

**DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING
RESEARCH-BASED PROGRAMS OF
SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:
Summary of Five Years of NNPS Research**

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Researchers associated with National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) conducted studies over the past five years that add information on how to improve partnership program development and how family and community involvement contribute to student achievement and other indicators of success in school. Many of the studies are based on annual *UPDATE* surveys that are required from all members of NNPS. Other studies are based on NNPS *Focus on Results* studies and on national data sets. NNPS uses research results to develop practical tools, materials, and guidelines for schools and school districts. Presently, over 1000 schools, 100 districts, and 17 state departments of education are working with NNPS to use research-based approaches to establish and strengthen their programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

1. PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS of Effective Programs of School, Family, and Community Partnerships

A series of studies of schools and school districts identified the importance of 8 “essential elements” for effective leadership and programs of school, family, and community partnerships. These include: *leadership, teamwork, action plans, implementation of plans, funding, collegial support, evaluation, and networking* (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2002). Districts and schools that organized programs with these components had higher-quality programs, greater outreach to parents, and more parents involved from one year to the next (Epstein, 2005b).

SCHOOL LEVEL. Data from schools in NNPS indicated that on-going technical assistance on partnerships helped schools improve the number and quality of actions taken to organize their programs of family and community involvement from one year to the next, regardless of the quality of their programs in the prior school year. When schools established Action Teams for Partnerships and used helpful tools and materials, the teams were more likely to form committees, write plans, adjust for changes in principals, reach out to more families, evaluate their efforts, and sustain their programs over time (Sheldon, 2005).

By taking these actions, schools addressed more challenges to reach “hard-to-reach” families (Sheldon, 2003) and improved the scope and quality of their programs of family and community involvement from year to year on several types of involvement and at all school levels – elementary, middle, and high (Epstein, 2001, 2005a; Sanders, 1999, 2001, in press; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Sanders & Lewis, 2005; Sanders & Simon, 2002; Sheldon, in press; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, in press).

DISTRICT LEVEL. Data from school districts in NNPS revealed that three factors affected district leadership and district leaders’ impact on school programs: (1) years of experience and time on partnerships; (2) use of NNPS planning and evaluation tools and technical assistance; and (3) the district leaders’ direct assistance to schools (Epstein, 2005c; Epstein & Williams, 2003; Epstein, Williams, & Jansorn, 2004; Epstein, Williams, & Lewis, 2002;). Specifically, district leaders for partnerships conducted significantly more activities if they had worked for more years on partnerships and had more exposure to and familiarity with tools, guidelines, and services to strengthen partnership programs.

More experienced district leaders were more likely to write annual district-level leadership plans, identify a budget, conduct training workshops for school teams and other colleagues, offer grants or other funding to schools, recognize excellence in school programs, help schools share best practices, and conduct other leadership actions. These district leaders visited with school teams, assisted teams more often, and helped schools conduct end-of-year evaluations to assess progress, and take other evaluative actions. Regardless of their starting points in the prior school year, district leaders who used NNPS tools and services for planning and evaluation increased district-level activities, facilitated their schools, helped schools address challenges to reach more families, and increased the overall quality of their programs (Epstein, 2005c).

2. RESULTS OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

Several studies were conducted on the impact of family involvement on student outcomes. Some studies used longitudinal data in the NELS surveys and followups. These studies showed that, through high school, family involvement contributed to positive results for students, including **higher achievement, better attendance, more course credits earned, more responsible preparation for class, and other indicators of success in school** (Catsambis, 2001; Simon, 2004). Using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses, Catsambis and Beveridge (2001) explored whether school, family, and community factors independently and significantly affected students' math achievement. **Analyses indicated that students in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty had lower math achievement test scores, but this effect was ameliorated by on-going parental involvement in high school.** NNPS studies at the high school level indicated that it is never too late to initiate programs of family and community involvement, as the benefits accrue through grade 12.

Several studies of student outcomes were conducted with NNPS schools. The "Focus on Results" studies showed that when educators communicated clearly with families on targeted content about **attendance**, schools' rates of average daily attendance increased and chronic absence decreased from one year to the next (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). These results were reinforced by another study using longitudinal data from Ohio, which showed that schools in NNPS improved attendance rates compared to a matched sample of schools that did not receive guidance on partnership program development (Sheldon, 2004).

NNPS studies also examined other results for students. When educators communicated effectively and involved family and community members in activities focused on **student behavior**, schools reported fewer disciplinary actions with students from one year to the next (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Similarly, the percentage of students attaining **math proficiency** increased from one year to the next in schools where educators implemented math homework that required parent-child interactions and offered math materials for families to take home (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005a). A review of literature on family involvement with students on **reading**, indicated that, across the grades, subject specific interventions to involve families in reading and related language arts, positively affected students' reading skills and scores (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005b).

Still other studies explored the effects of family involvement in **homework**, building on earlier work. Studies found significant results of subject-specific family involvement for students' science report card grades and homework completion (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Van Voorhis, 2003, 2004). The studies of homework and targeted outcomes reinforce the importance of well-designed, subject-specific or goal-linked activities for family and community involvement for strongest impact on student achievement and success in school.

A three-year study of the Partnership Schools Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Model (Epstein, in press) demonstrated that a Title I elementary school could organize this whole-school change model effectively. The school organized 5 action teams for reading, math, writing, behavior, and good partnerships. Longitudinal data showed that the CSR school improved its state achievement test scores in reading, writing, and math compared to matched schools in those subjects. The CSR school also closed its gap in test scores with the district as a whole, despite the fact that the district included several schools in more affluent neighborhoods with higher test scores in the base year. The school also improved student behavior and increased the number of families involved in students' education at school and at home.

Significance of the Findings

The Partnership Schools model is one of the few research-based approaches designed to help schools, districts, and state departments of education organize, implement, and sustain goal-linked programs of family and community involvement. The NNPS studies document the importance of understanding new ways to think about school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, in press). The research identifies “essential elements” for effective programs and specific processes and paths that strengthen (1) leadership for partnerships, (2) program plans, (3) outreach to involve more families, (4) responses of families and community partners, and (5) impact on student achievement and other indicators of success in school.

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NOTES

For a full review of recent literature, including studies by many scholars of school, family, and community partnerships, see Epstein & Sheldon, in press.

For research on preservice and inservice education, see Epstein, 2005b, and Epstein & Sanders, in press.

For articles written for teachers and administrators, see Epstein, et al., 2002 and:

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