

Involving Parents in Character and Citizenship Education

Chapter 10

“When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students ...”

– Epstein et al. 2002, p. 7

The importance of parental involvement in creating effective learning environments or implementing successful changes in schools is not a new concept. However, current research is giving us a better understanding of the nature and degree of parent and family participation that best supports success. This research suggests that caring communities can be supported by intentionally creating a culture where parents are viewed as partners in a community of learners.

In faith-based schools and programs, parents’ modelling of faith life is an integral part of a child’s education. Children learn best through daily parental examples and modelling.

A school learning community consists of educators, students, parents and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students’ learning opportunities. Research shows that an organized approach to school, family and community partnerships, with activities that support student learning, improves schools, strengthens families, invigorates community supports and increases student success.¹

Lasting school improvement depends on developing leadership capacity among all members of the school community, including parents.² Partnerships that foster adult learning as well as student learning build reciprocal rather than dependent relationships among all school community members.

A move to new levels of parental involvement requires time, energy, commitment and development of new skills to support true collaboration and mutual support. This chapter explores ways to work toward a shared purpose for developing character and citizenship education. It provides a sample framework and strategies for involving parents as partners in learning, to create a caring community that supports and reinforces character and citizenship education.



Forging Links and Strengthening Home–School Connections

Parents and families are busier than ever. This challenges schools to build school–home ties in new ways. In addition to perennial issues of time and school accessibility, increasingly multilingual families require schools to find ways to communicate with parents who may not speak or understand English. Bridges need to be built not only between home and school but across cultures in the community. Each school needs to examine its organization and find ways to work with parents that fit that particular context. To realize maximum improvement in student achievement, goals for parental involvement in character and citizenship education are tied to results of the entire system.

Epstein et al. propose that the key to success in forging links between home and school is having a range of activities to involve families that focus on six types of involvement including:

- parenting
- communicating
- volunteering
- learning at home
- decision making
- collaborating with the community.³

These six types of involvement are interrelated and work together to support a comprehensive approach to developing parent partnerships. The sample Involving Families Checklist on the following page is based on the six types of involvement. This checklist can be used as a starting point for identifying areas of strength and areas of need at the classroom or school level.

Involving Families Checklist

Read each of the statements and decide if, in your jurisdiction, school or classroom, the statement is a “green light,” “yellow light” or “red light.”

Green Light: *Established understanding and practice*

Yellow Light: *Moderate degree of understanding and practice*

Red Light: *Beginning level of understanding and practice*

Types of Involvement ⁴	Green Light	Yellow Light	Red Light	Evidence
Parenting				
1. Families are assisted to ensure home conditions are conducive to student learning at all levels.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Schools are assisted in understanding the diverse needs within families.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Families are assisted with transitioning students through stages of schooling (preschool, elementary, junior high, senior high).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Communicating				
4. There is communication with families about student learning on a regular basis through newsletters, phone calls, conferences or other methods.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Families are encouraged to communicate with the school through use of agendas, phone calls, meetings and parent conferences.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Volunteering				
6. Families are involved as volunteers and audiences to support student learning and school programs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Learning at Home				
7. Families are provided with information and ideas about how to help students with learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. Families are offered support through parent sessions and/or training that supports student learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Decision Making				
9. Parents are included in the school decision-making process through school councils, classroom teams and committees.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Collaborating with the Community				
10. Resources from the community are integrated to strengthen the school program and family practices in support of student learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Sample Strategies for Involving Parents

Parenting

- Survey parents to determine issues and topics of interest related to supporting character and citizenship education.
- Develop one-page fact sheets or a calendar of events and activities that suggest ways families can support and model the character and citizenship traits their children are learning.
- Use and adapt curriculum support resources for parents, such as the “Home, School and Community Connections” section in selected illustrative examples in the *Kindergarten to Grade 9 Health and Life Skills Guide to Implementation* and The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities resources.
- Investigate opportunities for hosting community workshops such as those offered by The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities. These workshops were developed to help parents model and reinforce knowledge, skills and attitudes that are taught through the *Towards a Safe and Caring Curriculum* programs and resources.
- Offer parents opportunities to learn strategies for supporting students during transition periods such as beginning school, moving from elementary to junior/senior high, or moving from high school to post-secondary education or work. These transitions are key times to reinforce and support core values.
- Create a cultural shift in involving parents and families as partners in character and citizenship education. For example, hold “Meet the Family and Teacher Night” and extend the traditional goals of “Meet the Teacher” events.

Communicating

- Use classroom and school communications such as newsletters to promote and support activities.
- Explicitly state high expectations for parent participation. Create an open and welcoming invitation to share resources and skills, take part in presentations or participate in special classroom activities. When planning for parents, schedule activities at a time when the majority of parents will be able to attend. Consider providing child care so all families can participate.
- Make learning transparent. Hold classroom or school ‘walk-throughs’ with parents that demonstrate how students are learning about character and citizenship through all aspects of regular and extracurricular activities.

Volunteering

- Target school or community events throughout the year in which parents can be involved.
- Use character or citizenship initiatives as opportunities to invite parents to participate in field trips, classes or schoolwide events as guest speakers or an audience for a specific purpose.
- Provide different types of ways for parents to contribute such as work bees for creating published books, drop-in helpers or work from home.
- Consider involving older siblings or extended families in some events.

Learning at home

- Share information about the curriculum. Explain key instructional strategies used in character and citizenship education, and explain how learning is assessed and reported.
- Share classroom and school expectations for behaviour through clear and positive communication. Encourage parents to reinforce similar expectations at home.
- Encourage parents to have regular discussions at home about character and citizenship education. Develop activities that involve parents in their children's learning, such as interviewing family members on attitudes, experiences or practices, or tracking positive behaviours.

Decision making

- Make actions for partnerships a part of the regular school council, with a focus on parental involvement in supporting school improvement goals, including character and citizenship education.
- Use meetings that focus on partnerships to shift school culture. Develop a parent community that leads, participates in, advocates and assumes collective responsibility for student learning.
- Design interactive learning opportunities, such as forums for parents to develop a shared vision, discuss their hopes for all students and construct new ways to think about student learning.
- Enlist parents as leaders in character and citizenship education by having them contribute to conversations, join school research teams, influence other parents to participate, advocate for school programs, help develop resources, and provide input into planning, implementation and evaluation.

Collaborating with the community

- See Chapter 11 for ideas on creating community partnerships.



Chapter 10

Taking Action

Making this kind of involvement a reality begins with a commitment to develop an action plan that supports character and citizenship education. This planning process may be linked to the school council, and may include teachers, administrators, parents and community partners as members. Guided by goals focused on promoting student success, embedded within the school's three-year plan, the team develops annual plans for family and community involvement, implements and evaluates activities, and brings together all parent-related activities in the school or jurisdiction into a comprehensive partnership.

Annual school plans could consider the six types of involvement, as outlined by Epstein et al. in the book *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (2002). By implementing activities that connect character and citizenship education in all six types of involvement, schools help parents to become involved at school and at home in various ways that meet student needs and family schedules. Input from participants helps schools address challenges and improve plans, activities and outreach so that all families can be productive partners in their children's school success.

When parent–school partnerships focus on curriculum and instruction in schools, partnerships move from being peripheral public relations activities to being central programs that create a 'core of caring' to support student learning and development.

Endnotes

1. Epstein and Salinas 2004.
2. Lambert 2003.
3. Epstein et al. 2002, Epstein and Jansorn 2004.
4. Epstein et al. 2002, Epstein and Jansorn 2004.