

# Emerging Issues

## in School, Family, & Community Connections

Annual Synthesis 2001



National Center for  
**FAMILY &  
COMMUNITY**  
*Connections with*  
**SCHOOLS**

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Annual Synthesis 2001

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In December 2000 SEDL and its partner, The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, created the National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools to serve as a national resource to schools, community groups, research organizations, policymakers, and families. The Center creates bridges between research and practice—linking people with research-based information and resources they can use to effectively connect schools, families, and communities.

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# Executive Summary

This research synthesis is the first in a series that will examine key issues in the field of family and community connections with schools. The issues highlighted in this synthesis represent critical areas of work in family and community connections with schools where clarification, agreement, and further development are needed, as well as promising new directions that are emerging. By continuing to strengthen the research in the field we can help ensure that schools, families, and communities can come together to produce positive outcomes. After reviewing and examining a body of literature that included more than 160 publications, four key issues emerged.

## Issue 1 — Clarifying the Concept of Family and Community Connections with Schools

The field of family and community connections with schools does not have consistent agreement on what is meant by the terms “connections,” “parent involvement,” and “community involvement.” The need to clarify these concepts comes not from a desire for universally acceptable, all-encompassing definitions, but from a need to be clear in our language so that researchers and practitioners can more effectively implement and measure the impacts of these connections.

Current research reveals that there are many different activities that connect families and schools. Often these activities are quite different from each other, yet they are lumped together as “parent involvement” or “school-family connections.” Some researchers emphasize activities that take place at the school, such as parent attendance at school events and participation in parent-teacher organizations (PTOs). Others include activities that take place in the home, such as parental homework help and discussions about school issues between parents and children. Still others include abstract concepts as well as actual involvement behaviors in their definition, such as parent aspirations for a child’s education.

These activities have very different impacts on students, schools, families, and communities. The variety of definitions make it difficult to compare studies and models of parent involvement to one another. They also make the analysis of the findings of multiple studies a challenge. For practitioners, these multiple

The issues highlighted in this synthesis represent critical areas of work in family and community connections with schools where clarification, agreement, and further development are needed, as well as promising new directions that are emerging.

definitions may lead to difficulties in making judgments about what kinds of activities to implement, how to implement them, and what results to expect from them.

Similarly, many different kinds of activities fall under the heading of “community connections with schools.” One researcher may define a school-community connection as a formal partnership between the school and another local organization. Another may highlight learning opportunities for students that take them out of the classroom and into the community for real-life experiences. Still other researchers may look at the role of the school in the larger community—as a community center or a community institution that can play a role in community development efforts. There is also variation in the very way the term “community” is defined.

The challenge of defining school-community connections in a comprehensive way has similar consequences to the challenge of defining the full range of school-family connections. The multiple definitions make it difficult to compare studies with one another and to synthesize the results across studies. Multiple definitions also create challenges for practitioners as they attempt to select, implement, and evaluate different connection activities.

In addition to the general problem of multiple and overlapping definitions, two important factors have affected how family and community connections are currently defined in research and practice. First, there are the differences in perceptions of appropriate roles of family and community members in connections with schools. Second, there has been an emphasis on school-centered definitions of family and community involvement. Family and community involvement frequently means helping reach goals defined by the schools (administrators and teachers) that reflect only school values and priorities. There is a need for the field to consider expanded definitions that move beyond narrow definitions of family and community involvement to include theories, concepts, and ideas from outside the field of education, as well as culturally appropriate definitions and family centered practices.

## Issue 2 — Measuring the Outcomes of Family and Community Connections with Schools

Parent and community connections have been measured inconsistently across studies and research has not yet captured the full picture of these connections and their results. There is a need to be precise in how we are measuring outcomes, in order to avoid faulty generalizations and conclusions and to clarify the sometimes conflicting evidence about the impact of connections. The field must continue to explore new methods for capturing the processes and outcomes of these complex interactions between schools, families, and communities.

We must also capture the different outcomes of the connections for the various stakeholders—students, parents, schools, and communities—to gain a full picture of the impact of the connections. It is evident that connections can have a broad array of outcomes, ranging from increased student achievement and improved school climate to enhanced civic capacity for a variety of stakeholders. The multifaceted results of these connections lead to measurement challenges for both researchers studying the connections and practitioners evaluating the impact of their efforts.

While there is evidence that family and community connections can result in positive outcomes for all stakeholders, we must continue to clarify the relationships between the different kinds of connections and the outcomes they produce. A redefinition of terms and rethinking of research tools in order to measure the effects of all types of family and community connections with schools is needed to help the field progress. There is also a need to better understand and document how various school, family, and community connections create conditions that support a variety of results.

### Issue 3 — Advancing the Research Base for Family and Community Connections with Schools

Research about the process and effects of family and community connections with schools is evolving and does not yet provide clear directions for practitioners. There is a critical need to take the body of research we have and build theory that can propel us into the next stage of research. Family and community connections frameworks can help research test the relationship between different components of the concept of family and community connections with schools, address the problem of unclear and overlapping definitions of the concept, and gain greater understanding of the predictors and impacts of these connections.

In our review, we also observed that researchers face numerous methodological challenges, including choice of design, sampling, measurement, and internal/external validity. New developments in research design and methodology that better link quantitative and qualitative research and more and improved conceptual models can move the field toward a stronger research base. Funding allocations to applied educational research and program evaluations must increase, a new level of partnership must be forged between practitioners and researchers to enable the use of experimental procedures in service settings, and program staff concerns related to random assignment and potentially intrusive data collection procedures must be addressed.

## Issue 4 — Critical Areas for Research in Family and Community Connections with Schools

Our review of the literature revealed a number of critical research areas that surfaced repeatedly. Within each of the critical areas listed here, both *promising directions* and *research needs* are discussed. These areas are:

- Forging connections with families from culturally diverse backgrounds
- Connecting families with schools in homework help
- Connecting school, family, and community for effective school reform
- Connecting school, family, and community through developmental approaches and integrated service delivery
- Connecting school, family, and community to support student transitions throughout the education system
- Developing process-based approaches to make connections
- Preparing educators and other school personnel to make connections between schools, families, and communities

Our charge as a field is to come together to address the issues highlighted in this document— to clarify the concept and outcomes of family and community connections with schools and to improve the quantity and quality of the research base available. In so doing, we will better understand these connections and create the knowledge needed to realize the potential of family, school, and community connections for student learning and students' lives.



# Introduction

This research synthesis is the first in a series that will examine key issues in the field of family and community connections with schools. This report identifies key issues that must be addressed if research is to assist schools, families, and communities in working together to nurture high standards and academic success for all students. Existing research has shown that family and community connections with schools can make a significant contribution to improving schools and student success; however, not enough is known about these connections to fully inform practice.

There are many reasons why the research issues presented in this synthesis must be addressed. First, the field is moving forward and work is being done without the research-based knowledge desirable to support the work. As one researcher said, “Connections between schools and other organizations are being formed at a rate that has caused action on them to outstrip knowledge about them” (Wynn, J., Meyer, S., & Richards-Schuster, K., 2000, p. 4).

Second, despite some promising models and growing evidence of the benefits of connections, policymakers, funding agencies, school systems, and state education agencies are still not demonstrating maximum support for connection-building practice. These stakeholders are asking for more research and evidence about the effectiveness of family and community connections with schools.

Finally, many authors reviewed noted that much of the evidence of the impact of connections is “hidden”; that is, results are not published or widely distributed. Some of these unpublished evaluations suggest that certain connections programs, such as community schools and School-to-Work, have had success in improving student outcomes and are viable school reform strategies (Dryfoos, 2000; Hughes, Bailey & Mechur, 2001). These efforts must be further studied and the results more widely disseminated so that a solid research base for supporting school-community connections can be built.

The objective of this document is to reflect research issues that have emerged from our review of recent literature, not to advocate for particular solutions or models. We have provided a variety of perspectives and potential

This report identifies key issues that must be addressed if research is to assist schools, families, and communities in working together to nurture high standards and academic success for all students.

solutions in order to increase awareness for all stakeholders involved. In most cases, further research and debate is needed to clarify issues and possible solutions.

After reviewing and examining a body of literature that included more than 160 publications, four key issues emerged:

1. Clarifying the concept of family and community connections with schools
2. Measuring the outcomes of family and community connections with schools
3. Advancing the research base for family and community connections with schools
4. Addressing critical areas for research in family and community connections with schools

This document is divided into four sections that explore each of the issues above. *Clarifying the Concept of Family and Community Connections with Schools* presents the first issue. In it we discuss what is meant by the term “family and community connections with schools” and the challenges that arise when there are different types of connections and different perceptions about the roles of stakeholders. We explore the tendency to focus research and practice on school-directed initiatives, due to the natural advantage schools have over other stakeholders and the policy structures that support it. We then present the need to expand our paradigm of the concept to include definitions that go beyond “programs,” to draw from theories outside the field of education, and to consider culturally-appropriate and family-centered definitions.

The second section, *Measuring the Outcomes of Family and Community Connections with Schools*, describes the variety of outcomes associated with different types of connections and the implications for various stakeholders: schools, students, families, and the community. This section explains that the relationships between family and community connections and specific outcomes are not always direct or clear. It then presents the need for more appropriate measurements and indicators of these connections, such as measuring intermediate variables and mediating factors between connections and outcomes, and for measuring the very process of building and maintaining connections in addition to the outcomes.

The third section, *Advancing the Research Base for Family and Community Connections with Schools*, points out the current early state of the research and what is needed to develop a solid research base. It reviews the importance of further developing theories and conceptual models and conducting rigorous research in this field.

Finally, the fourth section, *Addressing Critical Areas for Research in Family and Community Connections with Schools*, highlights seven areas that warrant more research. Within each of these areas, both *promising directions* (new thinking and research that hold promise and can serve as a basis for future work) and *research needs* (areas in which research is inconclusive or contradictory) are identified. The seven key areas are: (1) forging connections with families from culturally diverse backgrounds, (2) connecting families with schools in homework help, (3) connecting school, family, and community for effective school reform, (4) connecting school, family, and community through developmental approaches and integrated services, (5) connecting school, family, and community to support student transitions throughout the education system, (6) developing process-based approaches to make connections, and (7) preparing educators and other school personnel to make connections between schools, families, and communities.

While this report attempts to be fair and inclusive, time and space limitations prevent us from treating several important topics to the extent that we would like. In fact, there are four topics that require more thorough study, and these will be treated separately in subsequent annual research syntheses to be conducted by the Center. The 2002 synthesis will investigate growing evidence that family and community connections with schools make a difference in student achievement and success. Next, the 2003 synthesis will focus on the topic of connecting families from diverse backgrounds with schools. We will examine the links between families, communities, and schools in linguistically and culturally diverse populations as well as the extensive work now addressing special needs populations and systems of care. In 2004, the synthesis will look at what research says about involving community organizations in the process of transforming schools into high-performing learning communities. Finally, in 2005, the topic will be connecting families and schools to support successful student transitions throughout the education system. Taken together, we intend that these five syntheses provide a view that is broad and deep, thoroughly examining critical issues and offering a meaningful tool for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

The current emphasis on high standards and accountability in education requires a sound research agenda for this field that examines the evidence of its impact on student achievement and school improvement. At the same time, authors and researchers are interested in the broader outcomes of these connections, due both to their inherent value and their possible link to academic achievement. Researchers are also attempting to generate process information, such as how to develop connections or how to identify the factors that make connections possible, and ultimately impact student achievement or broader outcomes.

Ultimately, a strong research agenda for family and community connections with schools must include a clear and multifaceted picture of what these connections are, their benefits and limitations, and how different stakeholders can be involved. A sound research base will help practitioners envision and implement connections that will become part of the everyday environment of schools, homes, and communities. What is emerging from this synthesis of the literature is just such a research agenda for the field, one that will benefit and inform theoretical development, policy, and practice, and that will support student success in school and beyond.



# Methodology

In January 2001, the staff at the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools began the process of reviewing a broad body of literature related to the process and impact of school, family, and community connections. Criteria were established for selecting literature to be included. An emphasis was initially placed on family and community connections and their impact on student achievement, and then broadened to ensure the most comprehensive picture of the field was captured. Resources made available since 1995, with an emphasis on the most recent works, were selected. Seminal or background pieces previous to 1995 were included if they added a necessary perspective. Although this is primarily a research synthesis, literature beyond research was considered to broaden the narrow picture that research literature alone might provide. This literature included conceptual or theoretical pieces, practice and policy oriented works, and literature reviews. Our scan revealed three types of content: research that investigated the impact of family and community connections with schools, those that explored characteristics and processes of effective family and community connections with schools, and those that identified barriers, issues, and needs in family and community connections with schools.

Although this is primarily a research synthesis, literature beyond research was considered to broaden the narrow picture that research literature alone might provide.

In order to ensure a balanced and thorough set of literature to work from, our process for locating relevant resources included searching and contacting different types of sources and repositories. We first searched the major education information databases such as Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Education Abstracts. In addition to database searches, we scanned Web sites of organizations and agencies involved in this field for any reports or articles available online. To supplement these results we contacted researchers in the field to request copies of recent works. After compiling an initial set of resources for review, we consulted with our Steering Committee to ensure that we were not overlooking any important authors or studies. Staff at the Center reviewed in depth 166 relevant publications, including articles from journals and other periodicals, books, reports from government agencies and non-governmental organizations, conference papers and proceedings, and dissertations and Master's theses upon which to base this synthesis. (The body of literature reviewed is captured in full in an annotated bibliography available at [www.sedl.org/connections](http://www.sedl.org/connections).) Nevertheless, this literature set is not comprehensive. The field of family and community connections with schools is diverse,

and although we located and reviewed numerous items we cannot claim it to be an exhaustive list.

Center staff established guidelines for selection and review, based upon the type of literature. As staff reviewed the literature, they addressed questions and recorded their comments in a literature review management database developed to facilitate this process. Staff used the following questions to guide and structure the review of research literature:

- What is the purpose of the study and key questions addressed?
- What type of connection is being investigated, and how is it defined?
- Is student achievement defined and measured? If so, how?
- What is the researcher’s theoretical perspective or assumptions?
- What is the research methodology used?
- What are the results?
- What are the implications of the study for the field?
- What are the limitations of the study?

Staff reviewed the broader literature for emerging models, theories, trends of thought, and trends in practice and policy. Staff used the following questions to guide their examination of the *broader* literature:

- What are the main points, concepts, theories, or issues addressed?
- What type of connection is being discussed and how is it defined?
- What benefits and impacts of the connection are addressed?
- Is student achievement discussed as an outcome of connections? If so, how is it defined?
- What are the conclusions about the state of current research and knowledge, if any?
- How does the piece relate to the research literature we are reviewing?
- What are the implications for the field?
- What are the limitations of the piece?

After Center staff reviewed the literature, staff worked together to scan for common threads and important issues, emerging trends, and cohesive findings. A “force-field analysis” approach was used to sift through the information and determine the top research issues. An initial list included ten issues; it was then streamlined and collapsed into four main issues, as they appear in this document. The Center’s Steering Committee and an internal peer group reviewed several drafts of this document as it was developed, providing invaluable feedback and support. The staff at the National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools wishes to thank these individuals as well as others who helped throughout the process of reviewing the literature and writing this synthesis.

An illustration at the top of the page shows a school bus on the left, a group of people walking in the center, and a person riding a bicycle on the right. The background is a light teal color with stylized buildings and trees.

# Issue 1 - Clarifying the Concept of Family and Community Connections with Schools

The field of family and community connections with schools does not have consistent agreement on what is meant by the terms “connections,” “parent involvement,” and “community involvement.”<sup>1</sup> There are also many different kinds of activities that fall under the field’s umbrella. In addition, the various stakeholders that are involved in these connections (school, family, and community) may hold conflicting perceptions of their roles and the roles of other stakeholders. The need to clarify these definitions of family and community connections comes not from a call for a universally acceptable, all-encompassing definition of the terms, but from a need to be clear in our language so that researchers and practitioners can more effectively implement and measure the impact of these connections.

This lack of clarity and agreement about what and who is included in the concept of family and community connections with schools creates a challenge for those who seek models that are practicable and yield measurable results. When achieved, however, the rewards will be many, for effective connections can improve student achievement in school, support student success in life, and nurture the development of healthy schools, families, and communities.

## Ways Families Connect with Schools

Current research reveals that there are many different activities that connect families and schools. Often these activities are quite different from each other, yet they are lumped together as “parent involvement” or “school-family connections.” Some researchers emphasize activities that take place at the school in their definition of parent involvement, such as parental attendance at school events and participation in parent-teacher organizations (PTOs). Others include activities that take place in the home that support student achievement, such as

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this report, the terms “connection” and “involvement” may sometimes be used interchangeably. Also, the term “school, family, and community connections” and its variants are synonymous with “family and community connections with schools.”

parental homework help and discussions about school issues between parents and children. Still others include abstract concepts as well as actual involvement behaviors in their definition, such as parent aspirations for a child's education.

The following are some of the specific types of *family connections with schools* that were described in the literature reviewed:

- Homework help, including school-developed homework that encourages parent-child interaction as well as more general strategies that schools and families use to support effective homework. Also included is school-developed training for parents in strategies, tools, and resources to support learning in specific school subjects (Clark, 1993; Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Epstein & VanVoorhis, 2001; Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999).
- Supportive home environment, including the supervision and structure that parents give children outside of school to support their education, such as limiting television viewing time and providing structured time for homework and learning (Shumow, 2001; Xu, 2001).
- Home-school communication and interactions, including direct parent-teacher contacts and relationships as well as more general communication between school and home regarding school events and school policies (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Quigley, 2000).
- Parent participation in activities at school, such as parent-teacher organizations (PTOs), meetings, school advisory or site-based decision-making teams, and volunteering in classrooms or with class activities (Epstein & Dauber, 1995; Izzo et al., 1999; Mapp, 1999).
- Home practices that support literacy development, such as parents reading with children or providing books and writing materials (Faires, Nichols & Rickelman, 2000; Starkey & Klein, 2000; Melzi, Paratore, & Krol-Sinclair, 2000).
- Parent tutoring on specific subjects as part of school-sponsored programs (Invernizzi, Rosemary, Richards & Richards, 1997; Powell-Smith, Stoner, Shinn & Good, 2000).
- Parent support for the child, including emotional and academic support, and the expression of parent aspirations and expectations regarding a child's current school performance as well as future college or career success (Lopez, 2001; Trusty, 1999; Yonezawa, 2000).
- Parent-directed activities that connect students to out-of-school opportunities for learning and development, such as museum and library visits, private tutoring, and other enrichment opportunities (Cairney, 2000; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Tapia, 2000).
- Parent-child discussions and interactions about school-related issues and activities, including parental advice and guidance on academic decisions and course placements (Catsambis, 1998; Yonezawa, 2000).

- Parents serving as role models for why school is important and sharing their own experiences that reinforce the value of education (Sanders, 1998).
- Parent involvement in school reform efforts, including advocating for change, using standards and test scores as tools for holding schools accountable for student achievement, participating in the development of improvement plans, and taking part in opportunities created by reforms, such as governance councils (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Dodd & Konzal, 1999).

Although all of these activities may fall under the heading of “family involvement,” there is evidence that different types of involvement may have little or no correlation to each other (Keith & Keith, 1993). For example, while a parent may maintain consistent contact with a child’s teacher through telephone calls and written notes, he or she may not participate actively in volunteer activities at the school campus.

Several authors have developed frameworks for understanding the various types and components of parent-school connections (Chrispeels, 1992, 1996, as cited in Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994, as cited in Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Joyce Epstein’s framework of six types of family involvement (1995) is frequently cited in research and has been adopted by many practitioners, most notably the National Parent Teacher Association (National PTA, 1998). Epstein’s framework outlines six dimensions of parent-school partnerships:

- Type 1 Parenting – Assisting families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students, as well as assisting schools to understand families
- Type 2 Communicating – Conducting effective communications from school-to-home and from home-to-school about school programs and student progress
- Type 3 Volunteering – Organizing volunteers and audiences to support the school and students. Providing volunteer opportunities in various locations and at various times
- Type 4 Learning at Home – Involving families with their children on homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions

- Type 5 Decision Making – Including families as participants in school decisions and developing parent leaders and representatives
- Type 6 Collaborating with the Community – Coordinating resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and providing services to the community

Cataloging these kinds of activities is a useful step, but more work is needed to capture the variety of forms that family-school connections can take and create a common language in the field. The variety of definitions make it difficult to compare studies and models of parent involvement to one another. They also make analysis of the findings of multiple studies a challenge. For practitioners, this lack of clarity may lead to difficulty in making judgments about what kinds of activities to implement, how to implement them, and what results to expect from them.

#### Ways Communities Connect with Schools

Similarly, many different kinds of activities fall under the heading of “community connections with schools.” One researcher may define a school-community connection as a formal partnership between the school and another local organization. Another may highlight learning opportunities for students that take them out of the classroom and into the community for real-life experiences such as job internships and community research projects. Community connections might involve individual community members as educational partners, as well as community organizations such as businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies. Still other researchers may look at the role of the school in the larger community—as a community center or a community institution that can play a role in community development efforts. There is even variation in the very way the term “community” is defined. Cahill (1996) suggests that community can be defined using geographical, philosophical, political, sociological, or economic terms.

The following are some of the types of *community connections with schools* that were discussed in the literature reviewed:

- Connections that integrate or locate health and human services at school sites and use school facilities and resources for the benefit of the entire community. These kinds of connections are generally called “full service” or “community” schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Dryfoos, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Lawson, 1999; Shaul, 2000).
- School-to-work initiatives that link career training and real-life experiences with academic content (Hughes et al., 2001; Reynolds, Walberg & Weissberg, 1999).

- After-school programs that provide remedial or enrichment learning activities for students while maximizing the use of school resources and fulfilling parents' need for childcare (Miller, 2001).
- Community-driven school reform efforts that simultaneously seek to improve local schools, build the social networks that exist in the community, build the capacity of local community members to take action and solve problems at the local level, and create “new standards and expectations for life in the community” (Rockefeller Foundation, 1997, as cited in Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001, p. 4).
- School-business partnerships in which businesses provide schools with resources, business expertise, and volunteers (Otterbourg, 1998; Sanders, 2000; Shirley, 1997).
- Connections with community organizations, such as local health and human services providers and community-based youth development organizations, to provide services or enrichment opportunities for students at or near the schools (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999b; McMahon, Ward, Pruet, Davidson, & Griffith, 2000).
- School-university partnerships where universities, usually colleges of education, provide expertise, resources, and professional development to schools while schools participate in research studies or other professional collaboration projects (Restine, 1996; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995).
- Direct support from individual community members (church members, neighbors, and other adults) to students, to provide learning opportunities, expectations for educational achievement, and support for overall student well-being (Cordiero & Kolek, 1996; Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001; Yancey & Saporito, 1997).
- Connections with educational organizations, such as museums, libraries, and cultural groups, to provide out-of-school opportunities for informal teaching and learning (Faucette, 2000).
- Community service or service learning programs that link academic content with activities that allow students to contribute to the well-being of the community (Schine, 1996; Wang, Oates, & Weishew, 1995).
- Tutoring and academic support in specific school subjects by community-based volunteers (Invernizzi et al., 1997).
- Deliberative dialogue programs that bring together community members to explore issues affecting schools. These dialogue sessions provide a mechanism for two-way information sharing between the school and community (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000).
- Community participation in school decision-making through formal mechanisms such as school governance councils (Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Mapp, 1999; Sarason & Lorentz, 1998).

Several authors have recently attempted to categorize the different kinds of school and community connections. In one article, Cahill (1996) categorized the different types of connections by their primary purpose: a) service provision to meet youth needs, b) school-community educational partnerships, c) school-community partnerships in youth development, d) school-community economic development collaborations, and e) community redefined schools.<sup>2</sup>

A General Accounting Office (GAO) report to Congress (Shaul, 2000) identified a set of common elements found in school-community connections, including:

- Services and activities tailored to community needs and resources, with the flexibility to change as community needs change.
- A value for and encouragement of parent participation and individual attention from caring adults.
- An understanding that support for the family is integral to improving outcomes for children and youth.
- Active roles for parents, students, community residents, and organizations in guiding policy and practices through such entities as advisory committees.
- A continuing emphasis on the importance of collaboration and communication among school and community partners.

Another comprehensive research study emphasized those connections that were “intentional and ongoing relationship(s) between a K-12 school and one or more external organizations that entails the investment of organizational resources” (Wynn et al., 2000, p. 6).

The challenge of defining school-community connections in a comprehensive way has similar consequences to the challenge of defining the full range of school-family connections. The multiple definitions make it difficult to compare studies with one another and to synthesize the results across studies. Multiple definitions also create challenges for practitioners as they attempt to select, implement, and evaluate different connection activities.

### Overarching Factors that Affect Definitions

In addition to the general problem of multiple and overlapping definitions, two important factors have affected how family and community connections are currently defined in research and practice: role perception and “school-centric” practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Cahill (1996) describes *community redefined schools* as redefinitions of schools by communities, “away from professionalized, bureaucratic, centralized models, to communities of learning governed at the level closest to students, families, teachers and community members” (p. 9).

## **Differences in perceptions of appropriate roles**

Stakeholders (educators, parents, community members, students) may have opposing viewpoints about what constitutes involvement and what their roles should be. For instance, Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) found that teachers tend to define parent involvement differently than parents do. Teachers tended to view a parent's role solely as a support for academic achievement while parents viewed it as a means of supporting the total well-being of the child (i.e., social and moral development). Because school personnel and parents may conceptualize parent involvement activities and outcomes differently, there is a need to more fully explore teacher and parent perspectives about what constitutes appropriate collaboration and what role each can and should play in a child's education (Izzo et al., 1999).

One recent publication (Jehl et al., 2001) also suggests that there are important differences in the perspectives of school personnel and staff members of community-based organizations. While schools emphasize student achievement and classroom-based learning, community organizations tend to emphasize the role of school in broader human development and in the development of personal and social skills. Schools and community organizations may also define parent involvement differently, with school personnel emphasizing school-based and school-initiated involvement that supports classroom learning, and community partners emphasizing parent involvement in decision-making and reform efforts (Jehl et al.). The researchers suggest that in order to understand these differences in perspective, one must understand the underlying history and culture of the school and community organizations and the context in which they operate. They further suggest that differences in mission, political structure, and the level of public scrutiny and accountability can lead to differences in perspective between school personnel and community organization personnel.

## **An emphasis on school-centered definitions of family and community involvement**

While individuals within schools, communities, and families may have a range of beliefs about what constitutes appropriate school, family, and community connections, a review of the literature suggests that overall, definitions of connections that most closely reflect the priorities of schools have dominated both research and practice. Schools have largely been in the position to define what family and community involvement “is” and what the outcomes should be. These school-centered definitions of family and community involvement can be seen in both research and practice.

Honig et al. (2001) contend that “the focus of many school-linked services efforts has been on ‘fixing’ students so teachers can ‘really teach’ and removing barriers to learning, rather than rethinking the learning and teaching that occurs for students—all day, in and out of school—and the conditions, resources and supports that enable it” (p. 9). Edwards and Warin (1999)

agree that parent involvement efforts sometimes operate to enlist parents as agents of the schools to meet the school's needs—in essence turning parents into “assistant teachers”—instead of utilizing a parent's unique strengths as a child's motivator and nurturer. Generally, the most important goal for schools is increased academic achievement of students; therefore, educators tend to value family and community connections because of their potential for supporting this goal, sometimes at the expense of family or community member goals (Scribner et al., 1999).

Many researchers, theorists, and practitioners in the field agree that school-centered definitions do not fully express the range of connections that can and do exist (Edwards & Warin, 1999; McWilliam, Maxwell & Sloper, 1999). A continued emphasis on school-centered connections can limit the development of the entire field and its ability to identify and forge new directions for greater impact on student outcomes. Jordan, Averett, Elder, Orozco, and Rudo (2000) define “collaboration” as an arrangement in which partners establish joint goals and priorities, as well as shared responsibility for success. Partnerships that do not define a common mission are rarely able to sustain the long-term collaborative relationship and sharing of resources necessary to accomplishing substantive goals.

This emphasis on school-centered definitions of connections can also create a significant power imbalance in the school-family-community relationship. Schools are generally backed up by powerful and stable institutional structures that support the school's definition of the roles parents and community members should play. This institutional structure infuses power into the position of “the principal” and “the teacher” in the education of the child, while the family or community member role is not automatically infused with similar power (Hulsebosch & Logan, 1998).

#### Need for Considering Expanded Definitions

Much of the emerging theory and practice of family and community connections with schools encourages a rethinking of our understanding of how children develop and how the various people and contexts fit together to support that development. A new orientation is emerging in the field, from a school-centric focus toward the creation of reciprocal connections among schools, parents, and community members. These connections are mutually beneficial and reflect the shared goals of all stakeholders.

Several of the authors reviewed also argue for the need to develop an “asset” model, in which parents and communities are considered equal contributors to the education process and are viewed by school personnel as resources instead of as obstacles (Hulsebosch & Logan, 1998; Honig et al., 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). They suggest there might also be a need to reconceptualize roles that various people play in the life of a child: not as posi-

tions or functions, but rather as the natural product of an individual's strengths and assets, regardless of whether it is a parent, a teacher, a community member, or a religious leader. As the field begins to explore these expanded definitions, there are several key components to consider.

- **Moving definitions beyond family and community involvement “programs”**  
 Research in this field has emphasized “partnership programs” in which schools provide parenting classes or formal “adopt-a-school” partnerships with businesses over more seamless, interconnected approaches and perspectives. As a result, research has not adequately captured and defined the reciprocal connections between schools, families, and communities. Several of the authors reviewed point out that there is a need for definitions that include relationship and collaboration elements (Hirota, Jacobowitz & Brown, 2000; Mapp, 1999). Community organizers for school reform have also called for the development of descriptions with rich details of “how to do it” that reflect both the outcomes and the process and greatly emphasize the “relationship building” of their work (Lewis & Henderson, 1998).
- **Including theories, concepts and ideas from beyond the field of education**  
 In order to truly understand family and community connections and reform in schools, we must look to other fields of study and be open to theories used outside the established intellectual education tradition (Lagemann, 1999, as cited in Arum, 2000). Family and community involvement is based on forming alliances and connections beyond the traditional school system; therefore, drawing on perspectives, theories, and research methodology from other fields is integral to understanding the variety of purposes and impact of the connections among various stakeholders.
- **Looking at culturally-appropriate definitions of parent involvement** While the school, family, and community connections field has traditionally paid much attention to cultural diversity issues, there is still more to be done to define and clarify “parent involvement” that occurs within various cultural and ethnic groups. Recent research studies have found that families often practice forms of parent involvement that mainstream school personnel may not always recognize. For instance, a study of marginalized migrant families of highly academically successful students in South Texas found that parents were not involved in the traditional parent involvement activities, such as volunteering at the school or attending school functions. However, they were very involved in that they instilled a strong work ethic in their children and shared their own experiences to emphasize the importance of a good education (Lopez, 2001). Instead of trying to get diverse families to adopt more dominant cultural approaches to involvement, research suggests the need to capitalize on existing cultural traditions (Lopez; Peña, 2000; Tapia, 2000;

Scribner et al., 1999). Researchers need to build understanding about how involvement varies among different cultural groups and adequately capture those experiences in new definitions of family and community connections.

- **Family-centered definitions** The concept of family-centered practices can represent a new way for schools to think of working with families and community members. According to McWilliam et al. (1999), family-centered practices are defined as friendly, respectful partnerships that extend beyond the partnerships commonly described in education literature. The authors suggest that the early intervention concept of family-centered practices, frequently found in early childhood research and practice, is not well known in elementary school education. These family-centered practices emphasize support to families as an important goal in and of itself, not just as a means of supporting the child. In this view, families are seen as the primary decision-makers for their children, they are supported as key decision-makers in all aspects of school services, and their needs beyond the education of the child are also considered (McWilliam et al.).

### Summary

Both in research and practice, family and community connection activities are often bundled together in ways that may affect how the activities are conducted and how they are measured. Narrowing down these complex concepts to one single definition is not likely or even necessarily desirable. However, without a clear understanding of the way the concept is defined, it is difficult to understand how to create and sustain those connections that will achieve the intended results for students, schools, communities, and families. As Cahill (1996) suggests, we need to clarify the goals and underlying assumptions of various types of collaborations in order to have a positive impact on school improvement and student success. Working to create this “common language” in the field of family and community connections will support future research and practice so that it is clear and achieves intended results.

# Issue 2 - Measuring the Outcomes of Family and Community Connections with Schools

Parent and community connections have been measured inconsistently across studies and research has not yet captured the full picture of these connections and their results (Kohl et al., 2000). There is also a need to be precise in how we are currently measuring outcomes, in order to avoid faulty generalizations and conclusions and to clarify the sometimes conflicting evidence about the impact of connections. In order to advance, the field must continue to explore new methods for capturing the processes and outcomes of these complex interactions between schools, families, and communities.

We must also capture the different outcomes of the connections for various stakeholders in order to gain a full picture of the impact of the connections. Some of the outcomes are described below. The purpose of these summaries is to illustrate the multifaceted nature of outcomes to be captured through research and evaluation measurements.

## Outcomes for Students

The outcomes described below demonstrate the range of results for students that may be measured and monitored in studies of school, family, and community connections.

- **Academic achievement** Family and community connections with schools have shown evidence of an effect on student academic achievement (for example, Fan & Chen, 1999; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Luchuck, 1998; Keith & Keith, 1993). Recent studies by Shaver and Walls (1998); Faires et al. (2000); Quigley (2000); Chavkin, Gonzalez, and Rader (2000); and Izzo et al. (1999) all found specific positive impacts on reading and mathematics. Others, such as Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willett, and Wilson-Keenan (2000) and Epstein, Simon, and Salinas (1997) have found effects on other subjects, such as language arts, literacy, art, science, and social studies.

In order to advance, the field must continue to explore new methods for capturing the processes and outcomes of these complex interactions between schools, families, and communities.

- **Other achievement in school** Research has demonstrated that family and community connections have also impacted attendance, aspirations for post-secondary education, enrollment in challenging high school curriculum, and successful transitions from special education to regular classes. In addition, research has documented that connections have reduced retention and dropout rates among students (Trusty, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Yonezawa, 2000).
- **Social functioning** Students' social functioning can be impacted by family and community connections in such areas as student behavior, motivation, social competence, intrinsic motivation, positive student-teacher and peer relationships, language, self-help, meaningful youth and adult connection/relationships, and strong peer and adult role models (Palenchar, Vondra & Wilson, 2001; Sanders, 1998).
- **Addressing barriers to learning** Barriers to learning such as health and mental health problems can be alleviated as a result of family and community connections with schools (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999a; Newman, 1995; Wynn et al., 2000). Through connections, students and their families often have access to physical health services, social services, and basic subsistence services that they might not otherwise be able to access (Wynn et al.).
- **Creating networks of support** Years of research (for example, Anderson, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Sorin, 1990; Garbarino, 1992, all cited in Honig et al., 2001) have shown that social networks within and between neighborhoods can provide a web of support to parents and other adults that leads to greater learning opportunities for youth and children. Researchers investigating resilience in children (Bernard, 1990; Sampson, 1991; Werner, 1992; Blyth & Leffert, 1995, all cited in Honig et al.) have found that socially coherent communities and stable neighborhoods seem to be strongly correlated with positive development and learning outcomes for youth. In the resiliency research and in Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) work on assets and strength of neighborhood ties, it has been found that neighborhoods can extend the classroom and that peer groups function as powerful influences on youth development and academic engagement.
- **Creating new learning opportunities** Several authors suggest that connections between schools and communities can provide new opportunities for students to learn in a variety of settings, such as church congregations, community organizations, and afterschool programs (Dryfoos, 2000; Honig et al., 2001; Sanders, 1998; Wynn et al., 2000). These connections can provide new role models and teachers to students and provide opportunities for building

skills and leadership qualities that can support success in a variety of settings, including school. Additionally, school-community connections can lead to greater access to work-based learning and other career development opportunities (Hughes et al., 2001).

### Outcomes for Schools

In addition to supporting the success of individual students, family and community connections with schools show impact on schools as organizations and on personnel working in schools. The following is a summary of some of the outcomes found in the literature reviewed. They demonstrate the range of school results that may be measured and monitored in studies of school, family, and community connections.

- **School reform efforts** School reform efforts across the country have been influenced by parent and community involvement (Shirley, 1997; Desimone et al., 2000; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995). In their 1997 book, Lewis & Henderson suggest that parents have played three key roles in reform efforts: as reform advocates, as full partners in reform efforts, and as participants in the reform. Harkavy (1998) suggests that universities have a key role to play in school reform as major institutions within the local neighborhood or community. He suggests that they can serve as both a powerful resource and as a catalyst for change, but must adapt themselves to the needs of the local community in order to be effective.
- **School climate** A study of the CoZi model of school reform (a combination of James Comer's development schools and Edward Zigler's Schools of the 21st Century) also found that there were effects on the school as a result of family and community involvement in the reform effort, such as better school climate, and more open school culture (Desimone et al., 2000).
- **Access to resources** Studies of partnerships between schools and professional institutions, such as businesses, universities and foundations, have found great benefits to schools in the form of increased access to resources and knowledge (Merchant, 1996). Wynn et al. (2000) found that these resources, including both small ones, such as telephone lines, copying machines or space, and more substantive ones, like computers, are highly valued by schools. In the majority of the connections studied by Wynn et al., schools also received human resources in the form of teachers, trainers for teachers, and management assistance.

- **Increased instructional capacity and curriculum development** A review of several existing partnerships between universities and schools concluded that building instructional capacity was the greatest benefit to schools of developing these partnerships (Restine, 1996). The author cites the work of Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) that documents a trend toward forming professional communities between schools and universities that result in “contextualized theory and theoretically informed practice.” Also, community organizations can develop curriculum and work with school staff to integrate it into classroom lessons in subject areas including arts, civic education, and school-to-work. In many cases they also provide actual staff who teach students, such as artists and musicians. Another positive outcome for schools can occur as the community begins to serve as a site for “school work,” through service learning and student entrepreneurship activities. In these activities, students and educators engage in learning activities that are relevant to local issues and are meaningful to both the students and the community (Boethel, 2000; Lewis, 1999).

#### Outcomes for Families and Communities

In addition to supporting students and schools, family and community connections with schools can impact families and the community at large. Reports of improved outcomes for the family unit and the community as a whole are numerous. The following is a summary of some of the outcomes found in the literature reviewed. They demonstrate the range of family and community results that may be measured and monitored in studies of school, family, and community connections.

- **Changes in skills, knowledge, and beliefs** Several studies documented that family attitudes toward education and their understanding of schools improved as a result of involvement (Bauch, 2000; Sanders, Epstein & Connors-Tadros, 1999). One study found that parenting styles can shift in positive ways as a result of their involvement with schools when they are given specific opportunities to make changes (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000).
- **Acquisition of resources** Community organizations can acquire new resources as a result of their relationship with the school, such as use of school facilities. As previously noted, Wynn et al. (2000) found that all connections involve the exchange of resources among organizations, including physical resources such as space, equipment, and supplies; program resources, such as curriculum and training; and human resources, such as individuals from one organization working in another. Evaluations of community school programs also showed that families receive greater support and services as a result of school-based programs (Dryfoos, 2000).

- **Increased civic capacity and community development** Schools can serve as places where the public can come together and be involved in decision-making that impacts their community (Lewis, 1999). The roles that family and community members play in school reform and other collaborative efforts can have implications for the larger community, as reform participants build skills and capacity that can be transferred to address other community needs (Shirley, 1997). Also, Lewis and Henderson (1998) found that when neighborhood family and community members are engaged in school reform efforts, the following outcomes can often be documented: the partnership becomes a means of rebuilding civic infrastructure, the quality of life in the neighborhood improves, and the nature of local power and politics changes. Community-based education reformers have also reported that their work creates a sense of place, develops enduring relationships, empowers people, erases boundaries between schools and communities, and builds an engaged community around schools (Lewis & Henderson).

### Cautions in Interpreting Outcomes

Based on the outcomes discussed, it is evident that school, family, and community connections can have a broad array of outcomes for stakeholders. The multifaceted results of these connections lead to measurement challenges for both researchers studying the connections and practitioners evaluating the impact of their efforts. There are also cautions that arose from the literature about interpreting connection outcomes.

First, while the literature indicates that family and community connections can produce positive effects, there is also evidence that different types of connections produce different results (Fan & Chen, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Williams, 1998). Fan and Chen (1999) maintain that the relationship between family connections and student achievement should not be generalized across different dimensions of family involvement nor should it be generalized across different areas of academic achievement. For instance, while a parent involvement activity might be linked to increased mathematics achievement, that same activity can yield different results for reading achievement (Starkey & Klein, 2000). Similarly, a particular kind of family or community connection may result in improvement in one area, such as school behavior, but may have no effect on another variable, such as school attendance (Newman, 1995).

There is also some evidence that particular parent involvement strategies can have very different effects, depending on the age of the child. While establishing a more structured system for parent monitoring of homework may produce positive results for elementary students, the same high level of monitoring can have a negative impact on an adolescent's homework completion, when the youth is seeking more independence from parental control (Cooper et al., 2000;

Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2001). These examples point to the need to continue measuring the particular effects of specific school-family connection strategies, in order to ensure maximum impact on student and school success.

While there is evidence that family and community connections can result in positive outcomes for all stakeholders, we must continue to clarify the relationships between the different kinds of connections and the outcomes they produce. As we begin to further understand the full range of outcomes that can result, we will gain greater understanding of the sometimes contradictory results that are reported.

### Measuring Indirect Relationships and Mediating Factors Between Connections and Outcomes

There are many factors that can affect the relationship between family and community involvement and its many outcomes. Researchers are beginning to measure intermediate variables such as attitudinal and behavioral variables, gender, and social networks (Sanders, 1998). A number of factors, highlighted below, have been identified across the literature as mediating variables between family connections and academic achievement (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2001).

- Parenting styles and how parents and their children interact (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Cooper et al., 2000)
- Parents' sense of their effectiveness as a parent (Bandura, 1989, as cited in Shumow & Lomax, 2001)
- Parents' idea of their appropriate role in their children's education (Cooper et al., 2000)
- Parents' own school experiences (Shumow, 2001)
- Student characteristics such as attitude towards school and behavior in school, as well as student's level of intelligence (Sanders, 1998)
- School factors such as class size and school culture and climate, including staff behavior and school policies that encourage or discourage involvement (Ho Sui-Chu, 1997)
- Social, economic, geographical, and political context in which the school operates (Yancey & Saporito, 1997)

Taken as a whole, current research also suggests that the following factors seem to affect the level of impact family connections have on student success in more general ways.

- Demographic characteristics of students, such as gender, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and age (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000)

- Demographic characteristics of parents, such as gender, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and education level (Feuerstein, 2000; Ho Sui-Chu, 1997)
- Policy support for involvement through funding and staffing decisions; accountability systems that encourage or discourage connections (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000)
- School level (elementary, middle, or high school) (Adams & Christenson, 2000)
- Goal of the connection—whether it is targeted toward student success (Newman, 1995)

Researchers suggest there are also factors that affect the impact that community connections may have on student success. Studies show that social coherence, neighborhood stability, and the character of the communities from which students are drawn are some of these factors (Honig et al., 2001). The character of the community may be determined by policies dealing with community economic development, sociology, racial discrimination, access to medical services, and other issues (Yancey & Saporito, 1997).

In addition to these mediating variables, there is also a need to better understand and document how various school, family, and community connections create the conditions that support student achievement even when they do not impact it directly. For example, as documented earlier in this section, connections can have an impact on students' educational aspirations, attendance, homework completion, and school behavior. It is a reasonable assumption that these outcomes help facilitate student achievement in class and on tests, but more research is needed to fully understand these intermediate variables that create supportive conditions for student achievement. This understanding and articulation of how school, family, and community connections create supportive conditions for student achievement is critical, particularly as school accountability for student achievement increases.

#### Need to Measure Both the Process and Outcomes of Connections

In addition to the many outcomes that have been discussed, there is also a need to measure the process of creating successful family and community connections with schools. Understanding the various components of the process will further knowledge about how to make connections in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes.

Researchers and observers point out that the success of partnership efforts often depends on the existence of strong, trusting relationships between schools, parents, and community members (Cordiero & Kolek, 1996; Lewis & Henderson, 1998; Mapp, 1999; Merchant, 1996). In some cases, building these

relationships necessarily must come before more traditional measurable outcomes can be observed (Lewis & Henderson). Yet the field has not extensively documented the appropriate indicators for measuring success in building these relationships.

Recent research from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (Gold, Simon, Pickron-Davis & Ballenger, 2000) has focused on the development of indicator areas to measure both the process and the variety of outcomes that can result from the work of community organizing for school reform. Based on a study of community organizing efforts across the country, they have developed eight indicator categories that relate either to student learning or strong communities and neighborhoods. Additionally, the Cross City Campaign is in the process of documenting strategies that community organizers have used within each indicator area, as well measures of success and data sources for each area. This work is an example of capturing both the process and the outcomes of school, family, and community connections.

### Summary

Measurements of parent and community connections have not yet captured the full picture of these connections and their results. As the field moves forward, we must ensure that we gather information about the different effects that the connections have on the stakeholders involved. The field must also continue to explore new methods for capturing both the processes and outcomes of these complex interactions between schools, families, and communities in order to determine their indirect and direct effects on student success.

# Issue 3 - Advancing the Research Base for Family and Community Connections with Schools

Research about the process and effects of family and community connections with schools is evolving and does not yet provide clear directions for practitioners. As discussed in Issues 1 and 2, there are unclear and overlapping definitions of the concept, its dimensions, and its measurements. The body of empirical work on family and community connections with schools should be strengthened in several respects to generate a solid research base for this field. Most critical is the development of more cohesive theoretical models and frameworks that can be used to develop and test hypotheses that can inform theory. The use of a variety of research methods and designs, appropriate for the types of questions that need to be explored, is also critical.

## Current State of the Research

The body of research in family and community connections with schools is described as being at an early stage of development. Researchers are still trying to understand the overall patterns of these connections. Three specific characteristics that point to this early development are: the lack of linkages between research and theory, the limitations of methodology, and the disconnect between qualitative and quantitative research.

### **An early developmental stage**

In their review of the literature on parent involvement in homework, Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong & Jones (2001) explain that the current body of research consists primarily of descriptive accounts of what parents do when they are involved, what teachers or schools do to invite parent involvement, and what student outcomes are related to parent involvement. Others (Montemayor & Romero, 2000; Van Voorhis, 2000) point out that most parent involvement studies to date have been looking for family patterns and fixed characteristics, such as parent education, socioeconomic level, and relationships at home. Early studies have also often utilized only one measure to explain the construct, such as attendance at school events (Van Voorhis). These

The body of empirical work on family and community connections with schools should be strengthened in several respects to generate a solid research base for this field.

studies represent an effort to collect baseline information to understand current practice and its outcomes in family and community connections with schools.

Montemayor and Romero (2000) warn that focusing on family patterns has narrowed results to those characteristics that “good families” have that help children succeed academically. Schools then shape their programs around these results, such as by offering classes to teach “not so good parents” how to read to their children and help them with homework, in the ways that “good parents” do. From these studies researchers have portrayed families through deficit model lenses: some families are broken and need to be fixed. Usually, this pattern merely serves to reinforce racial, ethnic, and class biases (Montemayor & Romero).

### **Lack of theories and conceptual frameworks**

The body of research in this field that has been developed over the last three decades has not been well connected to theory. One reason for this, explored in previous sections, is the lack of clear definitions and good ways of measuring outcomes. In addition, there have been few attempts to pull the research together into theoretical models and conceptual frameworks.

In our review, we found no theoretical models for community connections with schools. Some models have been developed that focus solely on parent involvement or that integrate family and community connections with schools. Kohl et al. (2000) have examined the strengths and weaknesses of several of these current models in the literature: Grolnick and Slowiaczek’s (1994, as cited in Kohl et al.) three dimensions of parent involvement, Eccles and Harold’s (1996) five dimensions of parent-initiated involvement, and Epstein’s (1995) six types of school-family-community partnerships (as described in section 1 of this document). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Chrispeels (1992, as cited in Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000) have also presented models for parent involvement.

However, Epstein’s model is the only one that has undergone extensive review by the research community. Epstein’s model is based on a social organization perspective of overlapping influence, emphasizing that children are best supported when families and schools have shared goals and work collaboratively. This model includes the community as an important arena of child and adolescent learning. It views school, family, and community relations as dynamic, in that their overlapping spheres can be pushed together or pulled apart by important forces: background and practices of families, schools and communities; developmental characteristics of students; historical and policy contexts; and time (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Simon, 2000). Families, schools, and communities are jointly responsible for and influential in children’s development.

The field has greatly benefited from Epstein's model and most studies reviewed concur that the dimensions, or types of partnerships, are well-defined and provide useful guidelines for researching these connections. However, there are components to family and community involvement that are not part of the Epstein model. Kohl et al. (2000) for instance, point to the focus of Epstein's model on teacher and school-initiated behaviors rather than parent-initiated involvement.

The other models have not received enough attention and have not been widely tested. As a result, when researchers have studied the relationship between student achievement and family and community connections with schools, they have often done so without links to a theoretical framework or model. The findings are difficult to compare and interpret. In addition, they do not inform theory and do not lend themselves to building upon each other. The quantitative studies we found about the relationship of family or community connections with schools to student achievement have offered important initial information to help frame this issue; however, they do not yield understandings of how, why, and under what conditions these connections are linked to student achievement. After uncovering relationships and developing theories and models, further experimental evidence needs to be collected to test those theories and give evidence of direct links of involvement to student success. Experimental designs are necessary to ascribe direct impact on student achievement to specific family and community involvement practices.

### **Challenges of methodology**

In their review of the research, Epstein and Sanders (2000) took a historical look at the field and saw evidence of improvement and development in the research. They reported that researchers across the country and across disciplines have employed many methodologies, including surveys, case studies, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, longitudinal data collections, field tests, program evaluations, and policy analyses. Studies have grown from focusing mainly on preschools to elementary, middle, and high schools, and from focusing on what parents do on their own to what schools, families, and communities do in partnership. Studies have expanded from small, local samples to national and purposive samples of students and families with diverse racial and cultural backgrounds in urban, rural, and suburban locations.

Other authors take a different stance that emphasizes the problematic nature of the research. Fan and Chen (1999) conducted a meta-analytic synthesis of the literature about the empirical relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement. They found that the vast proportion of literature is qualitative, and very few studies are empirically based. They were only able to include 25 studies that lent themselves to a statistical meta-analysis (which they recognized as presenting a limitation to their own study). Baker and Soden

(1997) summarize the methodological flaws found to date in parent involvement research into four areas: use of non-experimental design, lack of isolation of parent involvement effects, inconsistent definitions of parent involvement, and non-objective measures of parent involvement. They also discuss the importance of program evaluations in this field. While recognizing that program evaluation may be the most challenging form of applied education field research, they complain that these studies tend to be among the weaker studies in the field, plagued by the flaws described above.

In our own review, we observed that researchers have faced numerous methodological challenges, including choice of design, sampling, measurement, and maintaining internal/external validity. For instance, researchers often relied on measures of perceived parent involvement instead of actual involvement (Reynolds, 1992; Catsambis & Garland, 1997; and others using data from The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988; on only one perspective, usually the schools' (teachers' or principals') perception of parent involvement (Izzo et al., 1999; Carey, Lewis & Farris, 1998; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000); on self-report surveys and questionnaires (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Sanders, Epstein & Connors-Tadros, 1999); or on retrospective information, when surveys or interviews ask information about involvement activities in the past (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). These data collection strategies tend to distort or bias the findings.

Another challenge, tied to the lack of theories and frameworks, is that there are very few large-scale data sets that are longitudinal and reflect the kinds of questions that researchers need to address as they conduct deeper and richer studies. The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88) is the most comprehensive data set on parent involvement, including data from parents of more than 24,000 eighth-grade students across the country. However, this data set has numerous limitations that contribute to the weakness of the many studies that rely on it. The NELS:88 does not include information about the initiator of contact, the length of the contact, or the quality of involvement. Only one of the top six parent involvement activities ranked as important to urban and minority parents and students (Xu, 2001) is included in NELS:88 indicators for parent involvement. The data set is not highly generalizable beyond the middle school age group. Finally, the NELS:88 are non-experimental data and can only be used to determine associations between variables, not cause and effect (Simon, 2000). Epstein and Lee (1995) suggest that researchers look at other national surveys and collect focused data in local, state, and regional surveys or field studies to assess the effects of particular parent involvement practices over time.

### **Disconnect between qualitative and quantitative research**

Currently, the bulk of quantitative research focuses on the effects of parent and community connections, while the qualitative research focuses on processes and

the “how to” of making connections. Most quantitative studies (Muller, 1998, and others using NELS:88 data) are testing details about impact without making connections to theory. Most qualitative studies (for example, Peña, 2000; Tapia, 2000) try to examine the factors or conditions that make these connections happen, but few are connecting this process-oriented information to results. Although many of these qualitative studies are using theoretical concepts as a point of departure for their research questions and design (for example, Mapp, 1999), few are attached to theory or models of family and community connections with schools. As a result, these two bodies of research do not inform each other well. Very few studies connect the information gleaned from quantitative and qualitative studies or are designed to cover the gamut of information that is needed to inform the implementation of effective practices.

### Building a Stronger Research Base

Taken as a whole, the current body of research in family and community connection with schools has helped inform many facets of the field. However, as the previous section points out, there is a growing need for a stronger research base that can more clearly and definitively inform further research, theory, practice, and policy. In particular, this section highlights the two areas where more work would greatly help advance the research base: further theoretical development and a diverse and innovative approach to methodology.

#### **Need for theoretical development**

There is a critical need to take the body of research we have and build additional theoretical models and conceptual frameworks that can propel us into the next stage of research. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) argue that research would benefit substantially from increasing use of theoretically-based predictions about involvement, saying:

Careful use of theory, the derivation of warranted hypotheses, and the design of studies enabling carefully crafted tests of hypotheses, promise considerable additions to our collective understanding, not only of what happens but also why it happens—e.g., through what mechanisms and under what conditions do specific elements of the parent involvement process influence critical student attributes and outcomes. (p. 10)

Family and community connection frameworks could test the relationship between different components, address the problem of unclear and overlapping definitions, and provide greater understanding of the predictors and impacts of connections. Researchers can begin to thoroughly examine a concept as they use theories and frameworks in a variety of settings, with a variety of samples ranging in population characteristics and size, thus isolating a variety of

variables to understand the relationship between them. Achieving this breadth of scope is necessary to build a core body of research that can truly support practice.

Theorists and researchers have emphasized the need for a multidimensional conceptualization of parent involvement that accounts for the distinction between parent- and school-initiated parent involvement and relies on ratings by multiple reporters (Kohl et al., 2000; Ho Sui-Chu, 1997). Kohl et al. in particular believe that making this distinction may help explain some of the contradictory research findings that have associated parent involvement with both positive and negative outcomes. Further, a 1994 study by Kohl and colleagues (as cited in Kohl et al.) pointed to the quality of the parent-child relationship as being more strongly associated with child outcomes than the amount of parent contact. Based on this study, these researchers argue that the quality of the involvement is another important component of any theoretical framework or model of parent involvement.

However, none of the models found in the literature account for parent or teacher perceptions of the quality of involvement. Kohl et al. (2000) have developed a theoretical model and empirically validated it, yielding six reliable parent involvement dimensions. The first three relate to types and purpose of involvement: parent-teacher contact to facilitate monitoring of a child's school progress and homework assistance, parent involvement in school activities, and parent involvement directly with a child at home to facilitate intellectual stimulation and school success. The second three aim at measuring the quality of parent involvement: the quality of the relationship between parent and teacher, the teacher's perception of the parent's value of education, and the parent's satisfaction with the child's school. This model has not yet been used in studies by other researchers.

There is also a need for hierarchical models for defining involvement and outcomes. It is important that these models consider the full range of definitions and outcomes of school, family, and community connections, as described in the previous sections of this document. Most current frameworks tend to emphasize programmatic or activity-oriented parent and community involvement. Relationship-building elements and other process-based aspects of family and community connections should be included (Hirota et al., 2000; Mapp, 1999). The variety of outcomes of these connections, including the impact they have on all stakeholders, should also be featured in the development of new theoretical models. Community organizers for school reform have also called for the development of indicators that reflect the outcomes and the process of their work (Lewis & Henderson, 1998).

It is also important that new models consider local context, including geographic, socio-economic and cultural contexts. It is unlikely that one model can

explain the interactions between all communities, families, and schools. The challenge for researchers and theorists is to create models that are well-informed by local realities and experiences and that are flexible enough to adapt to the local needs. Models have been developed that take into consideration particular cultural and geographic characteristics, but they have received very little attention in research. The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), for example, has created a parent-centered model and process that focuses on parent leadership in a child's education. It encompasses four types of parent involvement with schools: parents as teachers, parents as resources, parents as decision-makers, and parents as leaders and trainers (Montemayor & Romero, 2000). Each type values and acknowledges the assets that families from all cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic groups, and geographical areas bring to their children's education.

Finally, additional conceptual models for family and community connections with schools should draw from theoretical advances, concepts, and ideas from other disciplines beyond education. Researchers have started to expand their thinking in particular studies with positive results, but have not yet incorporated these ideas into models that can be further tested by others. For example, researchers have used social capital theory (Coleman, 1988, as cited in Ho Sui-Chu, 1997) as a way to understand and study the strategies that are needed to integrate family and community involvement in the change process in urban public schools. One study (Shirley, 1997) has measured social capital by the amount of concentrated and stable adult supervision and tutoring of children at home and the density of social ties between students, parents, teachers, and the community. Another researcher (Ho Sui-chu, 1997) has proposed a conceptual framework that indicates the relationships between school factors, family factors, parent involvement, and students' learning outcomes by using the construct of "capital" (economic, political and social). Social capital could prove to be a very useful concept in developing a model that emphasizes process- or relationship-focused forms of connections.

Urban ecology of schools is another rich theoretical area that holds promise for creating models that are flexible and account for local context. Researchers are pointing to the need to explore the greater urban context in which schools exist to fully understand the connections between changes in the urban environment and their effect on schools (Kantor & Brenzel, 1993, as cited in Bartelt, 1997). Recent work highlights empirical relationships between forces affecting the ways in which cities grow and decline and educational development (Bartelt; Yancey & Saporito, 1997). Researchers must recognize the close relationship between an economic situation, family structure, and educational participation. Situations such as families with single parents and parents with several jobs also need to be addressed to inform school, family, and community involvement practices.

### **Need for a diverse and innovative approach to methodology**

Although conducting research in this field is extremely challenging, as noted by Baker and Soden (1997), the development of theories and conceptual frameworks will help overcome some of the challenges of methodology, as researchers will be able to develop more precise and well-informed research questions. At that point, researchers will then be able to select the most appropriate design, taking into account its inherent limitations to make adjustments appropriate to the particular study. Addressing other methodological issues, such as measures, samples, internal/external validity, and analysis, will also contribute to a better body of research.

Qualitative and quantitative methods inform different facets of the research. Qualitative studies paint a rich, local picture and lend insight to the process. However, by design they do not tell us if the trend extends beyond the observations. These results should inform theory and conceptual development as well as subsequent quantitative studies that would indicate if these are broader trends. Baker and Soden (1997) openly advocate for the use of the true experiment as the design that adequately overcomes all threats to internal validity in education research. The critical component of this design, random assignment to the control and experimental groups, rules out pre-test differences between groups, so that post-test differences can be attributed to the independent variable. However, Dryfoos (1998a) maintains that experimental designs with random assignment are not feasible in school settings, and that finding and maintaining control groups is arduous and expensive. For example, schools that are located in disadvantaged neighborhoods can have turnover of students as high as 50 percent in one year, making it difficult for a researcher to keep the random experimental and control groups intact. Schorr (1997) also discusses the difficulty of experimental designs using random assignment as the only sources of reliable knowledge. She argues that other designs, considered “flawed alternatives” to experimental design, may provide less certainty about the cause of observed effects, but do offer a broader range of information that may be more useful in making judgments about what really matters.

To ease researchers’ ability to compare their findings with work of others, and to build upon existing knowledge in a systematic fashion, researchers will need to develop and validate common instruments for measuring parent involvement across a variety of settings. Some researchers argue that it would be better to use direct observation of parental behavior. New assessment tools such as the Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ) (Fantuzzo et al., 2000) are being constructed to study multiple parent involvement variables. The FIQ has met multiple construct validity criteria and yielded three stable dimensions of parent involvement: school-based involvement, home-based involvement, and home-school conferencing.

Other authors argue that because the process and impact of parent and community connections with schools is so complex, standard research methods and indicators for measuring the impact of connections are not able to capture information fully (Honig et al, 2001; Montemayor & Romero, 2000; Schorr, 1997). For instance, Honig et al. point out that most of the current research reduces community contexts to uni-dimensional indicators, such as poverty rates, violence, and the number of community organizations, and correlates these with other indicators of child/youth development and learning. This approach can be problematic because it focuses on the correlation of economic and other resources and relationships to outcomes, and not on what enables children and youth to take advantage of these resources and relationships in ways that may lead to favorable outcomes.

In other cases the challenge involves isolating the effects of a single factor from others. This becomes even more difficult when the effect of a factor is not necessarily directly related to a measurable outcome. Montemayor & Romero (2000) illustrate this challenge when they describe the difficulties of examining the role and measuring the effects of parent leadership in education, in the midst of other factors. Most would agree that parents ultimately make a critical difference in ensuring the quality of public education for their children by taking on leadership roles, but current research methodologies do not allow for the full measurement of the results of these actions.

Some researchers are beginning to make use of new advances in statistical methodology, tools, and technology that contribute to better quantitative research. Recent studies (Ho Sui-Chu, 1997; McWilliam et al., 1999) have used Hierarchical Linear Modeling, which allows researchers to look at multiple factors and outcomes simultaneously. Evaluation studies of the more formal strategies, programs, or initiatives in the field (for example, Desimone et al., 2000) have also been a source of data on both process and outcomes.

Schorr (1997) presents at least four attributes that new approaches in methodology should have: (a) they build on a strong theoretical and conceptual base, (b) they emphasize shared interests between researchers and subjects, (c) they employ multiple methods and perspectives, and (d) they offer both rigor and relevance. She comments that using theory as a starting point is in the finest tradition of social sciences, where it is important to “construct conceptual maps that link one thing to another” (Knapp, 1995, as cited in Schorr). When it comes to disentangling such complex forces as the effects of communities, families, or schools on children, parents, or school staff, the most powerful tools are not statistical but conceptual. Therefore, it is essential to ground both design and measurement in theory. Theory-based methodologies help us determine what is working in situations where statistical analysis alone cannot provide the needed answers. Combining outcome measures with an understanding of the process that produced the outcomes can shed light both on the extent of change and on how the change occurred (Schorr).

## Summary

What practitioners and policymakers really want is a single breakthrough study that resoundingly and unequivocally provides both concrete evidence about the impact of family and community connections with schools and a recipe to make it happen. But this is not likely to happen. New developments in research design and methodology that better link quantitative and qualitative research, and more and improved conceptual models to use in the research, can move the field toward a stronger research base. Epstein and Sanders (2000) believe there is much to learn and that:

As research proceeds and improves, researchers must continue to ask deeper questions, employ better samples, collect useful data, create more fully specified measurement models and conduct more elegant analyses to more clearly identify the results of particular practices and partnerships. (p. 290)

They also say it is important to conduct research that improves education policies and school partnership practices. Studies are needed at all grade levels, in differently organized schools, in varied locations, and with students and families with diverse racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as suggested by Epstein and Sanders (2000). Baker and Soden (1997) outline several advances that would support some of the improvements needed in the research: funding allocations to applied educational research and program evaluations must increase, a new level of partnership must be forged between practitioners and researchers to enable the use of experimental procedures in service settings, and program staff concerns related to random assignment and potentially intrusive data collection procedures must be addressed.



# Issue 4 - Critical Areas for Research in Family and Community Connections with Schools

Our review of the literature revealed a number of critical research areas that are receiving much attention in research and practice. The purpose of this section is to highlight these critical areas, as well as to suggest directions for future research. The areas discussed in this section are:

- Forging connections with families from culturally diverse backgrounds
- Connecting families with schools in homework help
- Connecting school, family, and community for effective school reform
- Connecting school, family, and community through developmental approaches and integrated service delivery
- Connecting school, family, and community to support transitions throughout the education system
- Developing process-based approaches to make connections
- Preparing educators and other school personnel to make connections between schools, families, and communities

Within each of the areas listed above, both *promising directions* and *research needs* within the area will be discussed. The *promising directions* sections center on the new thinking and research that have begun to emerge in the field. For each of these promising directions, key ideas are presented, as well as suggestions for ways that the field can continue to build on the research that is currently taking place. The *research needs* sections discuss gaps or inconsistencies in the current thinking and research that require additional research in the future. By beginning to address these research needs, the field can begin to develop more conclusive evidence to support the development of successful school, family, community connections.

The purpose of this section is to highlight the critical areas, as well as to suggest directions for future research.

## Forging Connections with Families from Culturally Diverse Backgrounds

Connecting with families from diverse backgrounds has been a subject of interest, debate, and research. The importance of reaching out to diverse families has become even more evident as greater accountability policies are implemented and schools are held responsible for ensuring that all children are educated to high standards. However, we are only beginning to understand the ways that diverse families are already involved in their children's education and how to engage them in new ways. McCollum (1996) lays out an agenda for future research that includes a careful examination of what is actually known about culturally different families, their attitudes regarding education, and how they support their children's education through their extended family and informal social networks. Based on our review of the literature, the following topics are promising directions that have emerged in the field or are areas in which further research is needed to build conclusive evidence.

### Promising Directions

- ***Strategies of diverse families whose children are successful in school*** Research has begun to explore the involvement patterns of parents from diverse cultural backgrounds whose children have been successful in the school system. In their study of parental involvement among low-income African American families of high- and low-achievers, Gutman and McLoyd (2000) concluded that both sets of families recognized the importance of their children's education but had very different strategies for helping their children reach their educational goals. Another study (Yan, 1999) found that families of successful African American students possessed average or above average social capital (measured by parent-teen interactions, parent-school interactions, parent-parent interactions, and family norms) and equal or higher levels of school contact than successful white students and non-successful African American families. A recent study of Hispanic high-performing schools by Scribner et al. (1999) documents some of the ways that Hispanic parents connect with these schools, with positive impacts for their children. Future research can continue to build our understanding of how these families are supporting their children's success in school.
- ***Involvement patterns of diverse families that are culturally specific or different from mainstream involvement activities*** Research is also beginning to document the ways in which cultural minority parents interact with their children that support learning, yet differ from more mainstream or middle class approaches (Cairney, 2000; Yonezawa, 2000). The strategies documented in this body of research reflect the cultural practices of the home that support success in school. One recent study explored the non-traditional ways Hispanic parents tend to be involved in their children's education, which are not necessarily recognized by educators as parent involvement (Lopez,

2001). Further research is needed to delve deeply into the connections that diverse families create that traditional indicators do not recognize and to consider the reasons why some diverse families might not be involved in the more traditional ways. Building a body of knowledge about the specific practices of various cultural groups can support the validation of those practices by school personnel and may support the sharing of effective practices across cultural groups.

### **Research Needs**

- ***The effect of family characteristics on family-school connections*** Researchers have explored the effects that family characteristics such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and cultural background have on family involvement in education, yet the body of research reviewed for this synthesis still presents an unclear picture. Some studies have found that these variables are not factors, and that non-majority families are as involved as majority families when they are given opportunities to be involved (Kohl et al., 2000; Marcon, 1999a). Others have found family characteristics to be a significant factor affecting the level, extent, and forms of involvement (Carey et al., 1998; Ho Sui-Chu, 1997). Further research is needed to understand how or if family characteristics affect family involvement.
  
- ***Perceptions of appropriate family involvement within various cultural groups*** There is a need to better understand different cultural groups' perceptions of appropriate involvement and to understand how these perceptions may be similar or different from the perceptions of school personnel and majority group parents. McCollum (1996) suggests that educators in the United States tend to believe that parents should intervene in their children's learning, while immigrant parents often come from cultures where the proper role of a concerned parent is not to intervene in the school's business or question the teacher's practices and expertise. A better understanding of the perceptions that different groups hold would support the development of appropriate outreach and involvement strategies.

### Connecting Families with Schools in Homework Help

Parent involvement in homework help is a key area of research in the field of family and community connections with schools, as it is a primary way that parents are involved with their children's education. Recently, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) examined a broad body of literature to understand the parameters of parents' involvement in student homework and the influence of that involvement on related student outcomes. They suggest that the body of empirical work on homework help might be strengthened by more theoretically grounded research focused specifically on the content, processes, and outcomes of

parents' involvement in homework. In particular, they suggest that research should explore parents' motivations for engaging in homework help, the dynamics of effective parent-child interactions during homework involvement, and the specific mechanisms of involvement that influence student outcomes. Based on our review of the literature, the following topics are promising directions that have emerged in the field or are areas in which further research is needed to build conclusive evidence.

### **Promising Directions**

- ***New concepts of homework help*** Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) have begun to unbundle both the process and outcomes of parental homework help. Their work suggests new ways to conceptualize homework help and understand its impact on student outcomes. They suggest that parents' involvement activities can influence student outcomes through a variety of activities such as modeling, reinforcement, and direct instruction. In addition, this work begins to link parent's homework involvement with broader student outcomes, such as student attitudes towards homework, perceptions of personal competence, and self-regulation. Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s work in conceptualizing and defining the processes and outcomes of parental homework helps provide a basis for furthering the field's understanding of the various activities that parents engage in to support effective homework completion.
- ***Parent training for homework help*** Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) have suggested that parents become involved with homework because they believe they should be involved, that their involvement makes a difference, and that it is wanted and expected. However, the literature also suggests that parents often wish they knew more about teachers' goals for homework and how to be more effective in their help. One promising strategy emerging in the literature for involving parents effectively in homework help seems to be providing training to parents on subject-specific strategies that they can implement at home that support student learning (Faires et al., 2000). A study of literacy practices in Latino families found that when mothers were given explicit guidelines on how to do literacy activities with their children at home, they reported substantially more activities directly related to their children's schooling (Melzi et al., 2000). Future research can build understanding of how to most effectively train parents to ensure that they have the skills to provide homework help.
- ***Interactive homework assignments*** The development of interactive homework assignments (homework that requires parent-child interaction as part of the activity) has also shown promise as a way of supporting parent involvement and student achievement. Homework activities that are explicitly designed to

encourage interaction between parents and children have shown positive results for increasing achievement in several subject areas, including science and language arts (Epstein et al., 1997; Van Voorhis, 2000). Van Voorhis suggests that well-designed interactive assignments can have a number of positive outcomes: they can help students practice study skills, prepare for class, participate in learning activities, and develop personal responsibility for homework, as well as promote parent-child relations, develop parent-teacher communication, and fulfill policy directives from administrators. Future research can continue to build understanding of the kinds of interactive assignments that best foster parent involvement and student achievement.

### Research Needs

- ***Effects of parental help style*** One ongoing concern seems to be with issues of parenting style and how it impacts the type and effect of the help parents provide. More than one study of the relationship between parenting style and homework help have found that more supportive but indirect parenting styles are associated with help that promotes student learning (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Shumow, 2001; Shumow & Lomax, 2001). One study found that the “autonomy support” style of parenting, applied to homework help, was associated with higher standardized test scores, higher grades, and more completed homework, while the “direct involvement” style was associated with lower student outcomes (Cooper et al., 2000). Further research is needed to fully understand the relationship between parenting style, homework help and the outcomes that are produced.
- ***School support of parental homework help*** Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) also describe the importance of continuing efforts to develop and test well-designed approaches to improving school invitations to parental homework involvement. These topics for research are particularly important in light of findings that many parents assume that they should be involved in homework and value specific guidance for involvement from schools and teachers. This occurs across socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographic groups. These authors suggest that although parents express positive feelings about homework, they have concerns about homework, their limitations in subject-matter knowledge, and effective helping strategies. More research is needed on how school personnel can effectively support parental homework help.
- ***Homework help at different grade levels*** Changes in curriculum, as well as the maturity and development of the child, suggest the need to explore variations in parental homework involvement and the impact of the involvement as the child gets older. Walker and Hoover-Dempsey (2001) found that there are significant differences in the ways that older and younger children invite

their parents to help with homework and in the parental help that results from these invitations. The evidence indicates a wide gap between older students' invitations to involvement and the levels of parental assistance they receive, suggesting that these students may not be receiving as much help with homework as they desire. The authors concluded that despite an overall decline in homework involvement as student age increases, some active homework relationships do seem to persist. However, further research is needed to understand the relationships between the child's age and the amount and appropriateness of assistance he or she receives from parents.

### Connecting School, Family, and Community for Effective School Reform

There is a growing body of literature on the role and impact of family and community members as participants, advocates, and full partners in school reform efforts (Fege, 2000; Hirota et al., 2000; Honig, 2001; Shirley, 1997; Schorr, 1997). Family and community involvement in school reform seems to be a key connection that is surfacing in the field, particularly as standards-based reform policies are implemented in communities across the United States. Lewis (1999) has documented that parents who are organized and who seek powerful ways to participate in school reform have been a crucial element of school improvement beyond the traditional professional approaches to improvement. The literature also suggests that there is an important role for community organizing and constituency-building work in systemic school reform efforts. Based on our review of the literature, the following topics are promising directions that have emerged in the field or are areas in which further research is needed to build conclusive evidence.

#### **Promising Directions**

- ***Impact of community-based efforts*** Recent research by Hirota et al. (2000) suggests that community-based collaboratives for school reform can have a policy impact on school systems and can significantly influence education policy discussions that can, in turn, contribute to more effective school reform. The collaboratives studied by Hirota et al. gained a voice in policy debates, strengthened the institutional groundwork for reform, promoted the legitimacy of stakeholder groups, raised the visibility of education issues, and helped prepare community-based organizations to take the next step toward systemic school change. However, the authors cautioned that it is difficult to draw direct links between these collaborative efforts and policy changes, as there are many factors that impact the adoption and implementation of policies. Because of the complexity of this kind of collaborative policy effort, further research is needed to understand the process for building and sustaining collaboratives and for taking action for school reform.

- ***Community organizing as a strategy for reform***<sup>3</sup> Community organizing for school reform is beginning to grow as a phenomenon in communities across the country. One promising approach is the Indicators Project on Education Organizing (Gold et al., 2000). This collaborative action research project is in the process of examining the role of community organizing in developing a community constituency for reform and in improving teaching and learning in public schools. It seeks to provide a detailed description of what community organizing for education reform looks like, as well as to identify the contextual factors that shape the strategies and influence groups' accomplishments. As community organizing develops as a strategy to support both school reform efforts and connections between schools, families, and communities, additional research is needed to document both its processes and outcomes.

### Research Needs

- ***Role and impact of family and community in reform efforts*** There is a need to further document the role and impact of family- and community-initiated school reform efforts. With the exception of a few authors (Gold et al., 2000; Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Shirley, 1997), these efforts have not been subject to extensive research. Finally, there is a need to study the impact of involvement in school reform efforts on individual parents and community members, as well as the community at large. There is some evidence that the roles that family and community members play in school reform efforts can have implications for the larger community as reform participants build capacity and skills that can be transferred to other arenas and community issues (Shirley).
- ***Impact of reform involvement on future connections*** There is also a need for researchers to explore how parent and community involvement in reform efforts impacts how the school approaches future connections with families. Many successful school reform efforts have built in parent and community

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<sup>3</sup> The Indicators Project on Education Organizing, a research project sponsored by the Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, offers the following working definition for community organizing groups (which can be independent, associated with a national network, and/or have a university connection). They generally:

- are active in urban or rural areas with a concentration of low-income, often racially, ethnically and linguistically minority families;
- target schools/districts that are under-performing; use social processes of relationship building with parents and community members to identify shared concerns about children's schooling;
- take collective actions that challenge inequity; develop a powerful membership base and local leadership for the purpose of leveraging change (Gold et al., 2000).

support and involvement elements (Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995; Shirley, 1997; Desimone, et al., 2000). More information is needed about how this inclusion in the reform process impacts the subsequent roles that family and community members play in the life of the school and how the school connects with the larger community.

- ***Conditions that support parent and community involvement in reform efforts***

In two publications, Lewis and Henderson (1997, 1998) have discussed several areas of inquiry specific to community organizing for school reform for researchers to continue to explore. One area focuses on the elements (accountability systems, governance structures, and policy contexts) that must be in place before parents can be meaningfully involved in school improvement. Sarason (1995) suggests that there is a need to develop governance structures that build trust and respect among all parties involved in schools before any reform efforts can begin to make a difference for students. Lewis and Henderson also suggest that further research is needed about how to engage families, especially low-income families, in discussions about the key components of reform: high standards, fair assessment, and good teaching. These discussions will further the development of a common language and vision of what constitutes a successful school.

### Connecting School, Family, and Community through Developmental Approaches and Integrated Service Delivery

Youth development researchers and theorists are calling for new ways of thinking about young people and how adults and organizations can fully support their healthy development (Benson, Scales, Leffert & Roehlkepartain, 1999; Council of Chief State School Officers & the Forum for Youth Investment, 2001).<sup>4</sup>

Developmental theory is influencing the way that practitioners and researchers view the role of schools within a larger context of youth-serving organizations. Connections between the student's primary environments—school, community, and family—are key elements of a developmental approach. As developmental theory continues to be applied in research and practice, there are a number of promising approaches and areas that need further research.

### Promising Directions

- ***Utilizing family and community connections to support child development***

Several authors (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999a; Dryfoos, 1998b;

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<sup>4</sup> While there are a number of definitions of “youth development,” most of these approaches include the following elements: 1) broad goals for schools and other youth-serving organizations “to promote not only problem reduction but preparation for adulthood”; 2) increased options “for instruction and involvement by improving the quality and availability of supports, services, and opportunities offered” to young people; and 3) redefinition of strategies “in order to ensure a broad scale of supports and opportunities for young people that reach beyond the status quo” (Council of Chief State School Officers & the Forum for Youth Investment, 2001, p. 82).

2000; Lawson, 1999) have begun to explore how family and community connections with schools can facilitate linkages between all of the environments that affect a child's development. These developmental approaches seek to reduce health, psychological, and other barriers so that children are ready to learn. They also seek to better understand the learning and development that take place in contexts other than schools. These authors suggest that both addressing barriers to learning and learning in other contexts can be important pieces to include in school reform efforts. Additional research can help identify those connections between schools, community organizations, and families that can support a developmental approach to meeting children's needs.

- ***Utilizing family and community connections to support community development***  
Developmental theory can also be applied at a broader level, as researchers and practitioners explore the role of the school in the life and development of the community as a whole. Some rural education researchers embrace this perspective, as rural schools are often the largest local employer and one of the largest community institutions. The literature suggests that integrated school-community projects, such as service learning and entrepreneurial education, can benefit a rural community by:
  - stimulating the local economy
  - making the community a more appealing place to live by providing needed services or improving the local environment
  - strengthening the bonds of community by documenting and celebrating local culture and history (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998).

Several authors (Lewis & Henderson, 1998; Shirley, 1997) suggest that increased leadership capacity that results from parent and community engagement in school reform results not only in improved schools, but also in stronger social networks and capacity throughout the community. As we continue to conduct research on school, family, and community connections, there is a need to capture those outcomes that support enhanced community development.

- ***Full service and community schools***<sup>5</sup> Developmental theory has frequently

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<sup>5</sup> According to Joy Dryfoos (1998a), a prominent writer on full-service and community schools, “a full-service community school integrates the delivery of quality education with whatever health, social, and cultural services are required in that community. This kind of institution draws on both school resources and outside community agencies that come into the school and join forces to provide ‘seamless,’ ‘one-stop’ environments” (p. 1). She adds that full-service schools represent an effort to make human and social service agencies partners in the education process, while simultaneously making school systems partners in the delivery of human and social services. Abrams and Gibbs (2000) describe full service schools as an “attempt to integrate programs such as health care, mental health services, parent education, or after-school care into the schoolwide change process” (p. 80).

been translated into practice as “full-service” or “community” schools. This school model seeks to integrate and connect various programs into comprehensive and multifaceted service delivery systems in order to support student success. There is evidence of positive impacts from these integrated approaches, including better family functioning and parent involvement, healthy youth development and improved social behavior, improved academic achievement and learning outcomes, and enhanced community life (Dryfoos, 1998a, 2000). Evaluations of community schools show an increase in mathematics and reading test scores, as well as improved attendance and decreased suspensions (Dryfoos, 2000). While there is evidence that this model holds promise for improved student, family, and community results, further research is needed, as indicated below.

### **Research Needs**

- ***Further research and evaluation of full-service and community schools*** Despite a number of program evaluations and research studies that have been released, integrated services for comprehensive child and youth development remain an example of implementation outpacing research. Recent funding from a variety of sources, including the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants through the United States Department of Education, has resulted in the widespread development of community and full-service school initiatives. However, a General Accounting Office (GAO) report to Congress (Shaul, 2000) found that most school-community collaboratives have not been rigorously evaluated to determine their effect on student achievement. They found that many programs can point to improvement in some form of student outcomes, such as attendance or higher graduation rates, but cannot link improvements directly to the initiatives. The report also found that many programs that are seeing positive results do not have the means (funding, staff, or time) to conduct evaluations or publish them. As a result, these integrated approaches have not been evaluated and researched to the extent that would be desirable, to understand both the complex process of fully integrating the services and the outcomes of these integrated efforts.
- ***Conditions and skills that support service integration*** To take a truly developmental approach, proponents suggest that comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated continuums of school-community connections are required. These initiatives involve much more than providing a few services, recreation, and enrichment activities at school campuses. Additional research is needed to understand the conditions that support the successful development of integrated service approaches and to facilitate the “formal and institutionalized sharing of a wide spectrum of responsibilities and resources” (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999b, p. 1). Specifically, we need a better under-

standing of the governance structures that support integration, the barriers that must be addressed for services to be delivered in school facilities, and the skills that are needed by both school and social services personnel to support integration. The literature also emphasizes the critical role of the principal in full-service and community schools. According to Lawson (1999), effective principals of these schools must build knowledge and competence in four areas: collaborative educational leadership, antipoverty strategies, family-centered practices, and advocacy for special needs children, youth, and families. They must adopt a new “mental model,” recognizing the other developmental contexts for children’s learning and healthy development as important pieces missing in school reform. More research is needed on the kinds of skills and preparation that school leaders, in particular, need in order to take an integrated approach to supporting student development.

### Connecting School, Family, and Community to Support Student Transitions throughout the Education System

The literature suggests that a strong and seamless connection between the home, community, and school facilitates children’s transitions into and throughout the school system, leading to an environment that supports student success. Each of the major transitions—Kindergarten, middle school, and high school transitions—are critical times when all students need additional support to continue to achieve academically. Based on our review of the literature, the following topics are promising directions that have emerged in the field or are areas in which further research is needed to build conclusive evidence.

#### **Promising Directions**

- ***Family involvement for Kindergarten readiness*** The importance of “readiness” for school, and its implications for parents, has been the subject of extensive research and attention. One recent study suggests that fostering parent support and parent learning about Kindergarten readiness can help ensure that children are adequately prepared to start school (Starkey & Klein, 2000; Perroncel, 2000). Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (1999) suggest that a network of social connections that support children and families during the Kindergarten transition is needed, including interactions between teachers and children, children and peers, parents and teachers, and preschool teachers and Kindergarten teachers. While there is a growing body of evidence about the elements that support Kindergarten readiness, there is also a need to better integrate the early childhood development literature and the K-12 literature to fully understand the connections that make a difference. For example, Fantuzzo et al. (2000) conducted a study to assess parent involvement for children in comprehensive day care, Head Start, Kindergarten, and first grade. Studies such as this can begin to build understanding of how

parent involvement changes from pre-school to Kindergarten. Future research can also build our understanding of the specific types of family and community connections that provide a strong support net for children, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they prepare to enter Kindergarten.

- ***Family and community involvement in middle and high school*** Despite the continued prevalence of the myth that family and community connections are primarily important at the elementary school level, researchers have begun exploring the effects of school, family, and community connections during transitions to middle and high school. Gutman and Midgley (2000) found that during the transition from elementary to middle school, both school factors and family factors were important to support academic achievement in African American students. Another study found that, contrary to popular thinking, middle and high school students do want their parents to be involved, especially in terms of homework help and other home-based types of support and involvement (Catsambis & Garland, 1997). This study found that parent involvement does not decline, as expected, but rather shifts as students move into middle and high school. Although they continued to be involved, parents reported increasing dissatisfaction with their role in relationship to the school, especially involving school policy (Catsambis & Garland). These results point to the importance of continued exploration of the needs that students have during the transition to middle school and to high school, and roles that families play in supporting these transitions. There is also some evidence that the involvement of social service agencies and school social workers can be particularly beneficial during the middle and high school transitions (Marcon, 1999b). More research is needed on how to use these professionals further to connect families and communities in supporting student transitions.

### **Research Needs**

- ***Post-secondary transitions*** School-to-Work and other school-community connections programs show evidence of facilitating and supporting student success during the transition from high school to work, career, or post-secondary education (Hughes et al., 2001). However, additional research is needed to understand how family and community connections can support successful transitions as students leave high school and begin careers and post-secondary education.
- ***Rural Kindergarten readiness*** One study suggested that rural children in particular face challenges as they transition into Kindergarten. Perroncel (2000) found that rural schools are not ready to help children of different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds to develop their individual abilities so

they can be ready to learn. Connecting community resources to support the development of all young children’s abilities and opportunities to succeed in school was mentioned as one of the most important things rural schools may be able to do (Perroncel). Further research about support for Kindergarten readiness in rural areas is needed to understand the particular needs of these children, families, and schools, and how families and schools can become partners to meet those needs.

- ***Impact of early involvement on future connections and outcomes*** Miedel and Reynolds (1999) suggest that “parent involvement is an important component in early childhood programs and should be emphasized” and “implementing parent involvement activities during the early childhood years can provide a strong foundation for family-school relations that can promote successful transitions” (p. 398). Further research is needed to understand the relationship between early parent involvement and later student success and parent involvement as the student moves through the school system.

#### Developing Process-Based Approaches to Make Connections

The research on family and community connections with schools has generally emphasized formal and programmatic approaches to connections. However, there is also evidence that more one-on-one, relationship-oriented connections between educators, parents, and community members are a key factor in making connections and effectively supporting student achievement, school reform, and community development (Wynn et al., 2000; Adams & Christenson, 2000; Mapp, 1999; Scribner et al., 1999; Setisinger, 1996). Research has also suggested that relationship building and trust are at the core of successful school outreach and invitations. Community-based education reformers also observe that effective school-community connections depend on building strong, trusting, relationships between schools and parents and between parents and community advocates (Lewis & Henderson, 1998; Wynn et al.). Based on our review of the literature, the following topics are promising directions that have emerged in the field or are areas in which further research is needed to build conclusive evidence.

#### Promising Directions

- ***Role of intermediaries in building connections*** An emerging concept from the literature is that of an intermediary organization or individual as a bridge builder between schools, families, and the community (Honig, 2001; Cordiero & Kolek, 1996). These intermediaries are also referred to as “cultural brokers” and “boundary spanners.” Honig defines intermediary organizations as organizations that “literally sit between policymakers and [reform] implementers to increase the human, social, and fiscal capital for implementation” (p.1). They can also be “instrumental in facilitating the

ongoing functioning of connections in ways that clarify purposes and reinforce constructive practices” (Camino, 1998, as cited in Wynn et al., 2000, p. 30). Other studies point to the idea of a boundary-crossing ambassador who serves as a necessary link between multiple cultures, whether individual cultures or institutional cultures, to establish effective collaborations (Cordiero & Kolek). Future research can help build understanding of the roles and impacts of these intermediaries on school, family, and community connections, as well as the processes they use to build bridges.

- ***Impact of school outreach*** An important emerging finding in the research is the significant impact that school outreach and invitations to families and community members have on the level and quality of family and community connections. In at least three studies, it has been found to be a more important factor than family characteristics or previous student academic achievement (Van Voorhis, 2000; Simon, 2000; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000). Simon found that when schools reach out, and families and community members feel that the school is extending invitations at a personal level, they respond with greater attendance at school-based activities and greater family involvement at home. The unique role that schools play in initiating and setting the tone for connections with families and the community warrants further investigation. Researchers have also suggested that more research is needed about what motivates individual school staff members to reach out to parents and community and how school staff can be further motivated and supported in building these relationships.
  
- ***Public deliberation as an engagement strategy*** Public deliberation, in which people come together to engage in dialogue around issues, has been highlighted in the literature as a promising practice for involving communities in decision-making, supporting school reform, and sharing information (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000). It has also been suggested as a strategy for bringing diverse groups of people together to achieve understanding of—if not consensus on—a range of public issues, including education (Ashby, Garza & Rivas, 1998). Further, it has been cited as a strategy to bring education policymakers together with their constituents to develop broader input for decision-making, increased support for public education, and increased potential for community and school partnerships (Pan & Mutchler, 2000). The process of public deliberation shows promise as a connection strategy, and further research would build our understanding of its potential for producing positive impacts for a variety of stakeholders.

## Research Needs

- ***Factors that impact relationship-building*** The literature points out that there is a need to increase the *quality* of constructive interactions between parents and teachers instead of focusing solely on increasing the *number* of contacts. Izzo et al. (1999) found that the quality of teacher-parent interactions uniquely predicts improvement in both children’s behavior and their academic achievement. In order to improve the quality of interactions and relationships, we must develop a stronger understanding of the factors that impact these interactions between educators and parents. A number of factors and strategies that supported relationship-building were identified in the literature (Mapp, 1999; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Sanders, 2001), but further research is needed to help us clarify and understand how these factors and strategies are defined and related. Furthermore, additional measurements and benchmarks are needed in order to assess how these factors change and develop over the life of the relationship.
- ***Relationships in school and community connections*** There is a growing understanding of the role that relationships between staff in schools and community organizations play in the development of successful collaborations. Jehl et al. (2001) suggest that there are “sticking points,” rooted in differences in organizational cultures and values, that can hinder school-community connections. They suggest that these sticking points must be understood and addressed in order to build effective partnerships. Wynn et al. (2000) also suggest that relationships between personnel can be a key factor impacting the success of school and community connections. Also, although there are a growing number of schools offering school-based social services, these services are often disconnected from the school’s curriculum, core services, and programs. These disconnects can be exacerbated by the lack of personal relationships that build trust and understanding between school and community staff (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999a). The importance of these relationships in the development of successful school-community partnerships warrants further investigation by researchers.

### Preparing Educators and Other School Personnel to Make Connections between Schools, Families, and Communities

Although superintendents, principals, and teachers play an integral role in involving families in their children’s education, few educator preparation and certification programs include requirements in the area of family and community involvement (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Traditionally, educators have been prepared in isolation from the organizations and communities in which they will work. As a result, a serious discrepancy exists between the preparation educators receive and the connections they are expected to create

to benefit student achievement. The literature suggests that through ongoing pre-service and in-service training, educators can be better equipped with the skills needed to create relationships with parents and students. Based on our review of the literature, the following topics are promising directions that have emerged in the field or are areas in which further research is needed to build conclusive evidence.

### **Promising Directions**

- ***Educator attitudes and beliefs that facilitate connections*** Research is beginning to define the attitudes and beliefs held by educators that facilitate connections with family and community. Researchers suggest that individual educators need both a supportive belief system about family and community and a repertoire of tools and strategies for how to make connections. For instance, educators can benefit from a deconstruction of some of the myths about family and community involvement—that there is a “traditional” American family that is the “right” type of family, that family involvement is only critical to those students at-risk, or that poor and minority parents are not involved in their children’s education (Lopez, 2001; Setisinger, 1996). Setisinger refers to the work of Noddings (1995, as cited in Setisinger), which suggests that educators must believe that they are the most important catalyst for successful connections in order to make those connections happen. In addition, Noddings explains that educators’ caring attitudes can support the development of a partnership approach and mutual respect between parents and educators. Lopez suggests that educators must also understand the need for making greater efforts to partner with marginalized parents on parents’ own terms. As we begin to better understand the attitudes and beliefs that facilitate connections with families and community, further research is needed to understand how educators can be prepared and supported to develop these beliefs.
- ***Skills and attitudes of school principals that facilitate connections*** Bradshaw (1999) discusses principals’ skills and attitudes that support family and community connections with schools. She suggests that principals of family- and community-oriented schools profit from positive attitudes toward collaboration. Flexible thinking allows them to respond to and use important new information to facilitate connections. A belief that collaboration can address the complex needs of their students, preparation on obtaining and distributing information strategically, seeing problems in new ways, crafting solutions, and developing these skills in others all contribute to successful leadership in family- and community-oriented schools. Bradshaw also sees boundary spanning as a role for principals in schools with community and full-service programs. Boundary spanners work in the areas where organization boundaries and departments cross and overlap, using five types of

boundary spanning activities: filtering, transacting, buffering, representing, and protecting. Further research can build our understanding of how principals can be supported to develop these skills and attitudes to support successful connections.

- ***Promising pre-service preparation for educators*** University departments of education, in particular, play a key role in connecting schools, families and communities (Shartrand et al., 1997). The results of a study by Morris, Taylor, Knight, and Wasson (1996) confirmed that course experiences in family and community involvement made a significant difference in enhancing students' perceptions of their comfort and competence levels in planning and implementing parent involvement programs in schools. One recent research study suggests that beyond incorporating family and community connections issues into pre-service coursework and curriculum, educator preparation programs can provide their students with opportunities to experience family and community connections firsthand. Power and Perry (2000) at the University of Maine modeled school-family connections by involving their students' families in their university courses. They also provided internship opportunities for their students to work with family and community members of a local school district. Once these students became in-service teachers, they demonstrated strong beliefs in family involvement and an understanding of the difference it makes in the learning process. More work is needed to document, assess, and disseminate promising practices such as these to prepare pre-service educators to make effective connections with families and communities.

## **Research Needs**

- ***In-service preparation*** Currently, local districts and schools are expected to provide the professional development and training their staff needs in the area of family and community connections (Shartrand et al., 1997). However, this is not happening with enough frequency across the country's school systems. Kessler-Sklar and Baker's (2000) national survey of school district policies found that the percentage of districts with policies to train staff to work effectively with parents was very low. Shartrand et al. have documented that teachers need adequate training if they are going to be effective at forging family-community-school connections. Even when districts hire intermediary or specialized personnel such as parent liaisons or Title I coordinators to work with parents or community members, these staff members may have only minimal training or experience. More research is needed about how schools and school districts can provide adequate support and professional development so that educators and other school staff are prepared to work effectively with families and the community. Specifically, research is needed on how educators can receive support and develop skills that foster

involvement in the classroom, at the school, and at home with positive results for children, families, the school, and the community. Research should also include an examination of the barriers that schools face in providing appropriate professional development and support in the area of family and community connections.

### Summary

This section has reviewed promising directions and research needs in the field of family and community connections with schools. The *promising directions* that have been discussed highlight new research and thinking that holds great potential for furthering our understanding of effective connections and the positive outcomes they can produce. The *research needs* highlight areas in which research to date has been inconclusive or contradictory, or areas in which there are gaps in the current literature. By highlighting both these promising directions and research needs, we hope to continue moving the field forward to build conclusive evidence about effective connections that produce positive outcomes.



# Conclusion

In this synthesis we examined the recent literature in the field of family and community connections with schools. This review provides a broad picture of research findings and emerging issues or themes, and makes a strong case for the need for further research in the field.

A general knowledge of the research is no longer enough for those who lead school, family, and community connection initiatives to be credible and to lead successfully. It is hoped that this synthesis will provide these leaders a quick, comprehensive reference they may use in several ways—to build the case for an initiative, to support an ongoing initiative, to secure funds for implementation of an initiative, to maintain a successful initiative, or to discontinue the implementation of an ineffective school-family-community initiative.

The themes distilled from the broad array of literature reviewed also point to the need for more coherent and organized discussion about these issues among leaders and researchers around the country. It is hoped that this review may provide a baseline of knowledge for these discussions.

It is clear that family, school, and community connections can benefit children and youth from before the time they enter Kindergarten until after they have left our schools. Our charge as a field is to come together to address the issues highlighted in this document—to clarify the concept and outcomes of family and community connections with schools and to improve the quantity and quality of the research base available. In so doing, we will better understand these connections and create the knowledge needed to realize the potential of family, school, and community connections for student learning and students' lives.



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