

Academic success and school/family collaboration

In January of 1992, the Center for research and intervention on academic success (Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur la réussite scolaire, CRIRES) launched a research program focussing mainly on the relationship between academic success and school/family collaboration. Researchers started by drawing up a list of North American publications dealing with the characteristics of a successful collaboration between the school system and the family and then, of the programs currently applied in grade schools to form a genuine partnership between parents and other educators. The findings of these programs can serve as a guideline in

drawing up high school programs. This first study was followed by a survey throughout the province of Quebec where both parents and educators were asked about their respective expectations and needs regarding the school/family collaboration. The present document is a review of the highlights from these two studies which were made possible by a research grant from Employment and Immigration Canada and by the Quebec Department of Education.



N.B. In this text, the term "parents" refers to the adult or adults living with the child.

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A new publication

This new publication from the CRIRES addresses one of the Center's main preoccupations: to provide concrete support to the school system. This bulletin offers information on research results conducted by various CRIRES research groups. Future issues will deal with school life and the reintegration of drop-outs.



L'ÉCOLE AVANT TOUT

STAY IN SCHOOL

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Academic success

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According to the authors consulted in this study, a student's academic success depends greatly on the relationship with parents. Thus, students who do well in school come from families where the parents have high but realistic expectations for their children. These parents show interest in their children's activities; they are affectionate but establish discipline. They set a schedule for homework, provide books and manage the amount of television their children watch. They take the time to talk to their children and provide support for their academic activities. They achieve this by using effective communication, supervision and problem-solving methods that may help the child.

Parents' interest in their child and their parenting skills could therefore be determining factors in academic success. However, researchers have not been able to determine which type of family interaction is the most successful. They can only establish a relationship between the parents' participation and their children's academic success.

According to these authors, children do benefit from their parents' involvement in school. In fact, there is a significant link between the parents' participation in school activities and the child's academic results. Reinforcing the collaboration between the parents and the school can therefore have a positive impact on the students' academic achievements.

Parents' involvement in school

Parents' involvement in school can also be beneficial to them and to the teachers, since they all rely on each other. Teachers experience problems of isolation, of professional self-worth and must deal with increasingly difficult work conditions associated with the parents' personal, professional or social problems, a situation which clearly calls for a rapprochement between the two parties. Collaboration between parents and teachers offers several advantages, such as a better mutual understanding, the sharing of common tastes and the pleasure of getting to know someone in a new context. Furthermore, this

collaboration allows both parties to broaden their horizons and to improve their educational relationship.

Moreover, parents' involvement can be considered as one of the school's alternative resources; an innovative educational tool offering the school a new opportunity for outside contacts.

The previous considerations clearly show the importance of the parents' participation in school activities. They help to identify positive and negative factors and show how important it is to clarify parents' needs and to take their availability into account when organizing activities.

Unfortunately, low participation on the part of parents is all too often mistaken for a lack of interest.

Obstacles

to the parents' involvement

Some researchers have identified the most common obstacles to the parents' involvement among which must be mentioned current parent/teacher relations and lack of time on both sides. In fact, parents and teachers do not meet often enough and when they do, in most cases, it is because of a problem with the child. Both parties then usually proceed to point the finger at each other instead of coming together in order to find a solution to the problem.

Incentives

to the parents' involvement

Although some factors deter parents from getting involved in their child's education, many factors can do just the opposite. It is thus possible to further the parents' participation by presenting them with a specific role where their tasks are structured and their goals clearly defined. Special attention must then be paid to the status imparted to the role which parents are asked to play. They must be considered as partners, not as executors or rivals. It is also important to dismiss any preconceived ideas about the parents' unwillingness or incapacity to collaborate with the teachers.



Collaboration programs

Parent/teacher collaboration is one of the major elements in the fight against academic failure and drop-out. The use and development of existing programs will further the parents' participation in school activities. These programs must include activities which satisfy all concerned groups.

A parent/teacher collaboration program can be defined as group of activities designed to reinforce the partnership between parents and teachers in order to ensure academic success. This type of program is quite different from the structures actually prevailing in the schools and stipulated by law (handing out of report cards, parent committees), but must still fit in with them. There are several types of school/family collaboration programs. We have chosen to divide them in three categories.

Parents' support of teachers

The first category of collaboration programs emphasizes the parents' support of school activities.

In some of these programs, parents can contribute time, or give goods and services in support of certain extra-curricular activities: organizing fund-raisers and workshops, supervising library work and field trips, teaching art or a hobby, or organizing cultural gatherings.

In other programs, parents are invited into the classroom to directly assist the teacher in his/her tasks. The parents may then become counselors for the students or be entrusted with certain teaching tasks.

Teachers' support of parents

A second category of parent/teacher collaboration programs provides support to the parents in their role as educators. Firstly, schools may directly contribute to the parents' education by offering training sessions in order to improve their parenting skills and to increase their knowledge of different subject matters. These can take the form of workshops within the adult education program. Schools may also provide parents with educational material (books, videos, booklets, etc.).

Another type of collaboration program deals with the parents' supervision of the children in the home. Schools may, for example, assist parents in their role as educators either by lending books or games, by creating a resource center or by organizing reading activities during summertime.

Improving the parent/teacher relationship

The third category of parent/teacher collaboration deals with the improvement of relationships.

These programs encourage parents' participation in organizing and supervising activities designed to promote communication and the development of healthy relationships between the different educational agents (teachers, administration and parents alike). These activities may therefore include visits, setting up a "parents' room" at the school, drawing up a parents' directory, setting up a telephone answering service outside school hours to keep parents posted on the school's activities, written communication, production of a parents' manual, dinner parties for parents and school staff, information meetings and discussions.

Parent/teacher collaboration can also allow parents to set up different advisory committees which cover every aspect of the school's activities, whether financial, administrative or academic.

Examples of collaboration programs

There are many examples of school/family collaboration. We chose to divide them according to their main goal: improving learning skills, and improving student behaviour. These two goals translate the teachers' concern for classroom management and the parents' desire for their child to be socially well-adjusted. Reference material concerning all the programs presented is listed at the end of the text.

Learning skills programs

School/family collaboration is important mostly to enhance learning skills, which is, in fact, one of the school's chief objectives. Mastering both written and spoken language and acquiring mathematical abilities have always been considered the cornerstone of elementary school education. Programs emphasizing learning skills are mostly applied to these two subject matters.

Training parents to become reading instructors

The first example of learning skills programs encourages parents to collaborate with the school in order to help their child to learn how to read. It emphasizes the importance of positive reinforcement on the parents' part, and organizes informal sessions on how to improve their child's comprehension of written text. Parents are also invited directly into the classroom to read to the children and are encouraged to borrow books and to read to their child at home. Workshops are also set up for the school staff to assist them in organizing sessions for parents. These workshops allow parents and staff to discuss children's literature and academic reading programs.

The activities vary from one school to another according to participation levels, the type of supervision provided by the school and organizers' personal visions. Parents who participate in these activities note an increased interest in learning more about reading and the means by which they can help their child to learn, how to find books, how to answer their child's questions and social contacts promoted by the activity. Many parents mentioned they had improved their understanding of the learning process. Others volunteered as school auxiliaries after these meetings. As for the staff,

they noticed that students showed a greater interest in reading and were happy to see parents participate (for further information on this program, see Handel (1990) in the reference list).

Training parents to become mathematics tutors

The second example of school/family collaboration for enhancing learning skills is in the field of mathematics. Better known as "Mathématiques en famille/Math at home", this program essentially shows parents how to give their child proper support in grade school math. The training program lasts two days and concentrates on raising both the children's and the parents' interest for math and on finding the proper motivation to learn. Through games, it allows parents to enjoy math. Parents are provided a book describing the material covered in each of their child's classes and suggesting activities which enhance comprehension of the various concepts. These activities are intended for the home and refer to concrete and interesting real-life experiences. When questioned on their evaluation of this program, most parents said they had conducted the activities on a regular basis with their child and had helped them with their math homework. They also stated they had learned something new about math and the manner in which it is taught (for further information on this program, see Hart (1988) in the reference list).

Recorded messages for parents

The third example of school-family collaboration consists in providing parents with information on homework, lessons and extra-curricular activities. Communication is established through recorded telephone messages. The messages are recorded daily by teachers and are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. After evaluation of the program, it was noted that this information on homework and lessons had led to an improvement in academic results. This evaluation also revealed that most parents listened to the messages and that this form of communication proved as effective for extra-curricular activities as for academic activities. Such a program is both cost and time efficient and improves students' academic results. The information transmitted to parents must however not interfere with direct communication between parents and teachers (for further information on this program, see Bittle (1975) in the reference list).

Appropriate behaviour and social integration programs

A second group of school-family collaboration programs addresses another major preoccupation for both teachers and parents: instilling in children acceptable behaviour.

Training parents to identify and analyse behaviour

The first example of this type of program is one where parents are given greater responsibility for their child's behaviour. It mainly tries to show parents how to identify and analyse behaviour. The program consists of eight two hour sessions, each of which has a different objective. Parents learn how to identify and measure the intensity, duration and frequency of specific behaviours. They also learn how to apply easy intervention techniques and to evaluate their effectiveness. Among these techniques are positive reinforcement, contracts, and learning by modelling and extinction (ignoring). A session is devoted to generalization and maintaining the learned behaviour. Studies have shown that students' behaviour noticeably improved with this program (for further information on this program, see Hall (1982) in the reference list).

Emphasizing skill acquisition rather than problems

A second example of this type of program focusses the attention of teachers and parents on the children's appropriate behaviour rather than on their problems. Better known as "Gagnants-Winning!", this program gives parents of three to twelve year olds basic notions on how to modify behaviour. If the parent has difficulty applying a basic technique, he or she is first taught specific applications for everyday problems and then encouraged to apply these newly acquired techniques on his/her own to a group of similar problems. The parent can use techniques which are easily applied to a wide variety of situations. The evaluation of this program reveals a noticeable improvement in children's behaviour and in the way in which they interact with parents and siblings. The drop-out rate in these programs is very low (for further information on this program, see Dangel & Poste (1984) in the reference list).

Implementing a logbook system

Our last example of student behaviour modification program consists in the implementation of a log book system. The teaching staff keeps a diary of the child's accomplishments and behaviour. Parents are encouraged to keep close tabs on their child's log book. This type of program calls for close collaboration between teachers and parents. It is generally preceded by a basic training session and calls for shared management and constant exchange of information between parents and teachers. The child also shares responsibilities, since he/she will be deprived of certain privileges if the book is lost or tampered with. This system has proven to be very effective as it noticeably improved academic achievements and reduced the occurrence of behavioural problems

in students (for further information on this program, see Atkeson & Forehand (1979) in reference the list).

Conditions for effective school/family collaboration programs

Kindergarten programs are most effective when they include a direct and personal relationship between parents and teachers. These programs present concrete and structured tasks to the parents with clearly defined long-term objectives. At the elementary school level, the most effective programs are those which offer tools enabling the parents to help their children's learning of math, reading and science.

Some high school programs focus on creating parent-support groups and organizing activities which try to improve learning skills. However, there is no available information on the effectiveness of these programs.

The following is a list of conditions and suggestions for implementing a school-family collaboration, both at the elementary school and high school levels.

- In general, schools where parents participate in different activities have a higher success rate. Schools where parents only attend mandatory meetings have a lower success rate.
- Effective programs encourage a constant exchange of information between parents and teachers on marking criteria, academic objectives and the children's progress.
- Students in classes where teachers call upon the parents' active participation are better readers. This is less noticeable for mathematics.
- The most effective programs appear to be the more global ones: all school staff and parents receive training on the school/family relationship; some parents with specific

leadership qualities are trained to give information sessions to other parents.

- Teachers must have realistic expectations regarding parents' participation. Parents have their own professional obligations which hinder their availability but not their interest.
- Some parents prefer a more active role in information sessions than that of simple observer, the role which is commonly expected of them.
- Programs initiated by school principals are less effective than those initiated by one or more members of the teaching staff.
- Teaching activities should include the parents and not focus only on the child.
- Preconceived ideas on the parents' willingness or ability to involve themselves are detrimental to any collaboration.
- The most effective programs are those in which parents are viewed as partners and in which parents are encouraged to voice their opinion on the programs.
- In cases where the participation level is low, it is important to identify the impediments to parental participation rather than immediately attributing it to a lack of interest. A program must then be set up which takes into account the family members' needs and availabilities.

Other suggestions

Although most educators consider parental participation to be an important factor in academic success, there is still a lack of well structured school/family collaboration programs. A variety of methods are available to improve parents' participation.

1. Use various methods involving reading and the use of books, such as reading to the children or listening to them while they read. Parents are encouraged to take their children to the library or the bookstore and to use educational material that is available at home. This method is most useful in the first grade.
2. Promote communication between parents and children in order to have the children practice their spoken language skills. Parents should ask their children about their day at school. For older students, homework necessitating the parents' participation should be encouraged.
3. Favour activities to be carried out at home in which the parents act as counselors or role models. Teachers may communicate information to parents on specific classes, games or activities which involve both parents and children, and help parents make their homes a better workplace for their children.
4. Establish a parent/teacher contract in which are described the privileges to be granted or removed to the child according to his/her efforts. This contract may also specify the parents' supervision and homework assistance responsibilities, as well as the measures they can take to help the child enjoy his/her study place.

5. Provide parents with teaching skills involving support and evaluation activities. Parents may also be made aware of the available teaching material designed to help in the learning process of subjects introduced in class and may be invited into the classroom as observers. They can also be presented with questionnaires designed to identify their child's achievements and problems.

Conclusion

This document summarizes the research conducted in recent years on the correlation between school/family collaboration and academic success. We have identified the parameters of this collaboration, as well as the factors which either impede or promote it. The usefulness of certain programs which aim to promote and facilitate this collaboration has been highlighted along with a list of effectiveness measures. In short, collaboration between schools and parents clearly promotes greater academic success and reduces the incidence of failure and drop-out. It is important, however, to identify the expectations of both teachers and parents regarding school/family collaboration so that activities, which are satisfying to both parties can be developed.

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Results of a study conducted in Quebec on school/family collaboration practices

This study has enabled us to explore the practices of both parents and teachers regarding school/family collaboration. The survey, conducted during the spring of 1992, reached a significant sample of Quebec teachers. 957 parents and 630 grade school teachers filled out a questionnaire about their attitudes, their needs and their expectations regarding this collaboration.

This study was made possible through a research grant from Employment and Immigration Canada and by the Department of Education of Quebec.

Parents' practices regarding school/family collaboration

The results of this study have enabled us to describe the parents' current practices regarding school/family collaboration.

Supervising homework and lessons

Almost half of the parents polled said they spend a little more than 15 minutes a day helping their children with their homework. The other half spend less than 15 minutes a day helping the children. Parents provide the most help during the elementary school years. There is, however, a significant difference between the first and sixth grades. Parents whose children are experiencing difficulties spend more time with them. Wealthier parents also spend more time with their children than parents with a lower income.

Communication with the school

Communication from the school to the parents is generally carried out in a written manner. Parents whose children are having difficulties both communicate and meet more often with the school's staff and administration.

Parents' availability

87 % of parents polled said they would spend more time helping their children with homework, but only 65 % of them were willing to undergo training. At the elementary school level, parents with higher incomes and parents whose children are having problems express a greater readiness to attend training sessions.

Teachers' practices regarding school/family collaboration

This survey also enabled us to describe the teachers' practices regarding school/family collaboration.

Communication with the parents

Almost 90 % of teachers polled said that, at least once a year, they establish a contract with parents and set up an action plan in order to modify the child's behaviour in school. More than half of them write to the parents once every term to keep them posted on their child's behaviour. However, direct contact is more frequent when a child seems to have a learning difficulty. Teachers show genuine confidence in their communication with the parents.

Parents' and teachers' attitudes and perceptions

Our survey enabled us to determine both parents' and teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding joint school/family activities such as information, communication, training and collaboration.

The need for information

Parents stressed their desire to be better informed on programs, educational material and grading criteria. They would like to have more information meetings on the subject; teachers, however, do not see the necessity for this. Parents who have a lower income are more

eager than others for more frequent meetings. Parents of children experiencing learning difficulties, say that they are kept well informed.

The need for communication

Parents who express the desire to meet with the teachers more often and to attend training sessions are usually those of children with learning problems. Parents from rural areas seem to be more satisfied with the communication with teachers than parents from urban areas. Parents who want to take part in supervision tasks say that there are not enough meetings. Teachers, on the other hand, consider parents to receive sufficient information.

The need for training

The majority of parents and teachers agree that parents would benefit from specific training programs enabling them to supervise their children's homework and manage their behaviour at home. Parents with a lower income are more sensitive to this need but have less time to allot to the training sessions. This situation should be taken into account when setting up activities.

The need for school/family collaboration activities

Both parents and teachers are convinced of the importance of supervising children during homework, especially when the child is experiencing problems. They would all welcome a practical guide designed for parents which explains how to help their children.

Reference: Saint-Laurent, L., Royer, É., Hébert, M. & Tardif, L. (Submitted for publishing). Enquête sur la collaboration famille/école au Québec.