School At Home:

Strategies and Methods to Increase Parental Involvement

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Overview

School at home (SAH) will enable to introduce not just the American educational and administrative school system to parents, but also will permit teachers to bridge school and homes on curriculum-related activities. SAH informational material and collected data will develop parent's understanding of school environment and also improve children's learning progress. The information to be provided by SAH will promote a positive interaction within the family in their home environment about schoolwork. Consequently, the parental involvement in the education will improve student's homework completion and develop subject-matter skills.

In SAH, teachers will find a straight path towards close contact with parents, informing them about classroom activities, parent night presentations, individual education plan meetings, curriculum applied, students' attendance and academic progress, etc. By providing a radical type of two-way communication between families and schools, SAH's framework methodology will present a way to make various approaches of educational involvement more feasible.

The proposed SAH program scheme will help to build partnership with families and communities to improve the school environment and support student learning. The benefits of this coordinated effort are two-fold. First, through coordinated strategies, SAH will maximize the human and financial resources. Second, the program will ultimately lead to higher student academic achievement, better students' test scores, a decrease in students' drop out rates and increase students' graduation rates.

" … More than 35 years of research has proven beyond dispute the positive connection between parent involvement and student success…" (National Standards for Parent Involvement Program PTA, 1998.)"

I. **Introduction**

In this paper, our goal is not to analyze nor review what already has been scrutinized and advocated in depth by many educators, researchers, scientists and politicians in the Nation in what can be summarized as a nationwide consensus on the importance of parental involvement in children's education[1]. We understand 'what' the problem is, but our goal is to propose 'how' to solve it.

As it was stated by Chalkboard's K-12 Action Plan[2] "The bottom line here is simple: As Oregonians, we are the owners of our public schools. The problem is, too many of us are absentee owners. This is one of the toughest issues to address but also one of the most important. Everyone agrees that getting parents, grandparents, neighbors and other adults involved in the schools is essential. Eighty-two percent of Oregonians say it is crucial to better schools. Teachers and principals agree."

We also firmly endorse the above conclusion. However, in order to finally reach the parental involvement declaimed, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the current methods of school communication and to adopt new methods that take into consideration the real concerns and issues of parents.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the efforts of schools' administrators, teachers, counselors and other school support staff, the reality is that parents continue to not attend school meetings. This lack of participation has become the number one concern for today's school administrators (see Table 1).[3]

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[1] The results of numerous studies reveal that Parent Involvement improve student achievement and behavior , The Chalkboard Project, http://chalkboardproject.org/action_plan_3.php; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) www.nwrel.org, Annotated References, Sections 8 Parent and Community Involvement 1, 2 and 3, http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/re-engineering/rycu/SubSection.asp?SectionID=8&SubSectionID=1 Parent Involvement in Education Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Connection on Student Achievement, Annual Synthesis 2002, http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf; 1996 Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) U.S. Dept. of Education, page 28   http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98032.pdf ; The President of the United States of America, George W. Bush http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060713-1.html . Remarks by Governor Ted Kulongoski, January 9, 2006 http://governor.oregon.gov/Gov/speech/speech_010906b.shtml

[2] Action Plan, "[#3] - Involve Parents & Communities - Chalkboard Leadership Area Take a look at our Parent Involvement Action Plan progress Background- *What needs to happen?*

[3] Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/ppsp/97455-4.asp

School At Home

Studies done by the Chalkboard have come to realize the failure of current Parent Involvement programs by concluding "[a]nd yet, [the parent involvement] is not working — not the way it should. We recognize that some parents and some schools are already working together as partners, but if we really want Oregon schools to be the best, we need to make dramatic improvement in this area. Furthermore, this issue is bigger than just parents and schools. Seventy-five percent of Oregonians don't have kids in school. But they have a stake in our state and our quality of life, so they need to be involved too."[4]

Roberta Furger stated "…[w]hen parents are involved in school, students of all backgrounds and income levels do better… It sounds good. It makes sense. But, unfortunately, partnering with parents isn't the reality in many schools throughout the country…" (Furger, 2005) [5]

Table 1

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Lack of parent involvement was also identified as a serious problem by
more than 10 percent of public elementary principals for 1990-91 and
1993-94, the two years it appeared.
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Table 5.Percentage of public school principals selecting problems as
serious in their schools: 1987-88, 1990-91, 1993-94
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Most frequently identified problems     1987-88     1990-90     1993-94
-------------------------------------------------------------------------
PUBLIC
Elementary
Poverty                                   (a)         15.4        17.0
Lack of parent involvement                (a)         11.9        10.2
Parent alcohol/drug abuse                 (a)          6.4         7.0
Student apathy                            (a)          4.7         5.6
Student absenteeism                       3.6          3.6         2.4
Teacher absenteeism                       1.6          1.1         0.8
Student tardiness                         2.7          3.0         2.3
Physical conflicts among students         2.6          2.3         3.4
Vandalism of school property              0.8          1.0         1.4
Students come unprepared to learn         (a)          (a)        11.6
Secondary
Poverty                                   (a)         11.5        13.3
Lack of parent involvement                (a)         19.8        19.7
Student apathy                            (a)         13.7        14.7
Student absenteeism                      15.3         14.3        11.6
Student tardiness                        10.5         10.2         9.2
Student use of alcohol                   11.7         14.0        13.3
Students come unprepared to learn         (a)          (a)        12.5
Student pregnancy                         6.3          7.4         8.4
Student drug abuse                        5.6          3.8         4.6
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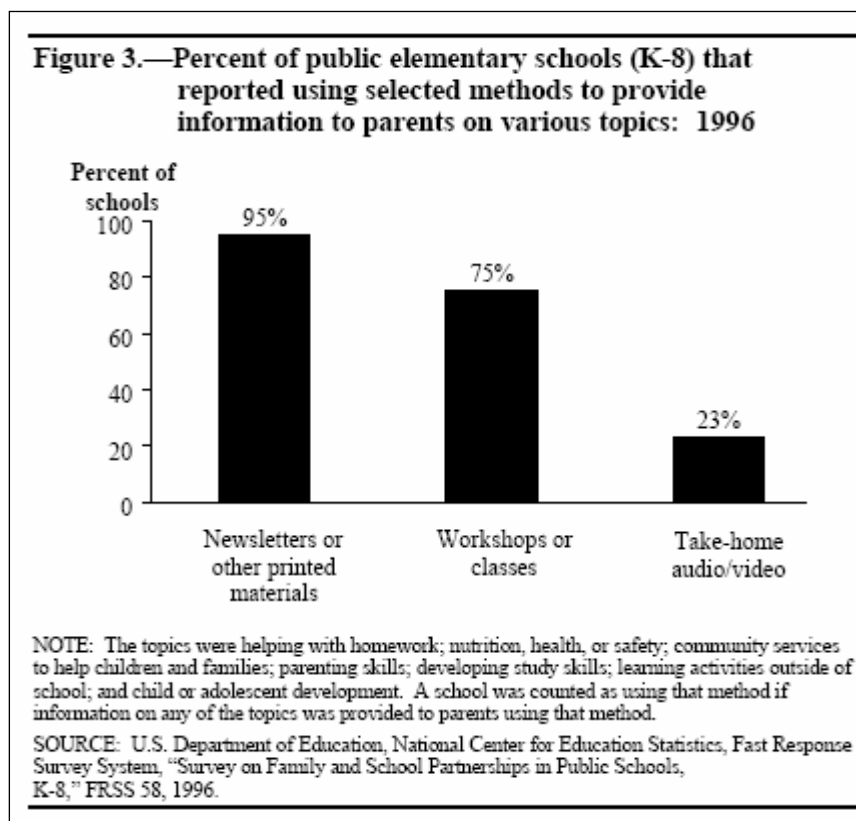
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[4] Chalkboard Project, www.chalkboard.org

5 Roberta Furger, an Edutopia contributing editor and a former executive director of Edutopia.org, wrote "NCLB Confidential" November 2005 Edutopia issue.

II. **Communication methods in use**

A. Writing/graphic information

The methods adopted by school districts in order to increase parent involvement have not been enough. As it can be inferred from the 1996 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, the absence of parents is not due to the lack of information output from schools (refer to Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2

Figure 3.—Percent of public elementary schools (K-8) that reported using selected methods to provide information to parents on various topics: 1996

NOTE: The topics were helping with homework; nutrition, health, or safety; community services to help children and families; parenting skills; developing study skills; learning activities outside of school; and child or adolescent development. A school was counted as using that method if information on any of the topics was provided to parents using that method.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "Survey on Family and School Partnerships in Public Schools, K-8," FRSS 58, 1996.

"The majority of elementary schools (95 percent) relied on newsletters or other printed material to pass on information to parents (Figure 3). About one-quarter of all schools offered take-home
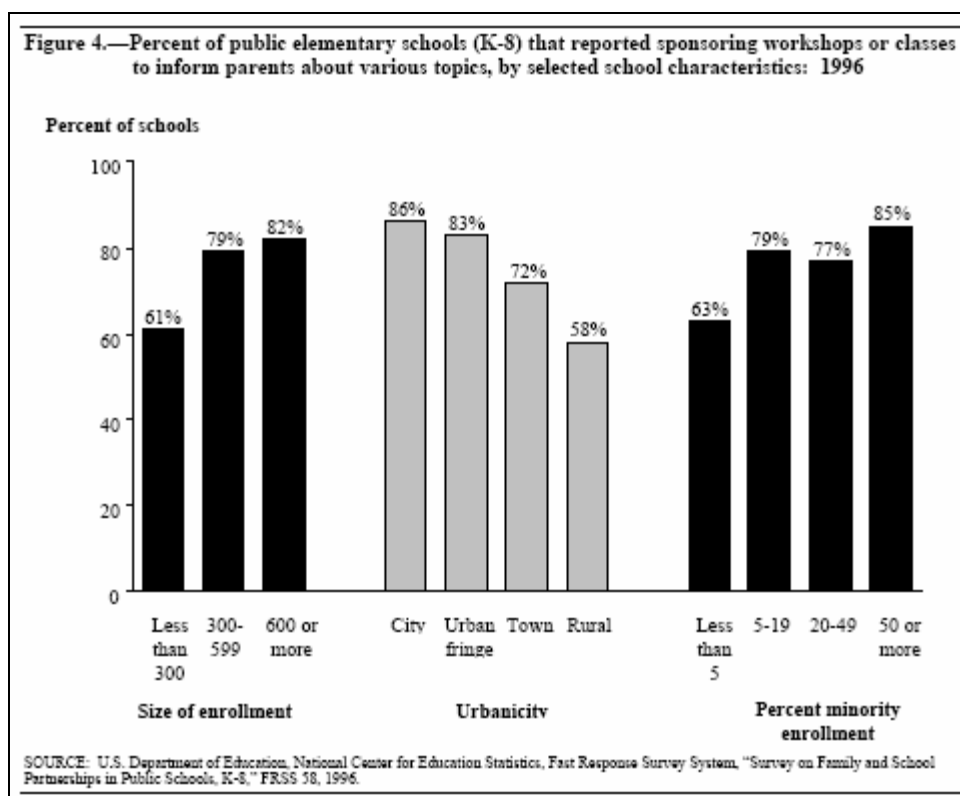
audio/visual materials relevant to these topics, and 75 percent of schools sponsored workshops or classes to inform parents on these issues..."[6]

Schools have mainly relied on written communication as their method to inform parents. Nevertheless, parents remain absent from school involvement. Thus, perhaps it is safe to assume that written information alone has not fulfilled its goal. Schools have sent their message by personal note, e-mails, newsletters, memos, notice addressed to all parents and/or phone calls, but the message has not gotten across to parents.

B. Workshops/Classes/Family night

Another common strategy used by schools in promoting Parent Involvement is to invite parents to visit their child's schools in the form of workshops, family night, parenting classes, etc (Refer to Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 3

Figure 4.—Percent of public elementary schools (K-8) that reported sponsoring workshops or classes to inform parents about various topics, by selected school characteristics: 1996

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "Survey on Family and School Partnerships in Public Schools, K-8," FRSS 58, 1996.

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[6] 1996 Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) U.S. Dept. of Education http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98032.pdf

The common problem with this approach is that it requires not only the schools taking an affirmative step in teaching parents about the importance and techniques of Parent Involvement, but also requires an affirmative step from the <u>parents</u> to attend these meetings. If parents do not attend for whatever reason, whether it is shame of not understanding the language, lack of time, work conflicts, intimidation, etc, this technique becomes useless in bridging the gap.

Nowadays, at the end of the day, many parents come home exhausted from working a full time job, and sometimes two or more jobs per day. This causes parents from having little or no time (and perhaps energy) to schedule a meeting with their child's teachers or to attend school events.

The 1996 Fast Response Survey System illustrates: "[H]owever, use of workshops varied somewhat depending on school size, urbanicity, and minority enrollment. Small schools were less likely than larger schools to use workshops (61 versus 79-82 percent), schools in rural areas were less likely to do so than schools in urban fringe areas and cities (58 versus 83-86 percent), and schools with minority enrollments below 5 percent were less likely than schools with minority enrollments of 50 percent or more to present workshops or classes for parents (63 versus 85 percent)"[7] (refer to Table 3).

Table 3 also shows that schools in rural areas tend to have fewer school-parent conferences and fewer attendees. One explanation that we have found from our field inquiry is that a large percentage of rural parents have blue-collar jobs that prohibit them from having time to attend or lack the financial resources to make time to be there. As a parent mentioned to us, even if he wanted to be present at school conferences, it is difficult for a parent who 1. gets up at 4 am to carpool to a 10 + hour work day, 2. returns home late, 3. must shower after working in the farm land all day, and 4. needs to organize his other children's day care, to then have time to attend.

III. **Absence of enough coordinated action within school district departments**

The lack of coordination between the scheduled activities of schools and district departments makes Parent Involvement even more difficult for parents. There are times when families with students in two levels (elementary and secondary level) are invited to go to meeting scheduled for the same night at the same time. This conflict makes parents be put in situations where they have to decide which child's meeting will be attended and which one will not. In order not to pick one child over another, many parents tend to make the difficult choice of not attending either meeting. On the other hand, had

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[7] 1996 Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) U.S. Dept. of Education http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98032.pdf

the meetings taken place on different nights, the parent would have made an effort to attend both and support each child completely.

Nowadays, Parent Involvement suffers from an uncoordinated system in which programs put forth by each of the schools lose effectiveness and focus, and become 'just another meeting'. The school endeavor is intended to support and assist students; however, in the absence of synchronized collaboration between all the schools and district departments, these efforts are likely to be more time-consuming and less effective than they would be in a more coordinated environment.

IV. **Communication – The Core Key Area**

Joyce Epstein[8] has identified six key areas where schools can help parents become full partners in education.

    a) Parenting,

    b) Communication with families about school programs and student progress,

    c) Volunteering,

    d) Learning activities to be develop and evolve at home,

    e) Decision/Making by involving parents, and

    f) Collaborating with Community.

Although we believe that the six areas Epstein identified can lead to increase parent involvement; it is our opinion that "Communication" stands in its own category with all of the other five areas being the result of good communication. As communication is efficiently delivered, the other five key areas are not but a logical consequence. If there is no communication or if the communication is deficient, parenting, volunteering, learning, school decision-making and community involvement are impossible. Thus, as Ellen Lunts has found, schools have a basic responsibility in communicating with students and parents: "This type of [parent] involvement concerns the basic responsibilities of schools, including establishing two-way communication between family and school. This type of involvement assumes that schools keep parents informed about school matters by sending newsletters or report cards, calling, e-mailing or visiting parents, etc. In addition, parents can also address their concerns to the teacher or school administration either through contacting them directly or through

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[8] Joyce Epstein's framework of six types of involvement,
http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancypreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/32.pdf

correspondence… Communication between families and schools is essential both for schools (they gain better understanding of the child's needs and secure parental assistance) and for parents (being more informed about their child's progress at school promotes levels of Parent Involvement that are even more beneficial for children's education and personality development)". [9]

Maho Kasahara and Anne Turnbull also support "Communication" as the core key area and acknowledge that "according to many participants who addressed the issue of good family–professional communication, empathy, commitment, and trust also marked the elements of desirable communication. Moreover, one participant also suggested that open and honest communication would, in turn, nurture the establishment of trusting relationships between families and professionals…"[10]

An example of the importance of two-way communication: A parent signed a disclaimer form which caused her daughter to be taken off the school's ESL program. Even though the disclaimer came with a form that explained the outcomes of being taken out of the ESL program in the parent native language, the lack of understanding in her "native language" mislead the mother to sign the form without being aware of the consequences. Once the consequences were explained on the phone, and the mother was given the opportunity to ask questions, she strongly regretted having signed the disclaimer.

V. **Announcement is not Communication**

A. The Test: Receive, Read and Understand

Without entering into a semantic disquisition, we understand that newsletters, memos, and flyers give families basic information on events; however, the implicit message of the importance of parent attendance to these events is not being communicated. **Giving information is not communication**.

The Chalkboard Project asserts: "Background surveys conducted by school officials as part of the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress exams suggest involvement by Oregon parents

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[9] Ellen Lunts, Parental Involvement in Children's Education: Connecting Family and School by Using Telecommunication Technologies. Meridian: A Middle School Computer Technology Journal, a service of NC State University, Raleigh, NC Volume 6, Issue 1, Winter 2003

10 Meaning of Family-Professional Partnerships: Japanese Mothers' Perspectives. Maho Kasahara -Syracuse University- and Ann P. Turnbull -University of Kansas-. http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:ZyLe3CZwm8kJ:journals.sped.org/EC/Archive_Articles/VOLUME71NUMBER3Spring2005_EC_Kasahara71-3.pdf+maho+Kasahara+pdf&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=3&client=firefox-a

fall roughly in the middle of the pack nationally, but lags well behind involvement reported by officials in the Northeast and Midwest. This same research indicates parental involvement in Oregon drops significantly from fourth to eighth grade." [11]

Diana Oberbarnscheidt, former president of the Oregon Parent-Teacher Association said: "There is an avalanche of national data indicating that parental involvement is critical to student achievement. Here in Oregon, we're constantly searching for new and creative ways to bridge the gap between parents and the classroom. Regardless of age and background, students flourish when parents are involved in their schooling." [12]

Announcements can be compared to a one-way street. They intend to facilitate communication but they are not, standing alone, communication because they inform without eliciting feedback. In some cases parents are receiving information from schools, they may read the information but, what we are seeing is that parents do not understand the implicit message in the announcements.

Communication requires a social interaction between two parties. It is a two-way street, unlike Announcements. This social interaction allows schools not just to place announcements, but facilitates an existentialist [13] approach with the person and his circumstances [14] within the environment where those announcements are taking place.

A type of efficient two-way communication is "face-to-face" communication. Face-to-face communication meets the goal of the message being received by the parent either through newsletters, memos, flyers, phone calls, e-mails, videos or television, then it is read, heard, or watched, and lastly it is understood through the assistance of home visits or face-to-face interaction with school representatives. We believe that the main reason for the lack of a substantial parent involvement can only be explained by the lack of an effective social interaction that two-way communication can

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[11] Chalkboard Project, http://www.chalkboardproject.org/pr102804.php

[12] Chalkboard Project, http://www.chalkboardproject.org/pr102804.php

[13] Existentialism, unlike other fields of philosophy, does not treat the individual as a concept, and values individual subjectivity over objectivity. As a result, questions regarding existence and subjective experience are seen as being of paramount importance, and initially above all other scientific and philosophical pursuits.

[14] This led the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gassett (May 9, 1883 - October 18, 1955) to pronounce his famous maxim *"Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia"* ("I am myself and my circumstance") which he always situated in the core of his philosophy and proposes a system where life is the sum of the ego and circumstance. This *circunstancia* is oppressive; therefore, there is a continual dialectical exchange of forces between the person and his or her circumstances and, as a result, life is a drama that exists between necessity and freedom.

provide. In order to be precise, communication must be delivered and received face-to-face. An effective dialogue develops out of a growing trust, a mutuality of concern, and an appreciation of contrasting perspectives.[15]

The findings of Chalkboard Project state that "Parental involvement means the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning…"[16] This idea is in concurrence with the NCLB Act, numerous educational works we had researched[17], and with our own field observations.[18] However, the communication methods currently in place, a main one being in writing, prevent parents and teachers from having contact in a way that allows each party to understand and enrich each other with their ideas, concerns, and needs. The absence of an effective communication impedes schools from knowing the reasons why parents are not involved in school events. Some reasons for not participating that we have encountered in our field study and in our research include the following:

- Feeling unqualified to help with the school work.
- Feeling intimidated by the school system procedures, rules, administrative roles.
- Feeling embarrassed or uncertain about how to approach school personnel.
- Feeling like outsiders when approaching their children's school building.
- Not having had good experiences themselves in school.
- Feeling conflicted about just how far to push their child on the academic front.
- Lacking communication.[19]

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[15] Lawrence-Lightfoot, S (2004), Building bridges from school to home. Instructor, 114(1),24-28 http://content.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=7389&sa_campaign=internal_ads/teachers/homepage/Parent_Communication/toplink2

[16] Chalkboard Project, Parental Involvement Policy, www.chalkboardproject.org/pdf/ODEInvolvementStipend.pdf

[17] Chalkboard Project.

[18] Families' contacted at Waldo Middle School, Parrish Middle School, French Prairie Middle School, Reynolds Middle School, Lee Middle School and Wy' East Middle School, Oregon, August / November 2006.

[19] Chalkboard Project, http://www.chalkboardproject.org/learn_more/Spanish-SpeakingParents.pdf

- Not getting school newsletters because their children don't bring them to their home intentionally (ex: some kids are not interested in having their parent going to schools) or unintentionally.
- Not getting newsletters that are delivered by mail. Mostly because mail tends to be delivered before parents get home, giving kids the opportunity to pick them up and dispose of them without giving these newsletters importance or fearing that these are disciplinary in nature.
- Feeling that the school only calls them when their children are in trouble or to ask them to perform peripheral tasks far removed from instruction.
- Avoiding communication with their child's school primarily because they do not feel comfortable talking with teachers or because of language barriers (ex: ESL parents).
- Feeling that their concerns won't be heard and properly addressed.
- Having work-related issues.
- Working in jobs that offer no flexibility for volunteering at school[20] or to attend school activities.
- Being illiterate and/or having low schooling skills background can create anxiety, confusion, and shame.

B. Facing a Subjective and a Objective reality

In order to reach Parental Involvement, it is essential to find an appropriate method of communication to efficiently deliver the school message. For that reason, and taking into consideration the parents concerns summarized above, we analyze the effectiveness of the methods nowadays in practice.[21]

In most of the concerns illustrated by parents, we found a common subjective approach pattern for not becoming involved in school related activities: "*I don't feel....*" On the other hand, in a few of

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[20] Chalkboard Project. "[P]arent Involvement …the majority thought that schools are "poor" or "very poor" communicators (52%combined). http://www.chalkboardproject.org/action_plan_3_ud0905_5.php

[21] See Tables 2 and 3 above.

them, an objective perspective was exposed by the parents as a way to mainly justified their behavior: *"I can't …"* (ex: work and time conflicts in some cases, work characteristics or the lack of transportation in some others).

1. Subjective approach: "*I feel...*"

The subjective approach leads individuals to predict behaviors by means of a conjecture, which evolve and remain from their personal feelings, ideas, experiences, and their cultural and socioeconomic background. Once expose to the dilemma of getting involve in school activities, parents "feel that…" and in consequence "they can't do it" under the scope of a feeling.

Understanding how a person's individuality plays a role in their subjective reason for not participating, we believe that it is essential to have a two-way communication that is centered on a 'personal touch'. This personal touch approach gives the school the opportunity to listen to the concerns of the specific parent and based on that knowledge, communicate the school's message in a way that will best reach and be understood by that parent. The two-way communication will permit the school to understand the uniqueness of each family on their own reality and within their cultural background.[22] Furthermore, this type of communication fulfills the goals of parents and schools by assisting parents in learning about the educational system and school environment where their children grow and, on the other hand, connecting schools with the authority and wisdom of parents. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004.).

2. Objective approach: *" I can't"*

As it was addressed by the Chalkboard Project (refer to Tables 4 and 5) and despite parents understanding of the importance of being involved in school related activities, objective reasons such as work related issues and time constrains impede them to be participate.

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[22] Meaning of Family-Professional Partnerships: Japanese Mothers' Perspectives. Maho Kasahara - Syracuse University - Ann P. Turnbull - University of Kansas-.
http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:ZyLe3CZwm8kJ:journals.sped.org/EC/Archive_Articles/VOLUME71NUMBER3Spring2005_EC_Kasahara71-3.pdf+maho+Kasahara+pdf&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=3&client=firefox-a
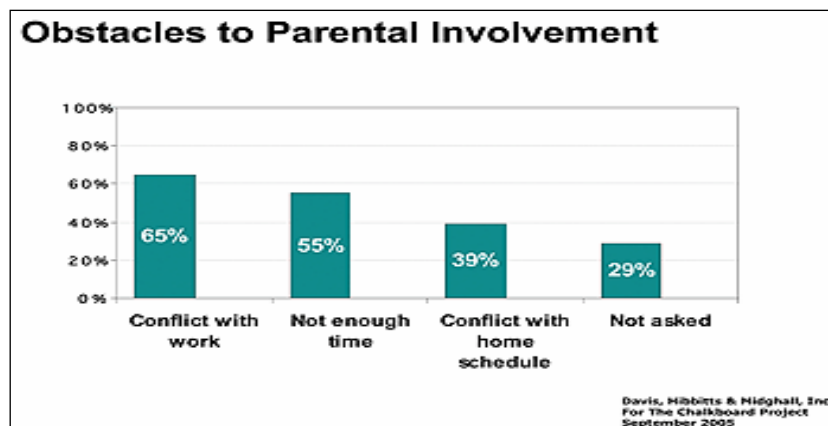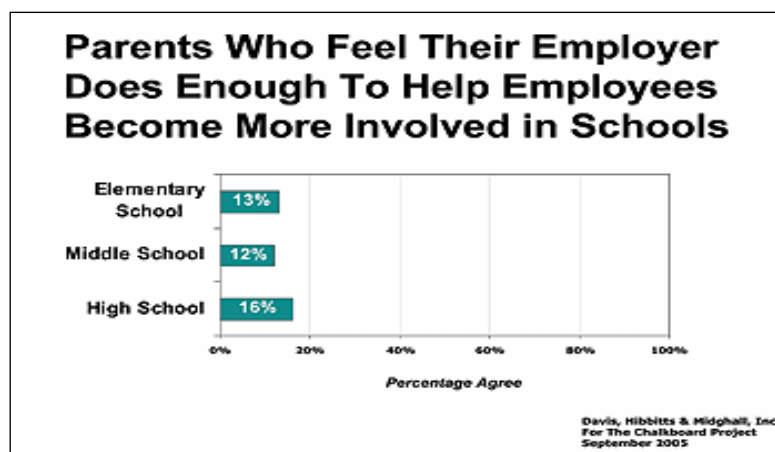
Table 4

Obstacles to Parental Involvement

Conflict with work	65%
Not enough time	55%
Conflict with home schedule	39%
Not asked	29%

Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc.
For The Chalkboard Project
September 2005

Table 5

Parents Who Feel Their Employer Does Enough To Help Employees Become More Involved in Schools

Elementary School	13%
Middle School	12%
High School	16%

Percentage Agree

Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc.
For The Chalkboard Project
September 2005

Whether parents do not attend schools because of subjective or objective reasons, two-way face-to-face communication is directed at attacking, and thus trying to eliminate, both types of reasons. The subjective reasons can be attacked by increasing the self-esteem and personal empathic [23] understanding of the parent, assisting them to value the importance of being involved in their child's education and the need for their involvement. To address the objective reasons, the school can facilitate

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[23] Carl Rogers (1902/1987) "On Becoming a Person" (1961), "Freedom to Learn" (1969).

the communication by doing home visits or using methods that will reach the parents, instead of requiring

them to come to the program (ex: Technology to be used at home when parents have the time). Effective communication must consider those implicit subjective and objective factors in the parents' concerns. Each type of reason could be targeted applying different strategies; for example: home visits to those with subjective barriers, and videos, VHS/DVD, CCTV, phone callings, voice mails for those with objective barriers.

VI. **A Coordinated Action**

In order to achieve the desired Parent Involvement and begin to see its beneficial effects, it is essential that schools and district departments coordinate their programs and compliment each other.

The coordination among schools, educational programs and community initiatives should be implemented it by creating a <u>Community and Parent Involvement Department</u> under the supervision of a <u>coordinator</u> at the district level.

A. <u>Community and Parent Involvement Department</u> – <u>Staff Responsibilities and Duties</u>

> ➢ Plans and implements the parental involvement program in cooperation with principals, compensatory programs supervisors, student services, support staff, parents and teachers.

> ➢ Works with the principals, teachers, parents and support staff in identifying and solving problems related to parental involvement.

> ➢ Prepares a unified district-wide Parent Involvement calendar.

> ➢ Provides parents with information about programs.

> ➢ Assures that all federal and state parental involvement requirements are met.

> ➢ Promotes public relations between parents and the community.

> ➢ Assembles a team with parents groups, community members/non-profits organizations, and school/district staff.

> ➢ Develops a written partnership plan between parent groups, community members/non-profit organization, and school/district staff.

> ➢ Conducts home visits with parents or guardians.

- Prepares and presents parent involvement workshops.

- Recruits parents to attend parent involvement training conferences.

- Provides opportunities for parents to volunteer at school.

- Coordinates Parent Involvement meetings.

- Coordinates contact between parents and teachers.

- Designs and makes teaching packets for parents to use at home: videos-VHS/DVD-.

- Develops a written parental involvement policy with parents and staff and distributes this policy to all parents.

- Gathers data (parent survey, community survey, and school survey).

- Keeps appropriate records to monitor visits.

- Maintains confidentiality.

B. <u>Coordinator – Responsibilities</u>

- Oversees the Community and Parental Involvement programs, strategies, activities and progress.

- Inventories all community and parental involvement programs in the district.

- Develops a strategic plan tied to funding from input by a Community Involvement committee.

- Trains program and school staff in coordination and collaborative procedures and informs principals about the procedures.

- Gathers data (parent survey, community survey, and school survey).

The Project Appleseed supported that "A parent liaison or home-school coordinator can develop parental involvement programs without adding to the workload of teachers. Programs in 17 sites throughout Tennessee have used home-school coordinators to visit homes routinely and run weekly

clubs for parents, helping to build parenting skills and trust between families and schools (Lueder 1989). Personal contacts, especially from people in the community, are important in encouraging hard-

to-reach families, including immigrants, to participate (Goodson, Swartz, & Millsap 1991; Nicolau & Ramos 1990)".[24]

     A district-wide unified Parent Involvement calendar will make a more efficient use of the limited human and financial resources available to school's districts and will maximize the attendance and effectiveness of each program made available by the various schools. The goal of this unified Parent Involvement calendar is to bring together each one of the strategies/services (ex: events, parents conferences, family nights, etc) so that they work together efficiently in a systematic way to improve parental involvement.

VII. **Strategies**

     Despite that family night and written material are both valuable strategies to reach parents, the following strategies can help reinforce the message the schools are trying to get across.

     A. <u>Home visits – a key face to face strategy</u>-

     The home is a logical place to conduct parent outreach, particularly when working with parents that, for a variety of reasons, do not feel comfortable approaching the schools that serve their children. The home environment can provide a non-threatening space for parents to ask questions and share their concerns about their children's education. Many of the programs we studied used home visits as opportunities to build or strengthen connections between the parent and the child's school. They also used visits as a means to convey important information about how the family could work together to prepare the children for graduation.

     In a study done by Maho Kasahara, she found that it was important to understand multiple contexts of a child in order to best assist the child. In her study "[p]articipants discussed two kinds of contexts as essential in understanding and supporting children. The first context was the child's developmental history. One participant (mother), a former elementary schoolteacher, pointed out that schoolteachers don't always know a child's developmental history and past experiences, such as

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[24] Strong Families Strong Schools U.S. Dept. of Education, September 1994, Project Appleseed
http://www.projectappleseed.org/strongfamiliesschools.pdf

developmental goals that the child and family had worked on and achieved, teaching strategies people came up with and tried, and various struggles and successes they experienced in relation to the efforts of enhancing the child's development. According to her, a teacher's lack of knowledge of children's

past experiences creates a significant and inevitable gap between how parents and teachers perceive children. Second, participants addressed the importance of locating a child in the context of family and community life. They described the complex interrelationships between the child, the family, and other environmental factors, as well as needs that could be appreciated only when one understood a child within broader and multiple contexts".[25] A home visit allows the school to acquire the multiple contexts of its students.

When teachers, community service outreach coordinators, instructional assistants, counselors and/or administrators share a living-room conversation with their students' families, they have the opportunity to listen as parents talk about their hopes and dreams for their children. At the same time, parents better understand their role as the supportive pillar of their children's education. School At Home (SAH) will show parents strategies and tips for working with their children at home. The ultimate goal is developing a partnership between families and schools where the biggest winners will be the children.

It is very important to encourage parent ownership. The first step for SAH is having the living-room conversation with the student's family, but once the parents feel confident they will facilitate meetings to introduce others families, organize meetings that will be held in the schools, community centers, apartment complexes and even in the parents' own homes.
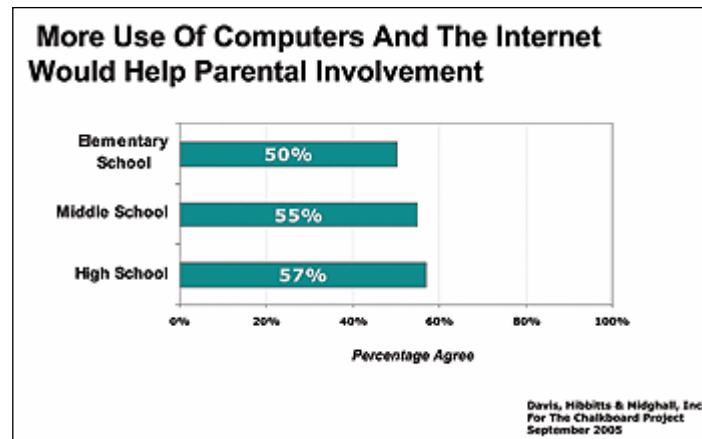
B. Media – Technology

The Chalkboard Project addresses the importance of technology as a tool to increase Parent Involvement.[26]

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[25] Meaning of Family-Professional Partnerships: Japanese Mothers' Perspectives. Maho Kasahara -Syracuse University- and Ann P. Turnbull -University of Kansas-. http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:ZyLe3CZwm8kJ:journals.sped.org/EC/Archive_Articles/VOLUME71NUMBER3Spring2005_EC_Kasahara71-3.pdf+maho+Kasahara+pdf&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=3&client=firefox-a

[26]Chalkboard Project, http://www.chalkboardproject.org/techtools.php

Table 6

Besides establishing a 'Parent Communication Network' (PCN) between families and schools and a 'Partners in Education Network' (PIEN) with the community, other telecommunication technology should be considered.

> 1. <u>E-mails and electronic newsletters:</u> One idea is to invite parents to subscribe to an e-mail list at the beginning of the year. Periodically through radio, CCTV, videos (VHS/DVD), home visits and newsletters, schools will remind parents to enlist on the list and to stay active reading the e-mails sent by schools. Most students are not reliable couriers. Class and school newsletters or fliers about upcoming events wind up crumpled at the bottom of backpacks or crammed into pockets. Electronic newsletters skip the middleman and send the information directly to parents' email accounts. They're quick, cheap, and reliable. <u>Note</u>: Since not every family has access to email, schools should also continue to provide the hard-copy option for those who need it.
>
> 2. <u>Website</u>: A School at Home (SAH) link will be available on the School District' website. Parents will be able to tap into: i. Their children's classroom, ii. A unified district event calendar and iii. Parent involvement policies. Additionally, each school

website should have a link to the SAH District website tab. As Jerold P. Bauch has suggested, school district websites have a positive impact not only on student

learning, but also on parent involvement.[27] When these sites contain important and insightful content, they attract parents. Consequently, parents will become more informed and involved in their child's education. The website will also provide online access to student data. From attendance reports to grade books, schools are making more student-specific data available to parents via a password-protected website. This anytime, anywhere access gives parents up-to-date information on academic performance and behavior, and alerts parents to problems before they reach a crisis point.

3. <u>Phone calls and Voice mail:</u> Since their effectiveness has already been proven, these two strategies should be strongly kept in place.

4. <u>Videos (VHS/DVD) Community broadcasting radio and CCTV</u>: As it was addressed by Rhonda Clevenson[28]: "The use of video communication is an important part of Gunston's [Middle School] Exemplary Project, Network 21. This research was initiated to evaluate the effectiveness of video communication with families and to examine the relationship of using informational videos and student achievement." This study found that parents were more involved in helping their children in school when schools communicated with them via technology. Videos or TV educational programs naturally command greater attention than a brochure or newsletter. Both technological methods of communication, allowed parents to experience how a class or an after-school program runs. The videos also facilitated schools in addressing language barrier reasons for lack of parental involvement. Clevenson said staff

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[27] Jerold P. Bauch, "Applications of Technology to Linking Schools, Families, and Students" and " The Bridge

[28] Clevenson, Rhonda, Evaluation Report: Gunston Middles School Video Communication Study: Bilingual Communication Methods, Text versus Video, to Increase Parent Involvement and Science Fair Project Student Achievement. http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/IS/plan_eval/eval_account/IMT2001_eval_report.pdf

members decided to address the parents' need by setting up a video lending library to "increase the information that families receive about school." Clevenson found that most of the school's families have television and video-cassette recorders which made it easy for them to watch the tapes at home.

The following are some of Clevenson's findings on the importance of the use of these methods of communications:

- Student achievement was greater when video was used for communication.
- All students, regardless of prior achievement, scored statistically significantly higher when the video communication method was received. The mean achievement of students in the video group was 80 points as compared to the text group of 74 points.
- Students with low prior achievement in Science may have particularly benefited from the video communication method.
- Students who receive ESL services in the video group had an achievement mean of 76 points (only four points below the general education group) versus their text counter parts that had an achievement mean of 67 points (13 points below the general education group).
- Viewing and discussing the information with the family may have provided scaffolds for student learning. This engagement may have resulted in higher achievement.
- Parents used the information to provide help that students found useful.
- 95% of the parents reported trying at least a few suggestions from the informational materials.

Gunston Middle School started its Home Visions Program during the 1997-1998 school year by buying video cameras, editing equipment, and creating a video journalism course. To this day, the school has produced more than 50 different videos, which run 12 to 15 minutes each. Rhonda Clevenson reports that: "With the recognition of the complexity of parent involvement and student achievement, the results of this examination suggest that video as a method of school to home

communication is a practice that may be positively related to student achievement, enthusiastically received by parents, and merits further exploration."

Melissa Marie Aronson further suggests that schools create a brief 10-minute video to welcome new families to the school including an introduction, tour of the school, portions of a "lesson in action," and an invitation to become involved.[29] Alberto, Mechaling, Taber, and Thompson, coincidently stated that the use of video technology has also proven effective as a communication tool for parents of students who have severe disabilities.[30]

VIII. **Conclusion**

Schools need parental involvement in order to have better achieving students. Many parents want to be involved in their child's education, yet the current trend is that they are not participating. Notwithstanding the efforts that schools have thus far produced, parent involvement is low.

Research and field studies have explained some of the obstacles that are keeping parents away from school; such as language barriers, lack of time, but mainly, lack of communication between schools and families. The time has come for schools to adjust to the reality of the new characteristics and needs of the families our schools are serving. Creating a Community and Parent Involvement Department will be an efficient use of funds currently being diluted on programs that result in low attendance and lack of parent participation.

This proposed strategy is directed at increasing Parent Involvement using ideas that have shown great success in other states. Face-to-face home visits and the use of technology are modern ways to bridge schools and parents at a time written communication alone has been inefficient. This proposed two-way communication works because it acknowledges the concerns, needs and structure of current families and elicits feedback in ways that are flexible to parents. The goal of schools is to have their message reach parents, be understood by parents, but most importantly, be valued by parents. A Community and Parent Involvement Department can make that happen.

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[29] Aronson, Melissa Marie, 1995 "Building Communication Partnerships with Parents. Professional's Guide."

[30] Alberto, P.A., Mechling L., Taber, T.A., & Thompson, J. (1995). Using videotape to communicate with parents of students with severe disabilities. Teaching Exceptional Children, 27(3), 18-21