

Partnering
with **Parents**
— *to Ask the* —
Right Questions

*A Powerful
Strategy for
Strengthening
School-Family
Partnerships*

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Introduction: Making Meaningful School-Family Partnerships Easier

The educators and parents you will meet in this book quietly do something quite remarkable. They demonstrate how to work together for the benefit of all students by using a simple and cost-effective partnership strategy.

The examples we present are drawn largely from low- and moderate-income communities around the country where both educators and parents are asked to do too much with too few resources. Each day, they must confront the painful reality, as the economists Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane (2014) have documented, where economic inequality is increasing, with harmful effects on the housing stability, physical and emotional health, safety, and general well-being of children—all of which makes the work of educators that much more difficult.

In this context, schools are too often unfairly expected to single-handedly solve the problem of disparities in achievement across racial and socioeconomic lines at a time when inequality beyond the school walls is sharply increasing (Lareau, 2003). The people who send the children to school—parents, foster parents, guardians, and grandparents—are also in a difficult position. Struggling to put food on the table and ensure the safety of their children while working one or two jobs or seeking employment in order to pay the bills, they can too readily be blamed for not being involved enough in their children’s education. The call for greater parent involvement or family engagement has to walk a fine line to ensure that the problems students might have in school are not pinned on their parents’ lack of participation (Edmonds, 1979).

The challenge of improving education for all students requires us to directly address the “opportunity gap” and an inequitable distribution of resources rather than focus solely on the consequences it produces, which have come to be labeled as the achievement gap. The opportunity gap—the need to ensure sufficient resources for schools as well as families—is a responsibility our entire society must shoulder. It should not be added to the burdens already placed on educators and parents (Schott Foundation for Public Education, n.d.).

So, instead of adding more demands, this book presents a modest resource to lessen the burden on educators and families who are pressured to somehow solve overwhelming problems on their own. Over the past 20 years, working in communities across the country, we have carefully developed, tested, and refined a strategy that makes it *easier* for more educators and families to work together to help struggling individual students and to become strong allies in advocating for greater equity and increased opportunities for all students. The Right Question School-Family Partnership Strategy (the Right Question Strategy) cannot solve, on its

own, the complex problems related to the achievement gap. It can, however, be an efficient and effective means to mobilize more hands on deck so the key adults in a student's life work together constructively. This partnership does not guarantee success, but we know that the absence of a strong partnership can exacerbate the problem (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

It might sound absurd to talk about making it *easier* to create a strong school-family partnership. Who has time and resources for this very complex task? We regularly hear classroom teachers, counselors, assistant principals, principals, and district leaders voice, in one way or another, a common lament:

We wish we had more parents who were actively involved in their children's education. We have to spend about 95 percent of any "parent-focused time" with a very small number of parents whose children are having serious learning or discipline problems. We wish we saw more of all the other parents, but we've tried to reach out and haven't gotten much of a response. And there are always so many other demands on us that take all of our time. Our job, every day, is to ensure that all of our students learn. Given the many challenges students face, we also try to provide social and emotional support that not only helps them feel better and more comfortable in school but also enhances their chances of academic success. We try to provide support to one another because this is a hard job, and we often feel like we're on the edge of failing. We are constantly being judged and evaluated based on how well our students do on state-mandated tests. Their test scores become "our" scores, and we are compared to schools and districts in higher-income communities where students face fewer challenges in their lives and there is strong parent involvement in their education.

In those same communities, we often hear these comments from parents:

I wish I could make sure my kids do well in school. I know how important it is, but I don't really know what I can do. When I go to meetings, I'm always worried that they'll tell me my kids aren't behaving or that they're not getting good grades. I'm not sure what I can do. I'm doing my best working two jobs, or sometimes I'm out of work looking for a job, or I'm just plain out of luck. When my kids bring home homework, I can't really help them. If I do go to meetings at the school (and it can be hard just to get to the school), I just sit there and listen. I don't even know what to ask. So I kind of stay away from it all and just hope my kids behave and the school teaches my kids what they need.

A few districts, here and there, have found a way to secure significant additional resources, create new infrastructures, and hire additional personnel to offer programs for parents—including “parent universities,” or parent leadership programs (Mapp, 2011; Molnar, 2013). The vast majority of overburdened schools, however, have little time and very few resources to commit to engaging more parents in the life of the schools and the education of their children.

One Strategy, Two Skills, Three Roles

This book is for educators in schools and districts with too few resources and who, nevertheless, want to tap into the great value of creating a strong partnership with their students' families. To make it easier to use our strategy for that goal, we always keep this question in mind: *What is the maximum that can be achieved by teaching the minimum?*

We are not providing an exhaustive or comprehensive educational program for parents that will provide information and support for addressing every possible issue that might come up along a student's K-12 journey. Instead, we sharply focus on just a few key factors that are universally relevant and have a transformative power when put into action. Specifically, we have seen that strong partnerships emerge when parents learn to play three key roles effectively:

- They support their children's education at home.
- They monitor their progress.
- They advocate for them when necessary.

How best, then, to develop parents' ability to play these roles? Again, with the goal of keeping it as simple as possible, we have learned that when parents learn just the following two skills, they greatly improve their ability to support, monitor, and advocate:

- They formulate and use questions effectively.
- They participate effectively in decisions that affect them.

We will introduce you to simple, easy-to-learn and easy-to-implement methods for teaching these two skills that in turn lead to parents playing the three key roles that enable stronger partnerships. We emphasize that we are offering a *strategy* that can be integrated into your regular workflow rather than a *program* that requires new infrastructure, additional personnel, and more funding. The only "cost" to you is to make a commitment to invest in building the capacity of all parents to ask better questions and participate in decisions that affect them and their children. As you begin to implement the Right Question Strategy, you will soon see how you can continuously adapt and improve it for different purposes so you and your family partners will reap both short- and long-term payoffs for the investment you make up front.