacting parents, students' home culture, appreciation of diversity, effective communication, conflict resolution, team building, and ways to involve parents as leaders and decision-makers in the school. In addition, as more children with disabilities are included in the general education curriculum, both special and regular educators will need training that focuses on effectively interacting with parents of children with disabilities to involve them as equal partners in the educational planning and decision-making process for their child (Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2002).

In addressing issues related to poverty, professional development for educators needs to change the focus from mothers in poverty as contributors, to the problem of underachieving students, to “how the schools, as powerful institutions of social control, reproduce inequalities of social class and stereotypes of the poor” (Bloom, 2001) and “socialize children into a white, middle-class system,” promoting values which may be in opposition to the values of some families in the school (Dodd & Konzal, 2002, p. 28). Possible topics for discussion include poverty and privilege, stereotyping, unrealistic middle-class expectations for families living in poverty, and recognition of the strengths of families as a balance for any limitations.

### ***Parents as teachers***

Parents of different cultures, such as Native American, Hispanic, and Asian, can take an active role in presenting parental perspectives in professional development opportunities for teachers that focus on family involvement. In California, “mentor parents” provide professional development to school staff on parent involvement and home-school communication. One workshop addressed obstacles to parent involvement in schools, including parents' negative past experiences that discourage participation, and perceived teacher biases based on parents' different socioeconomic status, race, gender, physical appearance, or language ability (U.S. Department of Education, *Family Involvement*, 1997).

### ***Reading at Home***

*Reading at Home is a course taught by parents to parents of K-3 students in several Illinois Solid Foundation Schools. The course helps parents encourage children to develop a lifelong love of reading. Parents who take the course attend three weekly, 90-minute sessions that are taught in groups of ten and led by parents trained as group leaders. Parents learn activities and exercises to do with their children and then share experiences with the group. Many of the activities require no previous planning or extra supplies. In several schools where students speak more than one language, parent volunteers are translating the course into multiple languages. (Reading at Home, 2001)*