

**Family-School Communication**

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### **Executive Summary**

This paper reviews research on home-school communication for the purpose of identifying specific steps the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools might take to 1) increase the effectiveness of family-school communication, and 2) realize the benefits of increased family involvement for students' educational outcomes.

The paper focuses first on the *benefits* of effective family-school communication, including:

- gains in student achievement;
- improvements in student behaviors that lead to achievement;
- increases in parent satisfaction with the quality of children's schooling; and
- increased parental support for teachers and schools' educational goals.

*Barriers* to families' and schools' effective communication are also identified. Barriers that often interfere with *families'* abilities to engage in effective communication include:

- issues related to family status (e.g., limited educational attainment),
- pragmatic concerns (e.g., inflexible parental work schedules) and
- psychological obstacles (e.g., negative memories of personal school experiences).

Barriers that often interfere with *schools'* abilities to engage in effective family-school communication include:

- low levels of system-wide support for improving communications, and
- limited teacher, principal, or system knowledge of alternative strategies to increase (and increase the effectiveness of) family-school communication.

Drawing on research about best practices for overcoming these barriers, recommendations for school action to increase the effectiveness of communication practices are targeted toward two goals: developing *schools* as places where family involvement is welcome and well-supported, and helping *families* become more effective in supporting student learning. Specific suggestions for *schools* include:

- improving school climate for family involvement;
- instituting systematic, dynamic in-service programs focused on effective approaches to improving family-school communication; and
- developing strong in-school support for effective communication between families and school.

Suggestions for strategies to help *families* become more effective in their support for student learning

include developing and offering:

- a full range of opportunities for family involvement;
- specific information about the benefits of increased family involvement to student learning; and
- frequent communications that include clear, specific suggestions for family support of student learning at home.

The paper concludes with the observation that concerted, system-wide and school-based efforts to examine, adopt, and evaluate specific strategies for improving family-school communication promise significant contributions to student learning, family involvement, and school effectiveness.

**Family-School Communication  
for Involving Families in Children's Education**

Family involvement in children's education has been related to better school outcomes for students from pre-school through the high school years. In this paper, we focus on one aspect of family involvement, family-school communication. Guided by the assumption that the purpose of family-school communication is to engage family support for students' school learning, we review the benefits of family-school communication, typical forms of family-school communication, and relatively common barriers to effective family-school communication. We conclude with recommendations for specific actions Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools might take to increase the incidence and effectiveness of communications between schools and students' families.

The paper is organized in four sections around the following questions:

- What benefits are associated with effective family-school communication?
- What approaches to family-school communication have schools developed and implemented in order to involve families?
- What barriers interfere with the development and effectiveness of family-school communication?
- What specific steps might Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools take to increase the effectiveness of family-school communication and realize the benefits associated with family involvement in children's education?

**What benefits are associated with effective family-school communication?**

It is widely recognized that effective family-school communication and related family involvement in education contribute to improved student achievement and better learning outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Less well recognized, however, is the important finding that the relationship between family

involvement and student achievement rests on students' development of several attributes and characteristics that lead to achievement. *Family involvement, in fact, may have its most important effects in supporting a set of student beliefs and behaviors that contribute significantly to achievement, among them:*

- more positive attitudes about schooling;
- greater time spent on learning tasks;
- increased attention to and persistence in completing schoolwork; and
- an enhanced sense of personal responsibility for school learning outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

Effective family-school communication and family involvement have also been related to improved student behavior at school, which itself contributes to improved student achievement.<sup>3</sup>

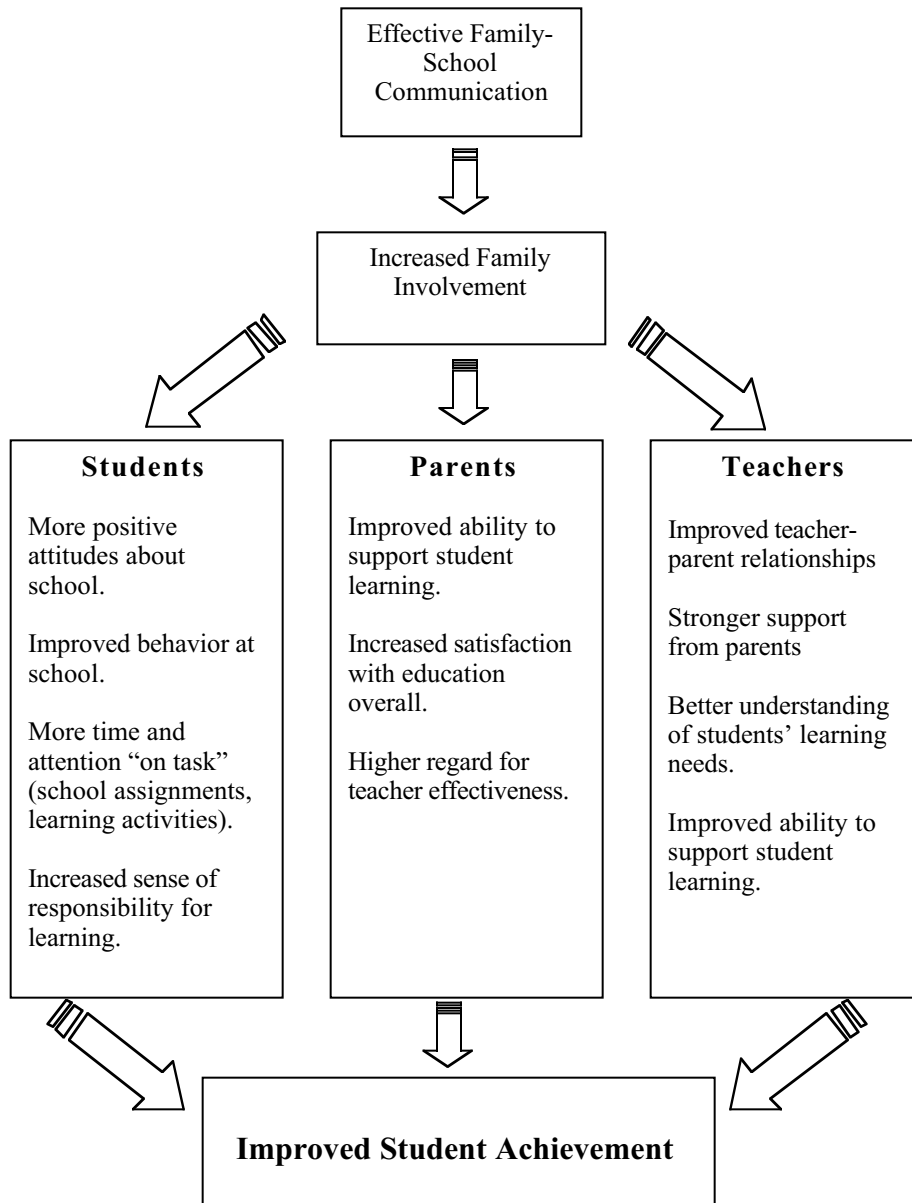
Parents, too, benefit from effective family-school communication. Studies show that parental involvement (at home *and* school) is increased when parents believe that teachers try to keep them informed, value their contributions, and offer specific suggestions for helping their children learn.<sup>4</sup> When they are successfully involved, parents develop stronger perceptions of their own success with their children.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when they believe that schools welcome their involvement, empower them to participate, and offer strategies for helping with student learning, parents feel more satisfied with the quality of their children's education (specific strategies for inviting parental involvement are included in the Recommendations section of the paper).<sup>6</sup>

Parental satisfaction, in turn, creates many benefits for teachers. For example, teachers who practice effective communication with families report improved parent-teacher relationships and stronger parental support; they are also perceived by parents and by principals as having stronger

teaching abilities than teachers who communicate less effectively.<sup>7</sup> These perceptions likely stem from the fact that effective family-school communication increases teachers' knowledge of students' learning needs and enables parents to offer appropriate home support for students' school learning.<sup>8</sup> In other words, *effective family-school communication strengthens the 'match' between home and school expectations for student learning, and clarifies the roles that each may play in supporting student achievement.*<sup>9</sup>

In sum, strong and positive family-school communication enables all parties – teachers, parents and students – to gain a shared understanding of school goals, individual student learning needs and strengths, and effective home support strategies for students' school achievement. A summary of these benefits is presented in Figure 1. In the next section, we describe forms of family-school communication that schools have typically used to inform and involve families.

**Figure 1. Benefits of Effective Family-School Communication for Students, Parents, and Teachers**



**What approaches to family-school communication have schools developed and implemented in order to involve families?**

Family-school communication practices range broadly from formal to more informal (see Figure 2 for examples). Epstein’s typology of family-involvement,<sup>10</sup> arguably the most influential in

**Figure 2: Examples of formal and informal family-school communication**

FORMAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES	INFORMAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal statements about school policy, student achievement and progress</li> <li>• Formal programs and meetings at school to orient parents to school programs.</li> <li>• Parent education programs and workshops</li> <li>• Formal meetings and conferences regarding student progress, behavioral or learning needs</li> <li>• Information about homework, including: calendars/assignment sheets, requests to sign homework; related information accessible by voicemail and email</li> <li>• Information about intervention or experimental programs, and related requests of parents and students</li> <li>• School, classroom, student newsletters</li> <li>• Notes or letters from teachers and parents, giving or requesting information, requesting conferences, attendance at school events, volunteers to work at school, specific parental help at home.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom drop-in visits by parents.</li> <li>• Brief conversations and exchanges during school programs or events, initiated by teacher or parent.</li> <li>• Phone calls, initiated by teacher or parent.</li> <li>• Spontaneous exchanges of notes between parents and teachers (via paper or e-mail).</li> <li>• Informal home visits</li> </ul>

educators’ and policy-makers’ thinking about family involvement, describes six levels of family-school interactions:

1. Basic obligations of families (e.g., providing for children’s health and safety);
2. Basic obligations of schools (e.g., communication about school requirements and child progress);



3. Involvement of parents at school (e.g., attendance at programs, volunteering);
4. Parent involvement in learning activities at home (e.g., helping with homework);
5. Involvement in decision-making (e.g., PTA/PTO, school advisory councils); and
6. Collaboration with community organizations on behalf of the school (e.g., businesses, community agencies, grass-roots consortia).

We agree with Epstein and others<sup>11</sup> that involvement activities at *all* of these levels are potentially important components of productive family-school communications and relationships. Because each type of parental involvement has the potential to exert considerable positive influence on students' learning outcomes, an optimally effective program of family-school communication should offer parents and teachers multiple options for family involvement.

Although communication often implies interaction and reciprocity, much family-school communication may be characterized primarily as one-way.<sup>12</sup> For example, most approaches to family-school communication convey information about school programs, information about student learning or behavior, or expectations and suggestions related to parents' involvement. These approaches involve schools communicating *to*, rather than *with*, parents. While one-way communication is often appropriate and helpful in relaying important information, it does not provide for *exchange* of ideas and information between families and schools about student progress, needs, and learning – exchange crucial to benefiting student achievement.

Given the critical role of family-school communication in developing the shared beliefs and behaviors that underlie families' and schools' successful contributions to student school outcomes, it is puzzling that family-school communication is often limited to more formal approaches and a one-

way flow of information. It is particularly so given that both of these qualities (formal, one-way) sometimes cause schools and families to give up on communicating well. In the next section, we describe the barriers that often interfere with teachers' and families' efforts to communicate productively.

### **What barriers interfere with the development and effectiveness of family-school communication?**

Despite the demonstrated benefits of productive family-school interactions, many families and educators encounter significant barriers to effective communication.<sup>13</sup> These barriers are often related to circumstances of parents' lives (practical or psychological barriers in families) and to schools' involvement practices (institutional barriers). In the sections that follow, we describe typical barriers faced by families and teachers.

#### Family barriers to effective family-school communication and involvement

For many families, barriers to effective family-school communication and involvement may emerge from the hardships imposed by low income, poverty, and limited educational attainment. These hardships often leave families feeling inadequately prepared to interact effectively with schools or to offer effective home-based support for student learning activities.<sup>14</sup> In addition, parents may confront *pragmatic* difficulties (e.g., responsibility for child or elder care, inadequate access to transportation, inflexible work schedules) that limit their availability for school-based interaction.<sup>15</sup>

Parents may also experience *psychological* barriers to involvement: unpleasant personal school history, memories of poor achievement or poor treatment at school, and personal battles with poor physical or mental health may leave parents feeling intimidated by school authority and poorly

equipped to participate effectively.<sup>16</sup> Families may also experience barriers related to real or perceived differences in home and school expectations for student, parent, and teacher behavior. These *cultural* barriers may emerge in language differences unaddressed by community or school support services; they may emerge also from limited understanding of schools' values and practices – and schools' limited understanding of families' values and practices.<sup>17</sup>

#### School-based barriers to family-school communication and involvement

Like parents, teachers may contend with *pragmatic*, *psychological*, and *cultural* barriers to effective family-school communication and family involvement practices. Although there is evidence that many teachers strongly endorse the importance of family-school communication and parental involvement, these barriers may constrain teachers' ability to enact the family-school communications needed to encourage and support effective parental involvement.<sup>18</sup> Real efforts to communicate with parents – e.g., developing plans for parent involvement in homework; setting parent-teacher conferences for evening or week-end hours; attending Friday evening potluck suppers at school, etc. – take time to plan, execute, and evaluate. Low levels of school support for such communication and involvement efforts (e.g., minimal support from colleagues; a principal who does not notice or understand critical elements of family-school relationships) can discourage teachers from investing this extra time.<sup>19</sup>

Even teachers who perceive parents as potentially powerful allies in supporting student learning may avoid involving parents because of their own personal, psychological, and cultural barriers. These may include lack of confidence in personal teaching ability or ability to work with parents, fear of being criticized by parents, or lack of knowledge about strategies that teachers and

schools might offer parents for more effective involvement.<sup>20</sup> Further, if they receive little feedback on their efforts, teachers may wonder if the communications they do have with parents are understood or well used.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of positive feedback about the usefulness of their efforts, teachers may give up on reaching out to families.<sup>22</sup>

### The consequences of barriers to family-school communication

In the absence of regular or reasonably positive parent-teacher communication, interactions between teachers and parents may emerge primarily in situations motivated by dissatisfaction, frustration, mistrust, or anger from one or both parties. Rather than creating family-school partnerships, interactions under these circumstances may serve to create separation and distance as parents and teachers struggle in their own ways to help children learn.

Dismantling these barriers to effective family-school communication requires understanding their origins. Considerable literature suggests that barriers arise from two primary sources: 1) those that are beyond school control (e.g., poverty, parents' education level, parents' health), and 2) those that stem from variables that the school *can* address (e.g., parents' feelings of intimidation or exclusion from the school, parents' perceptions that their involvement won't make a difference, teachers' beliefs that they can't be effective with parents, miscommunications due to language or unaddressed cultural differences).<sup>23</sup> Given that many aspects of parents' lives are clearly beyond school control, it seems essential that schools focus on identifying and addressing variables within their control, creating family-school communication that is inviting to parents and supports teachers. In the next section, we suggest specific steps Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools might take to improve family-school communication and family involvement.

**What specific steps might Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools take to increase the effectiveness of family-school communication and realize the benefits associated with family involvement in children's education?**

The audit of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools by MGT of America<sup>24</sup> noted that teachers and principals judged parents' school participation and efforts to help children as "fair to poor." Unfortunately, sources of the respondents' perceptions were not specified. They may have emerged from beliefs that schools have tried repeatedly – with adequate resources and creative effort – to engage parents, only to fail. They may also have emerged from minimal or poorly targeted school efforts characterized by a lack of resources, poor staffing, or tools for improving family-school communications.

As the school system works to improve family-school communication and family involvement, *understanding the causes of currently 'poor to fair' parental involvement is critical.* If serious efforts to involve parents have been unsuccessful, schools might need to focus renewed energy on addressing family barriers within the range of school (or school system) influence, for example: timing and location of communication and involvement activities; effectiveness of methods used to communicate; adequacy and appropriateness of involvement options offered. On the other hand, if schools have attended well to these issues only to experience 'fair to poor' parental response, they may need to address the possibility that parents' lack of engagement is grounded in parental beliefs that interfere with involvement (e.g., parents believe that: they're unable to help their children; their involvement doesn't really matter; they don't know how to help). The latter causes would suggest that schools should increase communications underscoring the importance of parents' roles in supporting student learning, offer reasonable ideas for home-based activities, and build parents' understanding of the achievement-

related outcomes their involvement is likely to influence.

We offer below a set of best practices for improving family-school communication in two broad categories. One is focused on *steps that schools may take to make themselves* more welcoming, prepared, and equipped to support strong family-school communication and family involvement in students' education. The other (which assumes that schools have addressed within-school factors that create barriers to effective communication and involvement) is focused on *steps schools may take to help parents* become increasingly capable of, committed to, and effective in supporting student learning. These best practices are summarized in Figure 3, and elaborated in the pages that follow.

**Figure 3. Summary of Best Practices to Improve Family-school Communication**

<p><b><i>What Specific Steps Might Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Take?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Best Practices To Help Schools Improve Family-school Communication</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improve school climate to include open, inviting opportunities and structures, for parents' engagement in family-school communications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop overtly welcoming practices that respect and build on family culture and strengths.</li> <li>• Use existing parent-teacher structures to enhance involvement.</li> <li>• Make use of after-school programs to increase family-school communications.</li> <li>• Make use of student-centered events, drawing parent participation as an opportunity to enhance family-school communication.</li> <li>• Ask teachers to write and share communication practices and ideas in the school office.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Provide in-service training for family-school communication and parental involvement</li> <li>3. Develop in-school resources to support interactive family-school communications and the development of trust (e.g., dedicate a staff position, designate a parent resource area, build time and support for teacher-parent conversations, home visits, etc.).</li> </ol> <p><b><i>Best Practices to Help Parents Become More Effectively Involved</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Offer a full range of involvement opportunities (standard approaches and new traditions); advertise them clearly, attractively and repeatedly.</li> <li>2. Emphasize that <i>many</i> family activities at school <i>and</i> at home are important to student learning. Describe the specific achievement-related outcomes that parental involvement influences.</li> <li>3. Offer clear and specific suggestions for parent support of learning at home, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe how parent involvement is related to student learning goals.</li> <li>• Offer specific suggestions for parents' involvement, focused particularly on time- or task-limited activities (e.g., "read together 10 minutes, 3 times per week").</li> <li>• Develop homework and school-related tasks that involve students asking for their parents' help or listening.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
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Best practices to help *schools* develop more effective family-school communication and family involvement opportunities

Developing schools as places where *family involvement is clearly welcome* is essential if Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools are to create family involvement options that are satisfying to families and teachers, and enable more effective family support for student learning. We believe that the most important strategy in this area begins by equipping teachers to offer more effective family-

school communication. Thus, we describe three recommendations in this section that support teachers' efforts with families as schools work toward improving parents' effective involvement in students' education.

1. Improve school climate to include inviting opportunities and structures for parents' engagement in family-school communications

Our first recommendation requires little money. As noted well in the MGT<sup>25</sup> report, the 'invitingness' of a school (conveyed in the building, in outreach to parents and community, in communications with families) has a significant impact on parent and teacher behaviors related to family-school communication and family support of student learning. Concrete strategies to improve climate include:

*A. Develop overtly welcoming practices that respect and build on family culture and strengths.* Several investigators' findings have underscored the critical role of school respect for family experience and knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Specific and often simple school actions (e.g., displaying pictures, artifacts, and history from varied cultures served by the school; emphasizing overtly friendly and welcoming greetings from staff members) often convey clearly to families: "This is *our* school; *we* – teachers, students, and parents – belong here."

*B. Use existing parent-teacher structures to enhance involvement.* Although designed to unite home, school, and community – and often a very positive force in family-school communications – PTAs have sometimes been found to be hierarchical, exclusive rather than inclusive, and somewhat removed from both community values and the goals of empowering all families as effective participants in children's schooling.<sup>27</sup> Working consistently with parent leadership, actively inviting all school



families to participate, monitoring to ensure open access and varied, appropriate activities may increase these organizations' effectiveness as a force for positive family-school communications in many schools. With active school support and appropriate training, some parent leaders might be asked to help cover classes for brief periods of time so that teachers can respond to immediate (or 'walk-in') requests from parents.

*C. Use after-school programs to increase family-school communications.* After-school program staff members often interact with children about homework and have regular opportunities to talk with parents about children's social and academic development.<sup>28</sup> Given findings that most parents who work 40 hours per week or more feel that they do not spend enough time with their children,<sup>29</sup> schools might do well to acknowledge after-school programs as an important link between school and home. For example, rather than treating after-school program staff as separate from school staff, schools might consider including after-school staff in teacher professional development, faculty meetings, and important in-house communication in the interest of expanded and increasingly effective family-school communication.

*D. Make use of student-centered events drawing parent participation as an opportunity to enhance family-school communication.* Relevant at the elementary level, this recommendation may be particularly pertinent for families in middle schools and high schools, where extracurricular activities often offer a 'natural' extra incentive for parental presence at the school. Several specific steps may enhance family-school connections during these events, for example: encouraging teachers, principal, and other school staff members to attend and circulate at such events; handing out brief but attractively formatted information on the important effects of parents' support for student learning; offering

similarly attractive suggestions for *how* parents can support student learning at various developmental levels.

*E. Ask teachers to write and file family-school communication practices and ideas in the school office or other teacher resource area.* Making family-school communication plans and practices part of the common school culture invites conversation about what practices work well within a school and raises awareness of family-school communication. Such ‘public’ record-keeping may also help schools develop a resource bank for supporting new teachers’ skills and capacities for effective family-school communication. (Interestingly, schools that have mandated filing of family-school communication plans and documents have also reported increased teacher interest in maintaining relatively high levels of communication even after the mandate’s expiration.<sup>30</sup>) Developing school-wide plans and goals for home-school communication practices may include other specific practices as well (e.g., plans for targeted frequency of communication with each family, periodic use of ‘quick notes’ between school and family). If and as schools offer increased attention and support for the development of teacher and parent home-school communication skills, teachers and principals may consider home-school communication an area for routine formative evaluation and continuous development.

## 2. Provide in-service training for family-school communication and parental involvement

School and teacher invitations to parental involvement are critical to parents’ involvement decisions. Given effective family-school communications and invitations, parents from very diverse circumstances can become productively engaged in their children’s schooling.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, teachers are often quite *unprepared* by professional pre-service or in-service training for effective family-school communication.<sup>32</sup> Our second recommendation, thus, is to give teachers the tools they need to involve

parents and families more effectively in students' education.

Specifically, we recommend that Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools support a systematic, dynamic annual program of in-service education for teachers focused on developing promising approaches to increasingly effective family-school communication.<sup>33</sup> Principles in the teacher education literature suggest that such in-service programs should:

- create opportunities for teachers to collaborate with and learn from colleagues;
- emphasize teachers' *active* learning and practice of approaches;
- offer parents' perspectives and views on effective and valued approaches to home-school communication;
- allow significant tailoring of program content and activities to the specific history, interests, family cultures, and goals of each participating school group;
- be followed by opportunities for school staff reflection, evaluation, and revision of communication practices as suggested by evaluation results.<sup>34</sup>

The professional development program should compensate participating teachers reasonably (i.e., it should not be simply added into an already full set of demands), and the program's focus on family-school communication should be treated as an on-going, integral part of school functioning during the year.

It should be noted that principals' preparation, too, may include scant focus on the specific leadership skills necessary for creating the structures, opportunities, and supports for teachers and parents that are critical to many effective home-school communication efforts. We recommend that the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools' also support a focused, systematic and dynamic annual program of principal leadership for effective home-school communication.

### 3. Develop in-school resources to support interactive family-school communication and trust

Our third recommendation is that Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools provide school based resources that further support teacher' and schools' family-school communication efforts. Such resources may include:

- The designation of a parent resource area (e.g., a room, section of the library, etc.), where parents may wait comfortably, talk with other parents or staff members, share ideas, and check out resources that support learning activities at home.
- Regular parent gatherings at school, focused on both social interaction and the sharing of information and suggestions regarding parent support for student learning.
- The installation of telephones and voice-mail in classrooms to allow for quick check-ins between teachers and parents; with sufficient computer access, email may also be used in many schools to increase opportunities for interactive communication. (Many teachers, parents, and students make use of informal evening time for routine as well as urgent and emergency phone calls. While effective home-school communication is often well-served by teachers' and parents' willing acceptance of such calls, adoption of the strategy recommended here would allow more time and opportunity for routine and effective communication.)
- The development of time and support for teacher home visits (e.g., classroom-released time for teacher home visits, compensation for evening or weekend visits).
- The development of advisory and related structures in middle and high schools that support the development of *individual* relationships between small groups of students in the school and specific teachers. These structures should focus at least in part on fostering increasingly effective and informative communication among school, home, and students.
- An additional staff member to serve as a school-community liaison worker. We realize that the expense of supporting such a school position may be difficult in the short run (e.g., current budgetary commitments may preclude immediate or even 'near future' support of such a resource). Nonetheless, the improvement of family-school communication, as well improvements in the incidence and effectiveness of parental involvement, is quite likely to require support personnel, just as serious attention to improving student achievement in given academic areas often also requires support personnel. Planning for such positions might begin in the development of parent-

teacher-community volunteer efforts, but the long-term viability of support for parents' and teachers' effective home-school communication is quite likely to require explicit school staff attention.

- A 'floating' staff member to cover teachers' classrooms for specific periods (e.g., afford teachers time for impromptu conferences when parents come in with questions that require more than a quick exchange; time for parent phone calls, preparation of class newsletters, informal conferences, home visits). Financial concerns may preclude immediate or short-term implementation of this recommendation as well. The importance of this function seems critical, however, particularly in schools serving families where many parents work in jobs that may not permit advance scheduling of communication time during the working day.

Whatever the forms chosen, *resource allocation should focus on helping teachers develop relationships with parents that are characterized by exchange of information and perspectives, mutual respect, and trust.* Trust in particular has been identified by several researchers as critical to positive and productive family-school relationships;<sup>35</sup> for example, parents who report lower levels of trust in teachers also often report less positive attitudes about involvement and fewer involvement activities.<sup>36</sup> Critically important in these results is the finding that *trust can be increased through more frequent communication, increased focus on 'listening' to and respecting parents, and increased development and use of specific suggestions for parent support of student learning at home.*<sup>37</sup> Importantly, parent perceptions of family-school interactions (a variable subject to school and teacher influence) have been identified as better predictors of parental trust in school and teachers than either parental income or parental education.<sup>38</sup>

In this section, we have outlined steps that schools can take to better equip *themselves* for more effective family-school communication and more successful invitations to family involvement.

In the next section, we address steps schools may take to *help parents* become increasingly capable

of, committed to, and effective in supporting student learning.

Best practices to help *parents* become more effective  
in supporting student learning at home

Families are more likely to respond to family-school communications and become involved in supporting student learning when options for involvement fit each family’s needs, strengths, and constraints. Families are also more likely to become involved when family-school communications focus on clear ideas about *what parents can do to help* their children succeed in school<sup>39</sup> and *what student outcomes parental involvement is likely to influence*.<sup>40</sup> Recommendations in this section thus focus on strategies for school-initiated efforts to increase families’ abilities to support student learning.

1. Offer a full range of involvement opportunities

Our first recommendation is that schools offer a full range of home-based and school-based involvement opportunities. (This seems particularly important in light of the MGT report that principal work plans in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools have tended to address parents primarily as ‘audience’ or ‘school-program supporters.’<sup>41</sup>) Standard approaches (e.g., open house, scheduled parent-teacher conferences, progress reports) should be included, as should efforts involving systematic trials of new initiatives and concerted efforts to begin the creation of new ‘traditions’ that expand the role of families to include home tutor, co-learning, advocate, and decision-maker. Such activities might include the following, some of which are already well in place in some Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools:

- Coordination with broad community efforts to support “First Day”/parents-in-the-schools activities (e.g., offering parents: ‘observation seats’ in classrooms, opportunities to ask questions, refreshments, descriptions of involvement opportunities through video presentations, brochures to take home, follow-up phone calls and notes);

- A full day of opportunities for informal visits to school during the week before the new school year begins (with child care, refreshments, opportunities to talk with the child's new teacher[s] and explore the school);
- Written messages to parents about home-based and school-based involvement opportunities, highlighting specific benefits of parental activities to student learning, followed up by phone messages on options chosen, opportunities for answering parent questions, etc.;
- Coordination of parents' in-school participation and at-home learning activities with media coverage (print, radio, TV);
- Explicit invitations to individual parents to visit the classroom on particular days or weeks.

The importance of parents' involvement at home *or* at school – and support for the variety of active support roles that parents may play in their children's education – should be consistent themes in family-school communication.<sup>42</sup>

2. Emphasize that many family activities at school *and at home* are important to student learning.

In many schools, parental involvement is assumed to center on those activities visible in the school (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the school, and attendance at special events). While school-based activities are very important components of a well-rounded program of family involvement<sup>43</sup>, these opportunities tend to be utilized more by parents who live near the school, have adequate transportation, and have jobs and family responsibilities that allow some degree of flexibility with time.

While parents' *school*-based activities have been found to vary with socioeconomic status, their *home*-based activities (e.g., supervision of homework, discussion of school-related activities, communications with the teacher) do not. Indeed, lower income families often report considerably more home-based involvement than may seem evident from their school-based efforts.<sup>44</sup>

Opportunities for helping children develop attributes leading to achievement are plentiful in the family setting. Crucially, *the parent involvement variable reported as most strongly related to student achievement is parents' at-home discussion of school-related activities.*<sup>45</sup>

### 3. Offer clear, specific, and inviting suggestions for parent support of learning at home

Communications about home-based activities are most effective when they:

- Tell families which student skills and achievement-related attitudes and behaviors they may influence through their involvement: for example, more positive attitudes about school, increased time on homework, greater persistence in learning tasks, improved knowledge and use of effective learning strategies, stronger beliefs that effort is important to learning success;
- Offer specific, time-limited suggestions for involvement (e.g., “Read together for 10 minutes three nights this week;” “Go over two of the problems in tonight’s homework sheet together;” such suggestions might also include routine mention of more general sources of help with homework, e.g., Homework Hotline);<sup>46</sup>
- Model respect for family culture and language,<sup>47</sup> express appreciation for parents’ efforts, underscore that many different family activities may play an important role in students’ educational success; and
- Engage students in inviting parents’ involvement, as students themselves are often powerful inducements to parents’ activities related to children’s education; for example, homework and school-related tasks may involve students’ asking parents to listen to them read, offer their opinion or perspective, help them review for a test, etc..<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

We know that effective family-school communication and family involvement contribute significantly to student learning. We also know that circumstances in schools and in families’ lives often create barriers to communication that interfere with school and family efforts to support student achievement. Fortunately, we know, too, that some of these barriers can be reduced or eliminated by



thoughtful, well-supported family-school communication and creative efforts to engage parents' support of students' school achievement.

Several provisos are important in reviewing, choosing, adapting and creating specific family-school communication strategies for implementation. First, the needs and preferences of families vary widely across the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools; thus, different schools may well need to enact different sets of strategies, targeted to the needs of parents, students, and teachers comprising each school community. Second, teachers, principals, and parents of a given school are often in the best position to adapt and craft strategies that will be specifically useful to the school and the community it serves. Third, the usefulness of specific strategies is likely to vary across student populations that differ in age and developmental level; these variables, too, need to be taken into account as schools adopt, adapt, and create strategies for achieving more effective family-school communication.

Finally, it is important to understand that issues in family-school communication will likely be addressed most effectively by taking "one step at a time." Improving family-school communication is a *process* that involves:

- identifying barriers that need to be tackled;
- identifying the strategies most appropriate for addressing these barriers;
- implementing identified strategies;
- setting up processes for evaluating the success of new strategies;
- modifying strategies according to feedback; and
- pausing to celebrate success.

Achieving the goal of effective family support for student learning often requires a long-term commitment to changing deeply-held perceptions and habits that interfere with optimally effective family-school communication. Concerted system-wide and school-based efforts to examine, adopt, and

adapt some of the recommendations above – re-vitalizing or creating new family-school communication efforts and traditions within schools – should position the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools to create significant, positive improvements in family support of student learning.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Clark, 1983; Comer, 1988, 1992; Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Taylor & Machida, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Ames, 1993; Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye & Greathouse, 1998; Fehrman, Keith, & Reimers, 1987; Frome & Eccles, 1998; Forgatch & Ramsey, 1994; Glassgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001; Hutsinger, Jose, & Larson, 1998; Leone & Richards, 1989; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989; Xu & Corno, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Leach & Tan, 1996; Sanders, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burow, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Griffith, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Bruneau, Ruttan, & Dunlap, 1995; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000; Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995; Hansen, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Hansen, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> e.g., 1986, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> MGT of America, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Piotrkowski, & Parker, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1986; Moles, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, 1997a, 1997b; Fantuzzo, et al., 2000; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Gavin & Greenfield, 1998; Moles, 1993; Pena, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, 1997a, 1997b; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Gavin & Greenfield, 1998; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Pena, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Baker, 1997a; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Gavin & Greenfield, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, in press; Moles, 1993; Pena, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Bermudez, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Moles, 1993; Pena, 2000; Yao, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Hoover-Dempsey, et al., in press; cf. MGT of America, 2001

<sup>19</sup> Bruneau, et al., 1995; Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., in press.

<sup>21</sup> Baker 1997b; Bruneau, et al., 1995; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Davies, 1993; Pena, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Baker, 1997a; Baker, et al., 1999; Moles, 1993; Pena, 2000; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, 1997b; Bruneau, et al., 1995; Pena, 2000; Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi, & Cumblad, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> MGT of America, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> MGT of America, 2001; see also Griffith, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Baker, 1997a; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990.

<sup>27</sup> Radd, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Afterschool Alliance, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Chrispeels, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Balli, et al., 1998; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1986; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Harry, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Krasnow, 1990; Pratt, et al., 1992; Shumow, 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Chavkin & Williams, 1988; deAcosta, 1996; Evans-Schilling, 1999; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., in press; Jones & Blendinger, 1994; Morris, Taylor, Knight, & Wasson, 1996; Pang & Watkins, 2000; Tichenor, 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Models of such programs are included in several of the sources cited immediately above; see also Baker, 1997b.

<sup>34</sup> Chester & Beaudin, 1996; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Leach & Conto, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> Adams & Christenson, 2000; Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette & Hamby, 1992; Finders & Lewis, 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Adams & Christenson, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Adams & Christenson, 2000; Ames, deStefano, Watkins, & Sheldon, 1995; Chrsipeels, 1996; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Adams & Christenson, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1995.

<sup>40</sup> Balli, et al., 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2001; Shumow, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> MGT of America, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Baker, 1997a; finders & Lewis, 1994; Henderson, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Comer, 1988, 1992.

<sup>44</sup> Baker, et al., 1999; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1992

<sup>45</sup> Siu-Chu & Willms, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Finders & Lewis, 1994; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., in press; Leach & Tan, 1996; Pena, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Moles, 1993; Pena, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> Balli, et al., 1998; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997.