

University of Northern Iowa

College of Education White Paper: (#2 – on Closing the Achievement Gap – Parental Involvement)

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Studies in closing the achievement gap in our public schools usually find that where great strides are taking place, there isn't one component for this success, but a menu of applications working in harmony to achieve success. One of these critical components is increased parental involvement. One of the leading researchers and authorities on this topic is Karen Mapp, lecturer on education and director of the education policy and management program at Harvard University.

Mapp's findings on developing "Home-School Partnerships" indicate a "positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and the benefits for student learning -- including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds and for students of all ages."

There must be a commitment on the part of the school district to adopt new ways to help parents become involved in the educational world of their children. Mapp's program is well articulated and when faculty and staff are given professional development, parental involvement increases. Becoming involved in the traditional "home room moms and dads" isn't possible for many of today's parents. Mapp explains, "Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher student achievement. Family involvement at home appears to have the greatest affect on student achievement."

(http://www.wastatepta.org/notes_highlights.pdf)

The key to helping this take place at home is the teacher's commitment to communicating with parents about how teachers, parents, and students can form a "team" that supports student achievement. Home visits become a powerful tool for teachers with appropriate training in the art of home visits. Mapp says, "When teachers know parents they get better behavior from students." (http://www.wastatepta.org/notes_highlights.pdf) This becomes a very powerful team to help increase student achievement.

Establishing training for teachers in the art of home visits is essential. There will be some resistance to the training--this is not uncommon. In my last urban superintendent assignment, we made the parental involvement training mandatory as part of the district goals and we made home visits required. There was pushback from teachers, but since we made these visits during the school day, faculty couldn't refuse. Some teachers used evenings and we traded time accordingly.

Here is an account of a teacher who had insisted she wouldn't make home visits and that we couldn't make her. After the principal offered to accompany her, the teacher reluctantly agreed.

Her first visit went very well and the teacher wrote in her required reflection, "This went very well. (The student) really appreciated me being there and we set up some goals for the next three

weeks.” After her next visit to another family, she reflected, “Very poor family and I had to bring with me our translator as mom could not speak English. I became relaxed once I was there and really saw how happy they all were that I came and was interested. I cried all the way home because it was such a good time for all of us.”

Since the initial visits, this teacher has visited all 25 students in her class at their homes, places of employment, or other locations requested by families. Her students are achieving at levels she never thought possible. While most of her parents are unable to come to school, they communicate every week and are helping their children at home.

Mapp agrees, “Family involvement has a protective effect. The more families can support their children’s progress, the better their children do in school and the longer they stay in school.” (http://www.wastatepta.org/notes_highlights.pdf) So clearly the role of parental involvement has a critical place on our school menu for closing the achievement gap. There are many programs and ideas in our schools to increase the role of parents in our schools. School boards, administrators, faculty and staff must all support efforts to increase parental involvement.

The next white paper in this series will add “engaged instruction” to our school menu to help close the achievement gap.

(Note to reader: For more information about Mapp and her biography, visit her Web site at http://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty_research/profiles/profile.shtml?vperson_id=36.)