

Epstein, J. L. (2005). School, family, and community partnerships in the middle grades. Pp. 77-96 in T. O. Erb, (ed.). *This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

School, Family, and Community Partnerships in the Middle Grades

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This We Believe, the position paper of National Middle School Association, discusses 14 characteristics of responsive middle level schools. The beliefs set high expectations for good people, good places, and good programs in the middle grades. They are presented as important goals to improve the quality of life in schools and the quality of education for all young adolescents.

One characteristic of a responsive middle level school is “family and community partnerships.” A goal for good partnerships is on every list for school improvement, but few schools have implemented comprehensive partnership programs. This chapter addresses three questions to help middle level educators move from beliefs about the importance of family and community involvement to action:

- (a) What is a comprehensive, goal-oriented program of school, family, and community partnerships in the middle grades?
- (b) How does family and community involvement link with the other elements of an effective middle level school?
- (c) How can schools answer the call for action to develop and sustain productive partnership programs?

A Framework for a Comprehensive Program of Partnerships: Six Types of Involvement

For decades studies have shown that families are important for children’s learning, development, and school success across the grades. Research is accumulating that extends that social fact by showing that school programs of partnership are needed to help all families support their children’s education from preschool through high school (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Sanders & Simon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005a,b; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

Left on their own, few families continue as active partners in the middle grades. Still, most families want and need more information about early adolescence, middle level education, the school system, special programs that are available to their children, and other issues and

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options that affect students in the middle grades. Studies show that if middle level schools implement comprehensive and inclusive programs of partnership, then many more families respond, including those who would not become involved on their own.

What is a comprehensive program of partnerships? From many studies and activities with educators and families, I developed a framework of six types of involvement that helps schools establish full and productive programs of school-family-community partnerships (Epstein et al., 2002). This section summarizes the six major types of involvement with a few sample practices that are important in the middle grades. Also noted are some of the challenges that must be met in order to involve all families, and examples of the results that can be expected in the middle grades from each type of involvement if activities are well implemented.

Type 1 – Parenting

Type 1 activities help families understand young adolescent development, parenting skills for the age group, and setting home conditions to support learning at each grade level. Other Type 1 activities help schools obtain information from families so that educators understand families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for their children. Type 1 activities reinforce the fact that educators and parents share responsibility for students' learning and development through the middle grades, and help develop trust and mutual respect for each other's efforts in guiding student development.

Sample practices. Among Type 1 activities, middle level schools may conduct workshops for parents; provide short, clear summaries of important information on parenting; and organize opportunities for parents to exchange ideas on topics of young adolescent development including health, nutrition, discipline, guidance, peer pressure, preventing drug abuse, and planning for the future. Type 1 activities also provide parents with useful information on children's transitions to the middle grades and to high school, attendance policies, and other topics that are important for young adolescents' success in school. Middle schools may offer parent education classes, family support programs, family computer classes, family literacy programs, parent-to-parent panels, and other services for parents. To ensure family input, at the start of each school year or periodically, teachers and counselors may ask parents to share insights about their children's strengths, talents, interests, needs, and goals. See, for example, how Sunset (UT) Junior High School organized parenting classes (p. 84) and how Lowndes County (GA) Schools organized workshops at a "parent university" (p. 108) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2004.

Challenges. One challenge for successful Type 1 activities is to get information to parents who cannot come to meetings and workshops at the school building. This may be done with videos, tape recordings, summaries, newsletters, cable broadcasts, phone calls, computerized messages, school web sites, and other print and non-print communications. Another Type 1 challenge is to design procedures and opportunities that enable all families to share information about their children with teachers, counselors, and others.

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Expected results. If information flows to and from families about young adolescent development, parents should increase their confidence about parenting through the middle grades, students should be more aware of parents' continuing guidance, and teachers should better understand their students' families. For example, studies show that if practices are targeted to help families send their children to school on time, then student attendance should improve (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). If families are part of their children's transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school, more students should adjust well to their new schools, and more parents should remain involved across the grades (Seidman, Lambert, Allen, & Aber, 2003).

Type 2 – Communicating

Type 2 activities keep families informed about school programs and student progress with school-to-home and home-to-school communications such as notices, memos, conferences, report cards, newsletters, phone and computerized messages, the Internet, open houses, and other innovative communications. Schools tend to send a lot of information home, but 2-way channels of communication are needed in successful partnership programs.

Sample practices. Among many Type 2 activities, middle level schools may provide parents with clear information on each teacher's criteria for report card grades, how to interpret interim reports, and, as necessary, how to work with students to help them improve their grades. Type 2 activities include conferences for parents with teams of teachers, or parent-student-teacher conferences (Tuinsta & Hiatt-Michael, 2004) to ensure that students take personal responsibility for learning. Schools may organize class parents, block parents, or telephone trees for more effective communications and set up the equivalent of an educational welcome wagon for families who transfer to the school during the school year. Activities may be designed to improve school newsletters to include student work and recognitions, parent columns, important calendars, and parent response forms. See, for example, how an e-mail system was organized by Madison Junior High School in Naperville, IL, (p. 79) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2004.

Challenges. One challenge for successful Type 2 activities is to make communications clear and understandable for all families, including parents who have less formal education, speak languages other than English at home, or do not read English well. All families must be able to process and respond to the information they receive. Another key Type 2 challenge is to develop effective two-way channels of communication so that families can easily contact teachers or counselors, offer ideas and suggestions, request conferences and information. Middle level schools also must make sure that students understand their roles in facilitating and participating in all school-family-community partnerships, including delivering home-to-school and school-to-home communications.

Expected results. If information is clear and 2-way channels of communication are established, home-school interactions should increase. More families should understand the

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school's programs and teachers' expectations, follow their children's progress, and attend parent-teacher conferences. Specifically, if computerized phone lines are used to communicate information about homework, more families should know more about their children's daily assignments. If newsletters include respond-and-reply forms, more families should offer ideas, questions, and comments about school programs and activities. Studies indicated that good communications with families were consistently important for helping schools improve student behavior (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002) and math achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, in press).

Type 3 – Volunteering

Type 3 activities improve recruitment, training, and schedules to involve parents and others as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs. Type 3 activities increase the adult-student ratio in a school and make it possible to offer more varied learning opportunities, and for teachers to provide students with more individualized attention.

Sample practices. Among many Type 3 activities, middle level schools may collect information on family members' talents, occupations, interests, and availability to serve as volunteers to enrich students' subject classes; improve career explorations; serve as foreign language translators; conduct attendance monitoring and phone calls; work on "parent patrols" for safety; organize and improve activities such as clothing and uniform exchanges, school stores, fairs, and many other activities. Schools may also create opportunities for mentors, coaches, tutors, and leaders of after-school programs to ensure that middle grades students have important and safe activities that expand their skills and talents. For example, middle level schools may establish a Family Center where parents can obtain information, conduct volunteer work for the school, and meet with other parents (Johnson, 1996).

Challenges. Challenges for successful Type 3 activities are to recruit widely so that many parents feel welcome as volunteers; make hours flexible for parents and other volunteers who work during the school day; provide needed training; and enable volunteers to contribute productively to the school, classroom curricula, and after-school programs. It helps if one or two volunteers serve as coordinators to match all volunteers' times and skills with the needs of teachers, administrators, and students. Another Type 3 challenge is to change the definition of "volunteer" to mean any one who supports the school and students' activities at any time and in any place. This opens options for parents and others who serve as audiences at school concerts, assemblies, sports activities, and other events to be recognized for volunteering their time. A related challenge is to help students in the middle grades understand how volunteers help their school, and to encourage students to volunteer, themselves, to help their school, family, and community.

Expected results. If tasks, schedules, locations, and training for volunteers are varied, more parents, family members, and others in the community will support the school and students' activities. If a useful directory is available of parents' time, talents, and resources, more

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teachers will call upon volunteers to improve school programs and activities. More parents should attend student performances and other events as members of the audience, if they know that their support is viewed as “volunteering.” Specifically, if volunteers serve as attendance monitors, more families will be alerted and able to help students improve attendance (Sanders, 1999). If volunteers conduct a “hall patrol” or are active in other locations, school safety should increase and student behavior problems should decrease due to a better student-adult ratio and more supervision. If volunteers serve as tutors for particular subjects, student tutees should improve their skills in that subject. If volunteers discuss careers, students should be more aware of their options for the future. One study found that when parent volunteers shared art work linked to social studies units, students in the middle grades gained art appreciation experiences and knowledge about art and artists that they did not have before (Epstein and Dauber, 1995). Thus, volunteers can assist teachers in improving student learning in particular subjects, if the volunteers have appropriate training for working with middle school students.

Type 4 – Learning at Home

Type 4 activities involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home that are coordinated with students’ classwork and that contribute to success in school. This includes interactive homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions about academic courses and school programs. Type 4 activities link every teacher with every student and parent on curricular issues.

Sample practices. Among many Type 4 activities, middle level schools may provide information to students and to parents about the skills needed to pass each course and about each teacher’s homework policies. Schools also may implement activities that help families encourage, praise, guide, and monitor their children’s work using interactive homework, student-teacher-family contracts, long-term projects, summer home-learning packets, student-led conferences with parents at home about their writing, goal setting activities, homework hotlines of daily assignments, or other interactive strategies that keep students and families talking about schoolwork at home. For example, the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) process guides students to share and discuss their work and ideas with a family partner so that parents can see how and what students are learning in math, science, and language arts in the middle grades (Epstein, Salinas, & Van Voorhis, 2001; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Van Voorhis & Epstein, 2002).

Challenges. One challenge for successful Type 4 activities is to implement a regular schedule of interactive homework that requires students to take responsibility for discussing with family members important things they are learning, interviewing family members, recording reactions, and sharing their work and ideas at home. Another Type 4 challenge is to create procedures and activities that involve families regularly and systematically with students on short-term and long-term goal setting for achievement, behavior, attendance, development of personal talents, and plans for high school and postsecondary education.

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Expected results. If Type 4 activities are well designed and well implemented, students should improve their homework completion, report card grades, and test scores in specific subjects. More families should know what their children are learning in class and how to monitor, support, and discuss homework. There should be more positive conversations between students and family members about their school work and academic ideas. Students and teachers should be more aware of family interest in students' work. Several studies show that interactive homework in the middle grades increases parental involvement with students about their schoolwork in math (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998) and improves homework completion and report card grades in language arts (Epstein, Simon, and Salinas, 1997) and in science (Van Voorhis, 2003).

Type 5—Decision Making

Type 5 activities include families' voices in developing a school's vision and mission statements, and in designing, reviewing, and improving school policies and other school decisions. Family members are participants on school improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, and district councils. Parents also may be part of independent advocacy groups and task forces for school improvement.

Sample practices. Among Type 5 activities, middle level schools may organize and maintain an active parent association and include family representatives on all committees for school improvement, including curriculum, safety, supplies and equipment, partnerships, and career development committees. Schools may offer parents and teachers special training in leadership, decision making, and collaboration. Type 5 activities may be designed to distribute information for families about school policies, course offerings, special services, and tests and assessments. Middle level schools may use a variety of technologies including low-tech summaries and high-tech e-mail lists to share information and gather parents' ideas and reactions to policy questions. In particular, parents, other family members, teachers, administrators, students, and community partners all are members of the Action Team for Partnerships, which plans and monitors the development of the school's program of family and community involvement.

Challenges. One challenge for successful Type 5 activities is to ensure that there are parent representatives on school committees from all of the racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, and geographic communities that are present in the middle level school. A related challenge is to help parent leaders serve as true representatives to obtain information from and provide information to other parents about decisions that are made. An ongoing challenge is to help parent and teacher members of committees trust, respect, and listen to each other as they work toward common goals for school improvement.

Expected results. If Type 5 activities are well implemented, more families will have input into decisions that affect the quality of their children's education; students should increase their awareness that families have a say in school policies; and teachers should increase their understanding of family perspectives on policies and programs for improving the school.

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Type 6—Collaborating with the Community

Type 6 activities coordinate the work and resources of community businesses; agencies; cultural, civic, and religious organizations; colleges and universities; and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Other activities enable students, staff, and families to contribute their services to the community.

Sample practices. Among many Type 6 activities, middle level schools may inform students and families about programs and resources in their community, such as after-school recreation, tutorial programs, health services, cultural events, service opportunities, and summer programs. Schools may arrange “gold card” discount programs with local merchants to recognize students who improve attendance and report card grades, or who demonstrate other accomplishments. Collaborations with community businesses, groups, and agencies also may strengthen the other types of involvement. For example, parent education workshops or meetings for families may be conducted at community or business locations (Type 1); local radio and TV (including foreign language stations), churches, clinics, supermarkets, and laundromats may help schools communicate about school events (Type 2); people from businesses and the community may serve as school volunteers (Type 3); artists, scientists, writers, mathematicians, and others in the community may enrich student learning in specific subjects (Type 4); and community members may serve on school and district decision making councils and committees (Type 5).

Challenges. One challenge for successful Type 6 activities is to increase the equity of access for diverse students and families to community resources and programs. Another challenge is to solve “turf” problems such as who will fund and who will lead school-community collaborations. Still another Type 6 challenge is to link students’ valuable learning experiences in the community to the school curriculum, including lessons that build on non-school skills and talents, such as students’ work as volunteers and as members of student clubs and groups. A major challenge is to inform and involve the family in community-related activities that affect their children, so that families are aware of how others are assisting their children.

Expected results. Well implemented Type 6 activities should help families, students, and educators know about the resources and programs in their community that can help students attain important school goals. By increasing equal access to community programs, more and different students and families should participate and benefit from various programs. Coordinated community services could help more students and their families solve problems that arise in early adolescence before they become too serious. Type 6 activities also should support and measurably enrich school curricula and extracurricular programs (Sanders, 2001, in press).

Summary. The six types of involvement create a comprehensive program of partnerships, but the implementation challenges for each type must be met in order for school

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programs to effectively inform and involve all families. The expected results are directly linked to the quality of the design and goal-oriented content of the activities. Not every practice to involve families will result in higher student test scores. Rather, practices for each type of involvement can be selected to help students, families, and teachers reach specific school improvement goals and results. The summary, above, includes a few examples from hundreds of possible activities that may help middle level schools improve their partnership programs.

Linking Partnerships to Other Recommended Middle Level Characteristics

The fourteen characteristics of responsive middle levels schools in *This We Believe* all are important. In excellent schools, educators who work with young adolescents share a vision of high expectations for all students. The school provides strong support, through an adult advocate for every student and partnerships with all students' families and communities. Academically, each subject's curriculum is challenging, integrative, and exploratory. Teachers are flexible in their uses of varied instructional approaches, assessments, and evaluations. Students are offered good guidance and programs that promote their health and safety. Instruction emphasizes students' active learning and inspired teaching, which motivates students to set high goals and take responsibility for progress in learning. These elements combine to promote all students' learning in a climate that is inviting, challenging, and joyful. With courageous and collaborative leadership, district leaders, principals, teachers, parents, students, and community partners work together to develop programs and practices that ensure successful middle level schools and successful students.

All of the characteristics of a good middle level school are interrelated (Epstein & Connors, 1995). It is particularly important for middle level educators to understand how a strong program of **School, Family, and Community Partnerships** (described above) is linked to the other recommended elements so that family and community involvement is not something extra, separate, or different from the "real work" of the school. There are several ways that family and community involvement enhance the other recommendations in *This We Believe*.

Educators Committed to Young Adolescents

To understand young adolescents, educators need to know their students' family backgrounds, cultures, hopes, and dreams. If a school has a strong partnership program, with activities for the six types of involvement, more families will understand young adolescents, middle level schools, peer pressure, and other topics of importance. And, educators will better understand students' families. Indeed, middle level educators serve as role models for students by the ways they talk about and work with students' families. Many young adolescents are trying to balance their love for their family, need for guidance, and need for greater independence. Middle level educators who understand students' families can help students see that these seemingly contradictory pressures can coexist. See, for example, how Westminster Community School #68 in Buffalo, NY, conducted a *Legacy Quilt* project to

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help students talk with parents about their heritage (p. 72) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2003.

A Shared Vision

Along with educators and students, families and community members must contribute to the shared vision of a responsive middle level school. Schools need to have well-designed practices as part of their partnership program that enable parents and community members to give input to a new vision or mission statement for a school or school district, and to periodic revisions of those documents. School vision and mission statements should be presented and discussed each year as new families and students enter the middle level school.

High Expectations for All

National and local surveys of middle grades students and their families indicate that they have very high expectations of success in school and in life. Fully 98% of a national sample of eighth grade students plan to graduate from high school; and 82% plan at least some post-secondary schooling, with 70% aiming to complete college (Epstein & Lee, 1995). Responsive middle level schools must incorporate students' and families' high aspirations with educators' high expectations for all students. Teachers and parents must work together to guide students in taking the courses they need to meet their goals, in selecting electives, in choosing summer programs, and in taking advantage of extra time and extra help, as needed, in coaching classes before and after school and on Saturdays.

An Adult Advocate for Every Student

School-based advocates and teacher advisors need to know each student's family. In some schools, students have the same advisor/advocate every year. This makes it possible for the advisor and students' families to get to know each other well. The advocate may serve as a key contact for the family should questions or concerns arise, facilitating two-way channels of communication before problems become too serious to solve.

Positive School Climate

A safe, welcoming, stimulating, and caring environment describes a good school for students, educators, families, and the community. In a school with strong partnerships, family and community members are more likely to volunteer to help ensure the safety of the playground, hallways, and lunchroom; to share their talents in classroom discussions; and lead or coach programs after school to create a true school community. Some schools discuss school climate only in terms of student attitudes and behavior. However, other aspects of school life, including teachers' professional relationships and school, family, and community partnerships all are aspects of a positive school climate. See, for example, many different ways to develop a welcoming climate, such as Thompson Middle School's *Family Fun Fair* in Newport, RI, (p. 71) and Meany Middle School's *Family Enrichment Center* in Seattle, WA, (p. 81) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2004, and Franklin D. Roosevelt Middle School's

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Spring Family Affair, in Cleveland, OH, (p. 80) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2003.

Challenging, Integrative, and Exploratory Curriculum

Teachers work together to improve their course content to challenge and motivate student learning. Families and communities need to know about the courses, special programs, and services that are offered to increase student learning in the middle grades. Good information about the curriculum helps families discuss important academic topics with their young adolescents (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Families also need good information about how their students are progressing in each subject, how to help students set and meet learning goals, how to monitor and discuss homework, and how to work with students to solve major problems that threaten course or grade level failure. Some middle level schools create student educational and occupational plans based on conferences with students and parents (Lloyd, 1996). If schools are serious about student learning, school-family-community partnerships must include information on and involvement with the curriculum.

Teaching and Learning Approaches

Families benefit from knowing about the varied instructional approaches that middle grades teachers use in all subjects, including group activities, problem-solving strategies, writing prompts and prewriting strategies, students as historians, hands-on science, and other challenging innovations that promote learning. Many new instructional approaches are unfamiliar to families. They need information on the varied ways that students learn different subjects. Workshops for parents and “family nights” are common activities that may be organized in many different ways to help parents understand state and local standards in specific subjects; units of work covered in various courses; teaching methods; state tests and sample items; how to help their children at home; and other subject-specific information. Some instructional approaches can be designed to involve parents in appropriate ways. For example, students are guided to demonstrate skills, share ideas, and conduct conversations with parents about real-world applications of school subjects in the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) interactive homework process, noted above as a Type 4 activity. Also see how families may be helped to understand instructional approaches in teaching science methods with the thoughtful organization of a *Science Fair*, conducted by Murray Junior High School in Saint Paul, MN (p. 35 in Salinas & Jansorn, 2004).

Students and Teachers Engaged in Active Learning

Excellent middle level schools emphasize active learning as an important instructional approach to make school subjects real and relevant to students. Families need information and guidelines on how to support early adolescents, each year, as active learners who, increasingly can set learning goals, take responsibility for short-term and long-term projects, and monitor their own progress. See, for example, the *Book Buddies* program in Thurmont Middle School in Thurmont, MD, which helped parents learn about and celebrate the growth

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of their middle school students' skills and confidence as they read aloud with preschool and elementary children (p. 14 in Salinas & Jansorn, 2003). And see another example of how a K-8 school, Southside Elementary in Buffalo, NY, conducted *Science Mystery Nights* to help parents understand inquiry-based instruction to increase students' critical thinking, lab skills, and science knowledge (p. 37 in Salinas & Jansorn, 2004).

Assessments and Evaluations

Families and community members need to know about the major tests, new or traditional assessments, report card criteria, and other state and local standards that schools use to determine children's progress and paths. For example, many schools conduct evening meetings for parents to learn about and try items on the state tests that are administered for the *No Child Left Behind Act* (Epstein, 2004). Families also can help students set learning goals and strategies for reaching goals. Families, teachers, and students may discuss progress in parent-teacher-student conferences, through student self-report cards, and family-report cards. Programs such as Project Write in Massachusetts required students to share their writing portfolios with a parent and obtain reactions and suggestions. Students may conduct "home conferences" to share writing and other work with a parent, and to develop plans for how to improve their skills over the next marking period. Students and families also should have opportunities to rate the quality of school programs each year. There are many ways to include students and families in important assessments and evaluations in order to make those measures more meaningful.

Flexible Organizational Structures

Families need to understand interdisciplinary teams, middle level "houses," schedules, electives and exploratories, and other arrangements that define middle level school organizations. Every middle level school should have annual group meetings and individual meetings of parents, teachers, and advisors to ensure that families understand how classes are organized and to gather family input for the decisions that affect their children's experiences and education. See, for example, how Washington Junior High's *Sixth Grade Family Picnic* in Naperville, IL, (p. 55) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2003, introduced parents to the organization of the middle level school that their children were entering.

Programs and Policies for Student Health and Safety

Families have major responsibility for students' growth and development and health related outcomes concerning nutrition, weight management, physical strength, exercise, sex education, prevention of the use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, and other health topics that are important in the middle grades. Programs of family and community involvement may include activities to improve the health and safety standards for the school as a whole (Gerne & Epstein, 2004). Students' health and safety out of school are directly linked to their work and achievements in school. Students, families, and community members may work in

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partnership with educators to develop and review safety policies, health policies, dress codes, lunch menus, facilities and equipment, and other policies and conditions that affect children's health and safety. If educators identify students' health problems, parents must be partners in decisions about health services. See, for example, *Visiting Nurses*, an immunization project for students and families at the Byrd Middle School in Sun Valley, CA, (p. 44), and varied health activities such as Lowndes Middle School's *Fitness Fair* in Valdosta, GA, (p.45), and in Alberta, Canada, Good Shepherd School's *Try it at Lunch*, (p. 47) and Rosary School's, *You Go, Girl*, (p. 48) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2003.

Comprehensive Guidance and Support Services

Families need to know about the formal and informal guidance programs at the school. This includes knowing the names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or voice-mail boxes of their children's teachers, counselors, advocates, or administrators in order to reach them with questions about their children's lives and work at school. In some middle level schools, guidance counselors are members of interdisciplinary teams and meet with teachers, parents, and students on a regular schedule and in other meetings as needed. If students need counseling services, families also must be part of those decisions. See, for example, how Lowndes Middle School in Valdosta, GA., involved parents in increasing understanding among racial groups at the school with *Family Night Teaches Tolerance*, (p.60) in Salinas & Jansorn, 2004;

The examples discussed above show, clearly, that school, family, and community partnerships have important connections with all of the elements of effective middle level schools. A comprehensive program of family and community involvement will include activities that ensure that families remain important, positive influences in their young adolescents' education.

Courageous, Collaborative Leadership

It takes courage and collaborative leadership, along with thoughtful and persistent action, to organize all fourteen characteristics of an excellent middle level school. This kind of management and mettle requires effective teamwork, not only among administrators and teachers, but also including parents, community partners, and students. Working together, all partners in education form the school's *learning community* (Epstein & Salinas, 2004) and may develop a goal-oriented program of school, family, and community partnerships.

A comprehensive program of family and community involvement takes more than organizing a discussion group or implementing incidental projects. Rather, each school must have an Action Team for Partnerships consisting of teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners, which serves as a permanent committee of the School Improvement Team or Council. The Action Team writes an annual Action Plan for Partnerships, including a detailed schedule of family and community involvement activities linked to school improvement goals for a welcoming school climate and for student achievement, attitudes,

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behavior, health, and other indicators of success. The plans and activities must be evaluated and continually improved from year to year. Research and field work show that comprehensive partnership programs help improve school climate and courses, strengthen families, invigorate community support, and increase student achievement and success in school (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003).

There is a growing consensus that educators must be competent in working on teams, sharing leadership, and conducting partnership activities with families in diverse communities (Fullan, M., 2001; Murphy, 2002). Of course, principals play key roles as school leaders and as members of the Action Team for Partnerships, even as teachers, parents, and others take leadership for planning and implementing family and community involvement activities to increase student learning and success (Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004).

Call to Action: National Network of Partnership Schools

Most middle level educators want to build strong school-family-community partnerships, but most have not reached this goal. Indeed, developing good connections of home, school, and community is an ongoing process that takes a bit of courage to change old ways, a lot of teamwork, and a reasonable investment of time and effort. Based on research and the work of many educators, parents, and students, my colleagues and I have organized a program to help all elementary, middle, and high schools develop strong and sustainable goal-oriented programs of partnerships with families and communities (Epstein et al., 2002).

Schools, districts, and state departments of education are invited to join the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University to obtain assistance in improving their plans and activities for productive family and community involvement. District and state leaders are helped to organize leadership activities to assist increasing numbers of schools to conduct these activities. Schools are assisted to organize an Action Team for Partnerships, write an annual One-Year Action Plan for partnerships, implement and coordinate activities, evaluate results, monitor progress, publicize activities, and report regularly on the school's partnership program. Each ATP tailors its plans with activities for the six types of involvement to meet specific school improvement goals, including goals for improving student achievement, attitudes, behaviors, and the climate of partnerships. The One-Year Action Plan for partnerships is appended to the School Improvement Plan, so that educators, parents, and community partners can see that everyone has a role to play in helping students reach important goals for success in school. In this way, a program of school, family, and community partnerships is not an "extra" program, but is part of every school improvement plan and an integral part of an excellent school.

To obtain an invitation and membership forms for schools, districts, states, and organizations write to: Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, Director, National Network of Partnership Schools, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 3003 North Charles Street,

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This chapter updates and extends earlier versions that appeared in the November 1996 issue of *Middle School Journal*, 28 (2), 43-48 and the 2001 edition of *This We Believe and Now We Must Act* (National Middle School Association).