

Family, School, and Community Connections Symposium:
New Directions for Research, Practice, and Evaluation
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Sponsored by

National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, TX

&

Harvard Family Research Project

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA

Opening remarks

Cathy Jordan, Program Manager, National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools,
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, TX

I'm delighted to be here and very excited about what we have in store for you here today. SEDL and the Harvard Family Research Project began their collaboration almost five years on a videoconference, and it was so successful that we decided to do something together again, and it has been a delightful experience and we thank all the staff and all the support and all the people here at the Gutman Center for helping us with this event today.

Mary Grassa O'Neill, Director, The Principal's Center, Harvard Graduate School of Education,
Cambridge, MA

Thank you for that very fine introduction and I am really excited to be here this morning, so good morning to all of you and on the behalf of the Harvard Graduate School of Education let me welcome you to our conference center and tell you how delighted we are to have you here today. The Harvard Family Research Project and the New Directions Symposium New Directions for Research, Practice, and Evaluation--you are in for a very, very exciting and interesting day. This symposium reflects the Harvard Graduate School of Education's real commitment to families, to schools, and to education and to community involvement every step of the way. It also underscores the focus that HGSE has on providing theory, research, and practice, and, in fact, when I had my interview to come in and work at Harvard, I remember saying to our wonderful dean, Ellen, are you hiring me to be a researcher and theorist, because I am actually a practitioner like many of you, although we have researchers and theorists in the audience as well. She said actually we are looking for a practitioner, so I said I think you have found the right person. I am happy to be here.

The Harvard Family Research Project is part of a new unit and that new unit is called, actually we affectionately call it RIO. We don't get to travel there but RIO is a catchy name if you can't remember it. It stands for Research, Innovation, and Outreach and the programs that are not within the degree programs of Harvard—all of the post degree or non-degree programs like the Harvard Family Research Project and like the Harvard Principal Center and like our Post-Degree Professional Development and like Harvard's Educational Publishing are all under the umbrella of Research, Innovation, and Outreach. I am delighted that we have the executive director of RIO with us today, Mr. Keith Collar and I would like him to stand up and be recognized and I would like you to know who he is. Let's give Keith a welcome. And the driving force at the Harvard's Research Project is our founder and director, Heather Weiss whom you have already had the pleasure of meeting.

I have had the opportunity to take a look at the list of the people who are here in this room and you are indeed an impressive group. And we have amongst us students and we have parents who are here in the parent role but many of us are parents not necessarily here in the parent role but in a more professional or an activist role. We have teachers, elementary school teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers. We have university professors, college professors; we have principals; we have policymakers. We have administrators, directors, volunteers, tutors, school district state and national leaders from such diverse places as HGSE but also the Kennedy School, NYU, the University of Toronto,

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the College of William and Mary, Framingham State College, Roger Williams University, Willamette University—I can't mention every single one because time won't allow it, but we come from all across the country; in fact outside the country. We have many participants from Canada, but we have people from our own wonderful state of Massachusetts and we welcome you here, but there are folks here from Maryland and Virginia, Texas, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Indiana, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, South Dakota, New Jersey and I could go on, but we really have come from far and wide and from a variety of places. Many of you are from the Department of Education or community-based organizations, parent and family networks and partnerships, and it really is so wonderful that we have all joined together here at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to talk about something that is so fundamental and is so important in the development of each and every child and that is families and communities and their involvement in our children's education and in their development.

Now as the director of the Principal Center, I am lucky enough to work with principals all over this country and all over this world because we have an international base and following as well, and I know from reading their applications to our institutes that one of the major concerns they have is, how do we get more parents involved, how do we get communities involved in the life of a school? So we know we are working in a very important area. I was asked this morning to speak about some of our observations as a former principal and a former superintendent and I hope I was imagining this but I thought some people –when they heard I had been a superintendent– sort of shook in their seats a little bit and sat up a little bit straighter. But I want you to know that one of my major goals working as both a principal and a superintendent was to find ways to get parents in the community involved.

Now principals are the school leaders. There are many other school leaders as well and good principals have a whole leadership team and they work with many people from a variety of roles, just like the roles that should be like a cross-section that we see at this morning's symposium. Principals set the tone for responsibility, for student achievement, for family involvement and setting this tone is critical because principals can make a decision that maybe is not important and what principals decide what is not important often gets overlooked in school. The climate and expectations for the school are set by the principal. If there is poor community involvement or poor parent involvement in a school, and the principal or the leadership team decides "Well, it's just poor. We keep trying but it just doesn't ever get any better." Two points I would like to make about that.

One, we have all learned that if we keep doing the same thing and expecting different results something must be seriously wrong with us. I mean, I have someone I work with who goes to the gym every single day and she is very, very thin. I too have a gym membership; I pay for it every month. One of my goals is to figure out how just paying for the membership could give me those health benefits that my colleague gets by going to the gym every day. I drop in periodically but I don't get there nearly as often as I should. But it's an example of how can you expect any results if you keep doing the same old thing. So you are going to hear a lot about the research in parent and community involvement today; you are going to hear some new things or some things that need to be reinforced. But it's very important to learn another thing and this is what I call one of the major myths of American education and that is that parents just really don't care. They're too busy; they really can't get involved; they don't have the time to do the things that we think they ought to do. When I was principal I was principle of an inner-city middle school in Boston in the Roxbury area for those who are familiar. Ninety-five percent of the students were on free and reduced lunch; they were students of color as well. And people said, well, you just can't get parents. Parents won't come out; parents had two and three jobs or these parents have lots of reasons why they can't come and they don't really care. I remember being there for the first parent-teacher conference. Some of you may have been to parent-teacher conferences where ten or twelve parents show up in a school that has 500 children and you look around and say, where is everybody and why don't we have more involvement here and that can happen. People just sort of said, oh, that's the way it is; Mary, we're a new middle school here. Parents don't have a way to get here; they aren't really interested, they aren't going to be involved. We were fortunate in the district I worked in to write grants—we were desperate for anything—the achievement was low; our youngsters came from very low socio-economic stratus. As I mentioned, free and reduced lunches. At the time there were 26 middle schools in Boston and we were the 25th lowest in terms of socio-economic income.

You can change a few things. The first thing we did was just to say report cards will be distributed at open house. You want your child's report card. Every parent does. You want your child's report card then you must come to the school. Hundreds of parents turned out to get those report cards. Now we weren't mean about it; we were just firm saying, "You must come here; we need to see you. You're our partners in the child's education and we want to meet you; we want to meet you face to face. We want to work with you." And of course you have to if you want to work with parents (I'm preaching to the converted here I understand) but you have to build in flexibility because some parents can't come in those seven hours you choose even if you did a morning or an evening or on a late afternoon. So we allowed teachers flexibility in their own schedules to meet with those parents one on one and individually. I can assure you that by the end of the report card distribution, we say virtually every single parent. We also did one on one interviews with parents and with

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children. Sometimes it was two-on-one, three-on-one, meaning two faculty members, two teachers, or a teacher and an aide, or a teacher and an administrator working with the parent and with the child talking about what did they care about their own achievement, did they understand what these test scores meant, talking with them in terms that they could understand. I'm not setting myself up as a success story; believe me, I told Heather I really didn't want to do that, but it is an example of the kinds of things we can do if we change the way we always do things, and there are many more ideas that are even better than that one.

They can come in and teach what they know; they can tutor students in things that they need to know and that's good way to involve parents. He said parents can also be involved as volunteers or as assistants. And they can work in the classrooms and there are many schools that adopt grandparents and a grandparent comes the same day every week. They work with youngsters who need extra help or do advanced work or read to children or whatever. Or parents who come in and run book discussion groups or the Great Books program or tutoring mathematics or whatever. He said, you know, parents can also be involved as activists; they can help with policies and procedures. He said parents can also be involved in schools by being learners along with the youngsters, whether they are learning how to use the latest computer software or learning how to use the computer at all or learning how to do something in the various shops that are around or they are learning what their youngsters are learning in those math and science fun nights that folks have, and he said they also can be involved as a decision maker: running for the school council, helping determine how the budget gets spent, helping determine some of the curriculum policies and practices. I thought that was a very, very good answer.

Heather Weiss, Director of the Harvard Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education,
Cambridge, MA

I'm Heather Weiss and I am the director of the Harvard Research Project and we've been pleased to work with SEDL in putting this event together and we are particularly pleased that we have all of you with us. You represent a very diverse experience and knowledge about families, schools, and communities and we think that you are going to help us make this a very rich day where we keep the momentum and interest in family, school, and community connections going and really make some real progress I think in building a future for this kind of work.

As I mentioned, it has been a real pleasure to work with SEDL; they have been a lot of the building of the evidence base as well as connecting it to practice for the last 20 plus years. One of the first things I read when I started doing parent involvement work was work that had been done by SEDL on what were effective parent involvement practices, how do you get them operating within schools, so they have a long history in this work, and it is great to be able to partner with them.

I want to mention a couple of housekeeping kinds of things. We have put together a resource table and we would ask you to take a look at it and take whatever would be of use to you from that table. SEDL has also very generously brought copies of three things that if you haven't seen them everybody should have and they are going to be available to everybody here at lunch time as a take-home. One is their *New Wave of Evidence* which Karen Mapp helped put together. A second, new version of this is literally hot off the presses, *Emerging Issues in School, Family, and Community Connections*, and a new one on *Diversity*. They are also going to mail you one that is not hot off the presses quite yet but will be in a week or so on Readiness in families, schools, and communities. So these are all things to pick up at lunch and everybody who has been working in this area will find these volumes invaluable.

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