Empowered Families, Empowered Schools

How family involvement and technology enhance student performance

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Executive Summary

For more than 30 years, research regarding family involvement in education has shown that children have advantages when their parents support and encourage school activities. Schools that are most successful in engaging parents and other family members in support of their children’s learning look beyond traditional definitions of parent involvement and understand two very important concepts: 1) not every adult in the life of a child is a parent, and 2) involvement does not necessarily imply engagement.

Students whose families are aware of what they are studying in school, who are in regular communication with their teachers, and who help to reinforce schoolwork show higher achievement all the way through secondary school.

Technology can significantly bolster the partnerships between home and school. In a 1997 report, J. Blanchard explained how technology can serve the family-school connection: (1) communication and information; (2) learning and instruction; (3) interest and motivation; as well as (4) resources and costs.

Technology can open any school in America to the homes of students. Through the Empowered EducationSM initiative, Sprint provides technology solutions that effectively bridge the communications gap between the school and the home. Sprint provides a wide-range of appropriate technologies that integrate effectively into the K-12 learning environment.

Introduction

The United States is presently mired in an education reform movement that has quickly moved our schools toward high-stake standardized testing as a means of setting high standards and promoting positive school reform. This idea has captured the support of presidents, governors, state legislatures and boards of education across the nation. This latest reform effort implies a pursuit of mandated content and testing regimes as a mechanism to improve the American education system. To truly educate children and encourage them to be engaged and stay engaged in their own learning, we must learn how to structure our education system so that students are nurtured not only by their teachers and schools, but also by strong partnerships between their families and schools that are necessary for every student to achieve at high levels.

Blanchard, J. (1997). The family-school connection, literacy development and technology: Meanings and issues. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Reading Conference, Scottsdale, AZ.
Throughout these modern school reform movements, and there have been several in the past 30 years, an equally significant amount of scientific research exists that strongly links the engagement of families in the educational lives of their children as a strong conduit to the successful achievement of all students. Simply put: we cannot expect total engagement and high standards from our students if both families and schools cannot form powerful alliances to guide our students to academic and lifelong success. If we are to truly leave no child behind, then we must be committed to leaving no family behind as well. Henderson and Mapp (2002) summarize the contributions of family involvement research succinctly and masterfully: “The evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and through life.” (p.7) For lasting and effective family engagement practices and programs, educators must search for ways to open lines of communication between home and school. This notion of family engagement determining levels of student achievement is by no means a new concept or a passing fad.

Creating Positive School Cultures with the Help of Families

Beliefs. Values. Actions. Interactions. These tend to be the core descriptors when defining the parameters of institutional culture. Creating a positive school culture implies that the vision of the school leadership include the belief that all children can learn, the core value of families as influential teachers of their children and partners with schools, the action necessary to bring all constituents together to support children, and the interaction with students and their families to keep focused on the importance of success in school. The strength in understanding and supporting the notion of positive school cultures centers on the inclusion of those persons in the environment outside of the school, primarily families. Families are an integral part of cultural change in schools. Reform ideas presented in research and literature discuss important aspects of school reform. However, very often, the idea of families being a

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A certain level of naiveté exists within those that propose any type of school reform that does not include a component for families.

Assessing the Engagement of Students and Their Families
Emerging from years of research and practice is a model for student engagement that promotes the strength of the interactions between school, families, individual students and their peers (Constantino, 2002). These overlapping relationships are surrounded by outside influences such as non-school activities, other adults and neighborhood influences. Research outcomes imply that the school becomes an overlapping sphere of influence along with the individual student, peers and family. The outside influences are better described as a macro system that encompasses the overlapping spheres. The interaction of the school, family, individual student and peers within the context of outside influences is the catalyst to the forces of engagement. The five forces then determine the degree to which students are engaged with school.

There are numerous points where peers, individual students, schools and families overlap their influence that ultimately results a continuum of student engagement from minimal engagement to significant engagement. What emerged from this study was a phenomenon that occurs as a result of the interaction of families, peers, individual students and schools. Data from the study clearly show that student engagement in school is predicated on five forces for engagement, those being desire, attitude, motivation, behaviors and actions. Schools can promote the engagement of students by encouraging the involvement of families in the educational lives of students. Families of students do have influence on their children’s relationships with friends and there is significant interaction between students and the families of their peers.

A brief overview of the research study findings shows:

- Throughout the collected data, students identified their peers as important components of their own school life and engagement.
- The involvement of families in the lives of their children remains a strong component to student engagement in school and school-related activities within the sample of students interviewed. Families who are involved and engaged with their child and their child’s school can motivate their children to do well and achieve to their highest level. Family expectations alone can be a significant driving force in student engagement with school.

Understanding the Need for Family Engagement

The evolutionary nature of the relationship between public schools and their students suggests a need for continued activity in the area of school-family partnerships. In 1999, the percentage of homes operating below the poverty level was 11.9% for families from all races, 7.7% for whites, 23.6% for blacks and 26.5% for Hispanics (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Because of this poverty, there exists a kind of social stress many low income families experience that causes them to have difficulty promoting the social and psychological development their children need to function successfully in school (Comer, 1980). The country is also rapidly becoming more culturally diverse with a decline in the white non-Hispanic population from 75.6% to 71.9% during the period 1990 to 1999, an increase in the black population from 12.3% to 12.8% and increase in the Hispanic population from 9.0% to 11.5% during the same period (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001).

For more than 30 years, research regarding family involvement in education has shown that children have advantages when their parents support and encourage school activities (Coleman et al., 1966; Dave, 1963; Epstein & McPartland, 1979; Marjoribanks, 1979).

Families who are involved and engaged with their child and their child’s school can motivate their children to do well and achieve to their highest level.
School and family partnerships point to the family’s role as the first and best educator of children and to the importance of family involvement in the educational lives of their children (Steinberg, 1996). These important partnerships link the involvement of families with schools as an indicator of student success (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Epstein, 1987, 1992; Steinberg, 1996).

School-family partnerships are now viewed as one of the components of school organization that may help to promote student learning and success in school (Epstein, 1996). Having synthesized 66 studies and reports on family involvement, Henderson and Berla (1995) reported that studies have documented the following benefits for students: higher grades and test scores; better attendance and homework completion; fewer placements in special education; more positive attitudes and behavior; higher graduation rates; and greater enrollment in post-secondary education. Families, teachers and schools can benefit from school and family partnerships.

These important relationships lead to improving parental knowledge of their child’s development, their ability to parent, their ability to assist their children with school and learning, and the quality of relationships between all stakeholders (Epstein, 1992).

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Schools that are most successful in engaging parents and other family members in support of their children’s learning look beyond traditional definitions of parent involvement and understand two very important concepts: 1) not every adult in the life of a child is a parent, and 2) involvement does not necessarily imply engagement. Therefore, schools have adapted the tenets of family engagement as a foundation from which to craft educational goals for all students.

The home-learning environment has a positive effect on a student’s achievement in school and can have an effect on achievement that is three times as large as family socio-economic status. The family educational culture results are an interesting departure from the usual SES variable usage.


Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) make an important observation about this result suggesting that future school and leadership effects studies ought to conceptualize family variables more centrally in their designs, which will lead to a systematic inquiry about how schools and families co-produce the full array of outcomes for which schools are responsible. The actions of families within the context of the educational lives of their children can be described in two categories, involvement and style. The involvement of families includes their engagement in the instructional and noninstructional lives of their children as well as the family’s educational experiences and values about the importance of education.

Students whose families are aware of what their children are studying in school, who are in regular communication with their teachers, and who help to reinforce schoolwork show higher achievement all the way through secondary school. Most educators are aware of the power of family engagement. However, multiple barriers exist that keep families uninvolved and educators frustrated to find creative ways to promote healthy relationships between home and school.

A new organization of society has caused a decline in family involvement forcing educators to work harder to garner family participation in education.

The involvement of families in the lives of their children remains a strong component to student engagement in school and school-related activities. Families who are involved and engaged with their child and their child’s school can provide their children motivation to do well and achieve to their highest level. Family expectations alone can be a driving force in student engagement.

Barriers to Family Engagement

Often, one of the salient questions asked is why, when we have years of research that unequivocally proves the importance of family engagement in raising student achievement, don’t more schools adapt family engagement philosophies, programs, practices and policies? The answer is multi-dimensional.

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involvement is key to repairing many educational problems, few schools and communities have been able to achieve a sufficient involvement to produce a desired level.

Barriers of time, cultural difference, socio-economic status and changing family structures prohibit important family partnerships. Numerous surveys done since 1995 find that a lack of time and mismatched schedules are just some of the barriers to building family engagement programs. Families considered as having high socio-economic status are more likely to be involved in their children’s education. The American Council on Education and the Education Commission of the States (1988) reveal that minorities suffer disproportionately from inadequate education and call for a renewed commitment to the education of minorities.

Families cannot be involved if teachers lack the fundamental understanding of the importance of family engagement and do not see family engagement as a necessary component in the learning process. In Connors and Epstein’s (1994) survey, 90% of families and teachers thought involvement was necessary, but only 32% of teachers felt it was their responsibility to involve families. As children get older and enter secondary school, there is a steep drop-off in the engagement of their families in education. In one national study, for example, the percentage of parents of elementary students who were involved in their children’s education was 50% higher than among parents of secondary school students.

There are numerous efforts to explain this family involvement phenomenon. Research indicates that the rigor and level of academic work required at the high school level changes parent’s beliefs as to their ability to help their children, and, the emergence of adolescence suppresses an active interest in overt parental engagement with school. Secondary schools also tend to be more compartmentalized and no single teacher is primarily responsible for a particular student.

Larger attendance areas also create transportation and proximity problems that discourage family engagement. Many researchers have identified the complex organization of the high school, the larger numbers of students assigned to individual teachers, and the physical numbers of students and families as deterrents to secondary school family involvement. Yet another idea touted in the late 1990s indicates that secondary school parents transfer the complete responsibility for managing their children’s education to the schools.

Schools themselves must also accept responsibility for poor family engagement practices. Schools profess to understand and support family partnership programs but their actual

behavior reflects mixed feelings as to the quantity and quality of family involvement. Often, while complaining about a lack of involvement from families, schools only want parents to be involved on their own terms. Empowered Families, Empowered Schools

Empowering Families through Technology

“Technology provides only an opportunity; an active interest on the school's part in increasing parental involvement is necessary if the opportunity is to be used” (Coleman, 1991, p.17).

How far beyond traditional definitions of school-parent partnerships and how best to promote an active interest on the school's part, is left to the vision and determination of school leadership. The term family engagement implies that families have at their disposal the type of academic information necessary to play a substantial role in the educational life of their children. It is inappropriate for educators to assume that because parent attendance to certain school functions, meetings or activities is sparse, those parents are apathetic or opposed to their child's school. Conversely, parents who do attend school functions may not be totally involved in the academic life of their child. If students succeed, then schools succeed. When schools succeed, the community thrives. At the nucleus of this spiral of success are meaningful and productive relationships between families and schools.

Technology can significantly bolster the partnerships between home and school provided school leadership understands the value in strong family partnerships. Students can also attain the autonomy in their education and accountability for learning that is essential to long-term success. With the advent of technological applications in education, school leaders have new resources at their disposal. Blanchard (1997) explains how technology can serve the family-school connection: (1) communication and information; (2) learning and instruction; (3) interest and motivation; as well as (4) resources and costs. He expands on these four areas by highlighting specific technological applications:

- establishing two-way communication between homes and schools;
- discussing school experiences within and among families and communities;
- involving families which are presently difficult to reach;
- helping teachers and families acquire needed knowledge and skills;

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- building the capacity of the schools to improve the educational health of the family;
- helping parents extend learning to the home in more meaningful ways by allowing them to be instructors or coaches as well as learning partners;
- helping families and schools motivate children;
- providing support and coordination for homes and schools to sustain involvement; and
- reducing resource costs of educating children.

After-school programs have become an important component to the education of all children since the *No Child Left Behind* legislation was signed into law. This type of supplemental education provides extra help in those areas of weakness for students. Administrators can and should investigate the available technology that will help all children learn in remedial and after-school programs, not only for the education of the students themselves, but for the management of data that will be necessary to report adequate yearly progress of the identified subgroups of children.

Connecting With All Families at Stonewall Jackson: The Impact of Technology

Stonewall Jackson High School is located in Manassas, Va., approximately 35 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. Stonewall has a student population of 2,600 students in grades nine through 12 with a diverse population from both a cultural and socio-economic standpoint. In 1995, the school was seen as a problem school with declining test scores, student unrest and community dissatisfaction.

Since 1995, several reform and improvement initiatives have been developed and implemented to improve the achievement of students. The most significant reform rests within those programs, practices and policies established to promote the engagement of all families in the educational lives of their children.

Stonewall Jackson High School launched a telephone and Internet community information network as a way to use communications technology to expand and improve family engagement and ultimately, the achievement of all students. This application provides an information exchange between home and school and opportunities for families to retrieve grades, attendance and other pertinent information from the school using the telephone or Internet. Most importantly, the system is interactive. In addition to retrieving information from messages and the Internet, families can leave information for school staff as well.

The ability for families to see their children's progress in school is now just a phone call or a mouse-click away. Families can log on to the system, and with a pass code, retrieve their child's grades, completed or incomplete assignments, and attendance patterns by day and by period. Parents can also review upcoming assignments, or
peruse the site while listening to teacher-made voice messages about classroom activities and how families can enhance their child’s academic experiences at home. This information is now available to busy families, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

A study was conducted at Stonewall Jackson High School in 1996 to determine the effectiveness of communications and family involvement. Baseline data collected at Stonewall Jackson before the implementation of technology showed that the average rate of family involvement was 1.3 contacts per teacher per day. For the first six months of the deployment of the technology, there was an average of 11,518 calls to the school per month. This represents 9.0 calls per teacher per day or a 592% increase in family/school contacts.

Today, the school’s automated system averages 300 telephone calls per day. So far, there have been more than 200,000 visits to the school’s Web site this year. Since the system launched in 2000, total communications between home and school via the Internet and phone have reached more than 1.3 million. Stonewall Jackson is now one of only a handful of schools nationwide that can boast of more than 1 million system accesses.

With all of this attention focused on family involvement and peer influences and recognition, Stonewall Jackson has achieved significant successes and improvements since 1995. Baseline data presented in internal school division reports show a dramatic increase in Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. In the past five years, SAT scores have risen 72 points. The International Baccalaureate program now encompasses 48% of the student body in one or more rigorous courses, with the number of full diploma program participants growing from three in 1995 to more than 40 in 2001. The International Baccalaureate Organisation worldwide is comprised of more than 1,000 schools in 80 countries. Stonewall Jackson has grown to the 17th largest program in the world.

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As a result of the large number of students sitting for advanced exams, Newsweek magazine proclaimed Stonewall Jackson one of the “Top 100” most challenging high schools in the United States (March 13, 2000).

The school’s crowning accolade is its feature in Time magazine (May 21, 2001) as “High School of the Year.” The school was selected to receive this recognition for both its commitment to
the involvement of families and the challenging academic programs that are available to all students.

Students themselves have strong feelings about their family and their family’s involvement with school. For example, even though certain students are not overly enthusiastic about their parents’ ability to access grade and attendance information with technology, they ultimately welcome their parents’ review either to celebrate their successes or to openly discuss problems in school. This interaction between students and their families seems to be important in determining the engagement level of students. If parents use the information to praise or help their child, the interaction was welcome. However, if the information is used to belittle, demean or punish their child, the information then becomes a deterrent to school engagement. Whether viewing this phenomenon positively or negatively, one cannot discount the important relationship between children and their parents.

Families who maintain a positive attitude about their child’s school help their child be more engaged and successful. In some cases, students report that there was a time when their families argued with school personnel and that terse relationships resulted in the student’s withdrawal from school and specific classes. Students are cognizant of the school’s efforts to promote family involvement. In some cases, even though students reported that they feel no direct encouragement from the school itself, they report that the relationship between the school and their parents is positive and that relationship helps parents open more constructive channels of communication with their child.

Implementation of an automated communications system to enhance family engagement practices has at its nucleus, a belief in community-based education and a vision for student excellence. School leaders who believe that all children can learn have embraced the idea that family engagement, while not the only conduit to academic excellence, is critical to the success of every child. School leaders who see the technological revolution sweeping American schools know it to be a strong ally in promoting strong families and strong schools. Technology can open any school in America to the homes of students. With a solid leadership vision, collaboration and consistent communication with every family, student and teacher, educational leaders can foster a deeper and more meaningful association between families and schools.

What Every Teacher Needs
In order to garner effective and ongoing relationships between families and schools, teachers and other education professionals must have at their disposal the tools necessary to build lasting and effective partnerships with all families.

First and foremost, teachers need exposure to training in the arena of
family engagement in education. Many teacher preparation programs either do not include family engagement information or provide a minimal exposure to this important research and concept. Teachers who are trained in the importance of family engagement and who are given resources and ideas to promote family engagement, see the power that can be harnessed by involving families in the educational lives of children. Further, teachers need more direct exposure to family engagement initiatives such as outreach and home-visit programs.

As technology continues to redefine the process of teaching and learning, its use in establishing relationships between home and school breaks down many of the barriers that exist when trying to develop strong family engagement programs. Teachers need access to technology. Even though the Internet increases in availability every day, the telephone remains the best way to communicate with all families. Teachers who have telephones in their classrooms can easily stay in touch with all families. Telephones in classrooms make communication easier, which in turn, bolsters interest in using technology to support student learning.

Schools that are reluctant to provide telephones must understand the great advantages of making this communication readily available to teachers. Teachers also need access to the Internet and should have a computer in their classroom from which they can share information with students and families.

**The Empowered EducationSM Initiative: A Solution from Sprint**

Through the Empowered Education initiative, Sprint provides technology solutions that effectively bridge the communications gap between school and home. Sprint provides a wide-range of K-12 appropriate technologies that integrate effectively into the learning environment.

One of the most daunting tasks for school leaders is to keep abreast of the rapid changes taking place in the field of technology. Sprint, a trusted telecommunications expert and a leader in the education market, can assist districts by designing and deploying voice, data and video communications that will enhance the operation of schools, the engagement of students and families, and ultimately help every child learn to his or her full potential.

Sprint understands the importance of monitoring student achievement and progress and can demonstrate links between research and program designs. While schools around the country are struggling to understand and create a development tool to manage services, Sprint provides the Empowered
Education desktop. This desktop can provide schools with an award-winning* platform through which students and teachers use the power of the Internet for real “anytime, anywhere learning” and expanded access to the school community and work. The Sprint platform helps schools and districts to:

- easily and quickly integrate technology into everyday teaching and learning;
- organize teaching tools and resources;
- expand learning outside the classroom; and
- coordinate and disseminate essential school information.

Easy to use, the Empowered Education desktop needs only one login and provides one-click access to a selection of more than 12,000 programs from 75 education content providers.

The advantages of the Empowered Education desktop and family engagement are staggering. With this technology, families can retrieve important school information not only about the progress of their child, but can also stay current with school trends and practices, understand the curriculum being taught to their child, learn with their child via software that is delivered through the desktop, understand how to help their child master the required assessments in a given school and have an important window into the educational world of their child.

John Bailey, director of the Office of Educational Technology for the U.S. Department of Education, makes an interesting point in his recent article published in *Scholastic Administrator* magazine (March 2003). Mr. Bailey indicates that the issue at hand is not the degree to which “dot com” companies can supply services, but how quickly traditional businesses can make dot com strategies part of their business processes.

Sprint knows that savvy administrators have already begun to use technology to expand and augment traditional educational programs and stands ready to provide products and services that will help shape the face of education in this century. Many of the programs under the *No Child Left Behind Act* encourage the use of technology to provide educational opportunities for all students. Sprint rises to this challenge and provides a full continuum of services to all schools while assisting educators in the application process for E-Rate funds. Sprint provides services for distance learning, technologies that reach beyond the Web and programs that can enhance professional development and allow schools to become the educational centers of communities.

*The technology for the Empowered Education desktop has received a number of awards, including: EdNet Pioneer Award (2002); Blue Diamond Award (1998 & 2001); ASPire award winner (2000).*
Sprint appreciates the significant role that families play in the educational successes of children. It not only offers this family involvement solution, but a full slate of training and services to ensure that schools understand the importance of family engagement and can reach the same successes as schools like Stonewall Jackson High School.

Sprint also offers a family engagement solution that provides two-way communication between families, teachers and students. In addition to providing telephone technologies, the system also offers families easy access to grades, attendance reports and homework information over a touchtone telephone or the Internet. It helps breach the digital divide between families who do, and do not, have access to the Internet. Teachers who have access to telephones in their classrooms create an even more seamless and successful opportunity for schools and families to exchange information.

As teachers understand the power of family engagement, they continue to seek ways to help all children learn at high levels by providing educational options that cater to a wide variety of learning styles. The partnership between Sprint and LearningStation® constitutes a huge step and tremendous opportunity for teachers to provide resources to students that can be accessed within the classroom or at home.

**Conclusion**

Families who are in tune with their child’s school and are provided the necessary tools to be involved are powerful forces in helping their child learn at the highest levels possible. School leaders who understand the power of family engagement in promoting high standards and achievement among all students will ultimately succeed with every child because they have incorporated families, who are the first and most influential teacher of children.

Within this paradigm of family-school relationships lies the power that technology can bring to enhance relationships between home and school. More importantly, this technology can provide families with the type of information that will allow them to support their children’s learning at home. Technology empowers families. Empowered families create successful students. The Empowered Education initiative from Sprint creates opportunities to ensure that no student – or family – is left behind.
About the Author
Steven M. Constantino, Ed.D., founder of Family Friendly Schools and principal at Stonewall Jackson High School in Manassas, Va., has been nationally recognized for his efforts to involve families in the educational lives of students. Dr. Constantino believes that for schools to be successful, all who are affiliated with them must take a role in shaping a positive school culture. Dr. Constantino is a much sought after speaker, consultant and workshop leader in the area of building successful school, family and community engagement programs.

About Sprint
With a rich heritage more than a century strong, Sprint remains one of the most financially stable companies in the telecom industry. When you choose Sprint, you’re choosing a company that wins industry and customer accolades for service, reliability and customer satisfaction and one that is committed to developing next-generation solutions that can transform the way you get business done.

For more information, contact your Sprint representative.