

African-American Parents and Effective Parent Involvement Programs

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Abstract

The effectiveness of PreK-12 schools in successfully educating African-American children is dismal. By the time African-American children enter high school, they are often more than four academic years behind their White counterparts. Suspensions for African-American children are approximately three to five times higher than for White children. Effective parent involvement programs for African-Americans can aid in increasing academic achievement and reducing suspensions of their children. Parent involvement programs should incorporate the unique assets African-Americans bring to such programs. All too often parent programs are school-centric, meaning that school personnel define what factors are in the programs. Effective linkage between parents/home environment, school personnel, and community resources is essential to the development of an effective parent involvement program that significantly enhances education for African-American children.

Keywords: parent involvement programs, African-American students' success at school, expectations of African-American parents, school-centric

“The lack of parent involvement is the biggest issue affecting Black students’ quality of education” (White, 2014, p. 1). School “receptivity” is the strongest predictor of parent involvement with economically disadvantaged African American parents (Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005).

“James Coleman’s 1966 epic study, entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, documented the shocking achievement gap of five years between Black and White children” (Bartz, 2016, p. 1). As Camera (2016) notes, “After 50 years the achievement gap between White and Black students has barely narrowed” (p.1). Regarding NAEP (National Assessment of Education Progress), Barton and Corley (2010) observed that:

From the early 1970s, documented a substantial gap in test performance in reading and math between Black students and White students. Since then this achievement gap has appeared to be fluid, narrowing in the 1970s and 1980s, but flattening since 2004. (pp. 5-6)

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), “Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receive more than one out-of-school suspension” (p. 1). Smith and Harper (2015) found that in 13 southern states serving as their data base, African-Americans were suspended at a rate five times or higher than their representation in the population. Coupling these suspensions—especially for males—with police in schools, is often viewed as the starting point for the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

There is a crisis in the United States regarding the achievement and treatment of many Black children that needs immediate attention and meaningful solutions! African-American parents expect schools to make sure their children have successful academic achievement; are in a safe, welcoming, and caring environment; will not be racially stereotyped or the recipients of any other racial bias; will develop effective social-psychological skills; and will be prepared for adult life. This is no different than the expectations of other racial/ethnic groups. African-American parents also want parent involvement programs that significantly contribute to the improvement of their children’s education.

Schools receiving federal funds are obligated via the Every Student Succeeds Act (the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) to use a portion of those monies to involve parents, school personnel, and community resources for the benefit of participating students. Other federally-funded programs, such as vocational education, require involvement of people from outside the school. Further, programs funded by special categorical state revenue sources often require parent input and involvement.

Unique Context of African-American Children and Parents

Unfortunately, racism is alive and well in the United States and significantly impacts African-American children and their parents. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Kennedy recently noted that racial bias in the U.S. is a familiar and reoccurring evil (“Politically Correct Juries,” 2017). Roberts (2011) notes that Black children are often exposed to multiple instances of racism that negatively impact their academic achievement. Roberts identifies the following negative impacts of racism, related to schools, on African-American parents and children: (a) lower self-esteem; (b) higher rates of depression; (c) increased behavioral problems; (d) lower academic achievement; (e) lower cognitive and behavioral expectations by teachers that African-American children internalize and, thus, do not perform to their potential; (f) stereotyping African-American parents so that their many unique attributes (e.g., strong support system through

churches, support and assistance of people in their social network, community/neighbor resources) which have a positive impact on their children are overlooked; and (g) microaggression and macroaggression experiences at school.

Many African-American children still attend segregated schools, even after *Brown vs. Board of Education* and numerous federal court cases that followed. For example, in Illinois 6 out of 10 African-American children attend a school that is 90% or more non-White (Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, & Siegal-Hawley, 2016, p. 4). Hence, there is a need to specifically develop parent involvement programs that focuses on African-American children.

Perspectives on Parent Involvement Programs

School-centric represents a definition of parent involvement established by school personnel that often means African-American parents' roles should be limited to volunteering at school, attending school meetings, and helping children with homework (Williams & Sanchez, 2012). While these factors are important, they do not constitute a comprehensive parent involvement program. The point is that in a school-centric approach, school personnel determine what parent involvement is based on the school's norms. This school-centric perspective of parent involvement pertaining to African-Americans often lacks such important functions as decision-making and governance in school operations (e.g., councils, committees, PTAs, and school improvement teams). If African-American parents perceive that school personnel do not want them to be meaningfully involved in matters such as decision-making and governance, they are likely to be less involved in other aspects of the school's programs.

It is common for African-American parents to indicate feelings of isolation, alienation, disengagement, and an array of other negative feelings pertaining to interactions with staff at their children's schools. African-American parents may be reluctant to become more involved in their children's education because of the negative experiences they had as students.

African-American parents have many positive attributes and resources that differ from school-centric definitions of parent involvement, such as: (a) supportive people in their social networks willing to help them with matters pertaining to their children's education; (b) advocacy by individuals from churches and community groups for their children; (c) childcare for siblings by friends and agencies while visiting the school; (d) adults in their community willing to support them psychologically; (e) assistance in obtaining educational books, resources, and school supplies; (f) access to supplemental educational activities based outside of their children's school in the communities in which they reside; and (g) medical and mental health services in their communities.

Context for Developing a Parent Involvement Program

The elements of parent involvement programs must include the positive factors African-Americans can bring to such programs. The positive role that Black racial identity plays in creating a sense of "connectedness" should be emphasized in a parent involvement program with the parents, themselves (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). A parent involvement program should not be exclusively school-centric. In order for such a program to be effective, it should also include the positive attributes of African-American parents. The overriding goal of the parent involvement program should be to ensure that African-American parents' attributes are not stereotyped and

thereby limit the effectiveness of school personnel to work meaningfully with them and their children.

It is essential that school personnel have a positive “outward mindset” toward the involvement of African-American parents. The outward mindset is indicative of school personnel viewing the roles and attributes of African-American parents as crucial to an effective parent involvement program. The outward mindset also represents school personnel exposing African-American parents to positive experiences pertaining to their involvement. In summary, the outward mindset represents the positive psychology movement that focuses on the assets people bring to a situation to make it successful (Arbinger Institute, 2016).

A key element of improving education for African-American children is the development of effective working relationships between parents (including educational activities in the home for children), the school and its personnel, and agencies and resources in the communities in which African-American children reside. In benefitting children, these relationships are akin to a three-legged stool. The stool functions best when all three legs are equal and effective in doing their part, as is the case with meaningful school-family-community partnerships. Further, Barton’s (2003) research analysis notes that strong school-family-community partnerships lead to higher educational aspirations and increased student motivations.

The “no blame” philosophy of James Comer’s (1980) approach to school improvement should be an essential part of a parent involvement program. It is counterproductive for individuals from any of the three entities—school personnel, parents, and community partners—to blame one another for the present situation. The “blame game” creates animosity and imperils meaningful working relationships. Developing positive bonding relationships between African-American parents, school personnel, and community members greatly enhances the value of a parent involvement program. A trusting bond between the three entities is the foundation of working together effectively for the betterment of African-American children. For maximum effectiveness, the meanings and functions of parent involvement must be perceived similarly and compatibly by school personnel, parents, and community members (Lawson, 2003).

Forty-nine percent of African-American households are low-income, while 23% of White households are low-income (Povich, Roberts, & Mather, 2014-15, p. 2). As of 2014, the poverty rate for African-American households was at 26.2%, compared to White households at 10.1% (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015, pp. 13-14). Middle class teachers sometimes view parents from low income and poverty households negatively with regard to their childrearing practices and the contributions these parents can make to their children’s education (Grant & Ray, 2013). It is imperative that school personnel guard against this possible bias.

Fifty-six percent of African-American children are from single parent households—usually headed by the mother (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, pp. 2-4). School personnel often use the childrearing practices they experienced as children as the “right way” to raise children. This may be different from the culture of many African-American households, even though the African-American parents’ practices have positive impacts on their children. This is another potential bias that school personnel must avoid.

Approximately 7% of public school teachers in the United States are African-American, and only 2% are male (Will, 2016, p. 7). Since the vast majority of African-American children have teachers from another race, it is imperative that hiring practices include criteria for being sensitive to the unique characteristics of African-American families and children, regardless of a teacher’s race. Because of this under representation of African-American teachers, it is critical

that school personnel seek input from African-American parents to better understand the parents' and children's needs.

Example of Basic Components of Parent Involvement Program

In addition to the previously-mentioned content for effective parent programs, the following information is based, in part, on Epstein (2011) and the National Education Association (2008) pertaining to effective parent programs.

1. Recognize basic obligations of families
 - Provide for children's health and safety
 - Develop parenting skills that prepare children for school
 - Build positive home conditions that support school learning and behavior
 - Provide a warm, caring, and loving environment
 - Understand developmental levels of children as they progress in age
 - Provide for nutritional diet and other physical needs

2. Recognize basic communication obligations of schools
 - Make sure all communications are respectful of parents' roles in their children's education, at home and at school
 - Develop videos and other social media information highlighting school events, teachers, and available resources
 - Provide a personal greeting/welcome packet for new parents
 - Provide families information about age appropriate child development that are cognitive, social, and psychological
 - Communicate with families about school programs and children's progress
 - Ensure written communications are clear and free from educational jargon
 - Communicate with parents about good behavior and academic successes, not just negative happenings
 - Make sure that no "bureaucratic hurdles" prevent effective communication and participation
 - Strive to make parents feel comfortable when communicating with school personnel in the context of understanding that, based on past experiences as students, they may have a feeling of alienation
 - Understand the challenges faced by single parents, grandparents, Godparents, foster parents and other caregivers regarding participation

3. Recognize involvement at school by parents
 - Conduct open house events that have "make-it and take-it" activities which provide parents with materials and insights pertaining to home-based learning
 - Involve parents in assisting with fundraising activities, including planning
 - Use parents to assist as volunteers in classrooms or other areas of the school
 - Use parents as volunteers to be greeters at school events
 - Involve parents in children's school activities
 - Have parents accompany students and school staff on field trips

- Provide a wide range of times for parent involvement to increase the likelihood that parents are able to participate
4. Recognize involvement in learning activities at home
 - Assist parents with learning activities at home that are coordinated with children's classwork
 - Provide easy access to parents knowing specific homework assignments for their children
 - Provide parents with information, resources, and skills related to helping their children at home and understanding the expectations of each grade level
 - Link parents to community agencies that will assist them with home-based educational activities for their children
 5. Provide involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy
 - Involve parents in school committees such as PTAs, advisory councils, school improvement teams, and independent advocacy groups
 - Have school policies that are easy for parents to understand and subject to their feedback
 - Involve parents in advocacy lobbying efforts at local, state, and federal levels
 - Seek suggestions from parents for input in school and district policies and procedures
 6. Utilize collaboration and exchanges with community organizations
 - Connect parents with agencies, businesses, and other groups that support their children's educational activities at school
 - Utilize community resources that aid parents who do not have means of transportation or child care for siblings which prevent them from being involved
 - Work with public libraries to support and assist parents with educational materials for their children
 - Work with entities that provide food and nutritional assistance

Hoerr (2017) notes that “[It] cannot be overemphasized how important it is that parents feel they belong in the school” (p 89). He also offers the following practical suggestions for effective parent involvement:

- (a) teachers contact parents at the start of the school year with positive information about their children;
- (b) conduct workshops for parents (and include them in the planning) focused on interests and issues relevant to their children's educational needs;
- (c) have opportunities for parents to see children perform at school, in their immediate neighborhood/community, and at places such as malls in the greater geographical area (assist with transportation, when needed);
- (d) have a parent area in the school with coffee, snacks, educational materials, and information related to their children (also display artwork and other materials produced by children in this area);
- (e) have free food in the parent area and at events;

- (f) establish a structure that solicits input to decision making and advisory groups (e.g., councils, committees, PTAs and school improvement teams);
- (g) utilize technology (social media, Facebook, email, texts, tweets), but do not assume all have access or will use it; and
- (h) establish channels of communication to receive input from parents and *listen*. (pp. 88-89)

Dr. Joyce Epstein (2011) is associated with the National Network of Partnership Schools based at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, which is an excellent source of information on parent involvement programs. The Chicago Public Schools Child-Parent Centers program is an outstanding example of how parents, school personnel, and community resource people can work collaboratively to enhance the education of African-American children at the early childhood level.

Our Reflective Thoughts

A history of racial stigmatization influences how African-American students think about and behave in school, as well as parents' efforts to influence their children's educational outcomes. Too often public schools in the United States do not enable African-American parents to participate in school processes and practices in meaningful ways.

Focusing on African-American parent involvement sheds light on the experiences of African-American families in the quest to gain opportunity and academic success for their children. It offers school personnel the opportunity to confront and address the deficit thinking that can negatively affect the development of authentic relationships between school personnel and African-American families. Without accurate knowledge of African-American parents' needs and wants for their children and how African-American parents view their children's education, school personnel are limited in their ability to know how to best serve these students and their families.

Positive African-American parent involvement is needed throughout students' elementary and secondary years. African-American teens face significant societal and academic challenges, and their families serve as a connecting force. When teens embrace an African-American racial identity, it fosters a positive self-image that enhances achievement in school.

There is more congruence than incongruence between the beliefs of school personnel and African-American parents about involvement. It is the responsibility of school personnel to recognize the barriers, such as the school-centric approach to parent involvement, that impede African-American parents' ability to be involved in their children's education, both at school and at home. In response, school personnel should strive to increase African-American parent involvement. That involvement should build upon individual family strengths and create opportunities that embrace the skills of African-American parents, acknowledge their individual and collective needs, and contributions. African-American parents must be committed to being involved in the academic, social, and emotional lives of their children throughout the PreK-12 continuum; learning about school activities and how they can be involved; and fulfilling an active role as advocates for the success of their children in school.

Staff diversity is lacking in many schools, but educators can enrich student lives with diversity by partnering with parents. Who else knows children better than the parents? African-American parents are in the best position to aid the school in meeting common expectations

regarding their children. This must be a true partnership based on collaboration and communication. It is imperative that educators adopt an outward mindset or the ability to see the intrinsic value of collaborating as equals with African-American parents. This will strengthen a school's parental involvement program as compared to a school-centric approach which limits some forms of positive input from African-American parents that would enhance the program.

When educators, parents, and students work together and pull in a common direction, good things happen for students. As the proverb reminds us, "Many hands make light the work." Building synergy will help to establish high expectations, and build positive relationships with African-American students. High expectations and a caring relationship with students are two key ingredients needed to maximize student achievement.

Lastly, it is imperative that school personnel and African-American parents work cooperatively with community agencies and other resources in the neighborhoods where the children reside. An effective linkage between the school and its personnel, African-American parents, and community resources has tremendous potential for maximizing school success for African-American children.

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