

25 YEARS OF SCHOOL AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The Johns Hopkins-based National Network of Partnership Schools has helped more than 5,000 schools plan, implement, and continually improve family and community involvement, says its director, Joyce Epstein

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It may be hard to imagine now, but there was once serious debate about whether families or schools played a more important role in a student's education. Today, most agree that families and schools share that responsibility. One of the key proponents of that intellectual evolution is sociologist [Joyce Epstein](#), a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Education and founder of the [National Network of Partnership Schools](#), which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this fall.

Epstein began her research in the early 1980s, at a time when, as she recalls, academics across the country had spent over a decade arguing about the question. NNPS traces its roots to the famous *Coleman Report*, written in 1966 by Johns Hopkins sociologist James Coleman and his colleagues. Coleman conducted the first large, national study of the educational conditions in the U.S., and the equality of educational opportunities in schools for students with diverse backgrounds. Among its more provocative findings, the report revealed that the family had the most important role in a child's academic achievement, regardless of family background. In academia, this inspired debates, new studies, and many publications about whether the finding was true and how to better measure and understand the effects.

"It was, indeed, a social fact that when families are engaged in their children's education, regardless of background, their children do better in school," Epstein says. But that fact hides two unacceptable inequalities, she cautions: Not all families are welcomed by schools as partners in education, and as a result, not all children benefit from family support for education. "I thought researchers were asking the wrong question," Epstein says. "It wasn't a contest at all. Both home and school are crucial for student achievement and well-being, and they need to work together."

So, she changed the research question, asking instead, if families are so important to their children's education, how can all schools engage all families in ways that contribute to student success?

Starting in the early 1980s, Epstein and her colleagues planned a programmatic research agenda that devoted 15 years to exploring increasingly detailed connections between schools and families, and their influence on students' education. Epstein developed a theory of "overlapping spheres of influence" to explain the results of their studies. When she founded NNPS and the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships in 1996, enough research by many scholars confirmed that school, family, and community partnerships were components of good school organization, and promoted greater equity in education.

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Joyce Epstein
Director, NNPS

In 2000, Epstein was joined by [Steven Sheldon](#), an educational psychologist, to conduct research and help translate the theory and research results for use in practice. Sheldon, an associate professor at the [Johns Hopkins University School of Education](#), remains a key figure in the center and NNPS, and a champion of research, development, and dissemination on family and school engagement.

"The National Network of Partnership Schools is not just about applying research in practice," Sheldon says. "There also is a key feedback loop in which practice informs our research, fuels further studies, and helps us refine the tools and training that we provide to districts and schools." This reciprocal relationship—itsself something of a partnership-- creates a cycle of ongoing research and program improvement that has kept NNPS in the vanguard of this field of study.

Epstein and Sheldon's research and applications in practice continue to have a profound influence on policy and practice at the federal, state, district, and school levels in this and other countries. NNPS currently includes about 500 member schools and more than 90 districts and organizations that want to use evidence-based strategies to nurture welcoming schools, engage all families, and increase student success. Epstein estimates that over the course of its 25 years, NNPS has assisted more than 5,000 schools and several hundred districts and organizations to plan, implement, evaluate, and continually improve their partnership programs.

Today, hundreds of researchers around the world study the many nuances of school, family, and community conditions and connections, and the field continues to widen its net. NNPS remains a unique organization that provides professional development to guide practitioners in applying research-based strategies and tools in practice.

"NNPS began with this once-revolutionary, now *de facto*, notion that schools and families must work together to help students learn," Sheldon says. "The pervasiveness and the impact of that key idea in the world today owes much to the life-work of Joyce Epstein. Twenty-five years—and counting—of leading NNPS is a testament to that fact."

NNPS publishes a widely read handbook, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (Corwin Press, 2019), [now in its fourth edition](#). It produces an annual book, *Promising Partnership Practices*, in which members of the network share their best engagement activities with each other and the public.

"What good are research studies and confirmed results if they sit unused?" Epstein asks, rhetorically. "It is educators' professional responsibility—their job—to engage families as partners in their children's learning. And it is our mission to help them do it."

"As our dean, Chris Morphew, points out, research, development, and dissemination—RD&D—are important aspects of our work," says Epstein. "Our RD&D agenda has helped us identify the essential structures and processes for effective and equitable partnership programs. "Today, every district, and schools at all grade levels and in any community, can be confident that NNPS tools and guidelines will help them implement excellent programs of partnerships, engage all families, and increase positive results for students," she says. "That is what is most important to me."

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Joyce Epstein



Steve Sheldon