

Is it effective to use websites in getting parents involved in education?

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Discussion: 16-25 February 2004

Summing-up: 26-27 February 2004

Pre-Discussion Paper

Introduction

Parental involvement is an emerging issue in education. Many research studies show that when parents are interested in science and involved in science activities, their children's performance in science increases. According to these research studies, many science educators are concerned with how to improve parents' engagement in learning science. At the international science competition, U.S.A ranked lower than many Asian countries including Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (TIMSS, 1997). According to the report of TIMSS (2001), US eighth-graders performed slightly above the international average of 38 nations in science. In the 1995 study, US eighth-graders had tested above the international average in science, compared to students in 41 participating countries. Direct comparisons of international standing cannot be made between the two years because the list of participating countries is not identical. In fact, the data shows no absolute improvement in performance of US eighth-graders between 1995 and 1999, in science. To improve students' performance in science, not only teachers at school but also parents at home must be engaged in science education.

Science teachers at schools want to get parents involved in science education. Even though science classes may be well prepared there will always be students who do not understand the material and think that science is a difficult subject. It is challenging for teachers with limited time and resources to successfully motivate all of their students to be excited about science. Individualizing the learning to each of the students needs can be an overwhelming task, but the individual support is critical to helping students enjoy science learning. Teachers realize that parents know their own children best and that when they are involved in the learning process both teacher and student benefit. One of the challenges is to develop productive ways to involve parents in their children's learning.

Students who feel that science is boring and difficult could benefit from additional help and encouragement from their parents in studying science at home. When parents show interest in science and take part in science experiments related to what their children learn at school, the children may become more interested and excited about science. Not only is the home environment a great place for children to apply what they learn in school to their daily lives, but spending time with a parent who supports their child's learning has effects that are immeasurable. Different from the school environment, home environments are the real places where students can make connections between book related facts and the real world. With the help of a parent, they can experience problem solving on a daily basis. In fact, the parent can help the child recognize a real-life problem and guide them in solving it. These kinds of experiences are ones that children remember forever.

Problems

Teachers and administrators who recognize the importance of parental involvement try to hold conferences and meetings with parents to further involve parents in science education. These meetings can be time consuming for the teacher and don't usually engage the parents in doing science with their children. Additionally, there are many barriers that keep the level of parents' participation in these conferences low. Some of the parent-centered barriers are lack of time, cultural or socioeconomic differences, language difference between parents and teachers, and parent attitudes about science and school. Similarly teacher-centered barriers include lack of time,

lack of training in working with parents, and teacher attitudes towards parents (Fehlig, 1996; Katz, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1997). There is a need to develop flexible strategies for increasing parent involvement with their children’s science education in the home.

According to the survey conducted through a nationally representative sample of 900 public schools enrolling kindergarten to eighth grade students, some of the barriers relate to the challenges and pressures that parents face and others are associated with the constraints facing teachers and other school staff.

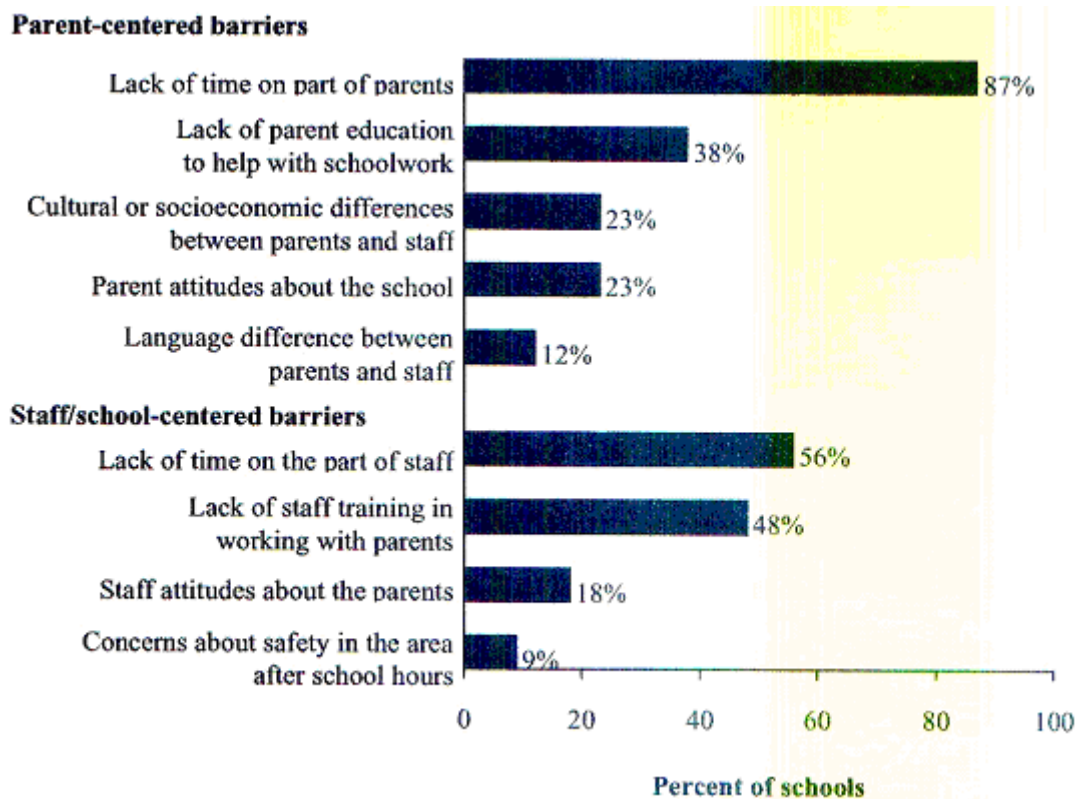


Fig.1 Percent of public elementary schools (K-8) that perceived various concerns as barriers to parent involvement at their school to a great or moderate extent

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

Solution

Because parental involvement provides an advantage of improving science education, it is necessary to address the problems that prevent parental involvement. Using technology as a tool for increasing parental involvement is a growing phenomenon in science education (Gergen, 1991). Technology not only provides a new way to communicate with parents but it provides a wealth of free and accessible resources that can easily be used by parents in the home. By engaging technologies in communicating with parents and supporting information about science education, teachers can overcome barriers to parent involvement in science education.

Questions for subscribers to respond to

1. How do you think about getting parents (families) involved in education?
2. Have you ever involved parents (families) in your teaching?
 - a. If so, what kind of technologies did you use in getting parents (families) involved in education? And what were the problems in getting parents (families) involved in education by using the technologies?

- b. If not, what kind of technologies are you going to use in getting parents (families) involved in education? And what kinds of problems do you expect in getting parents (families) involved in education by using the technologies?
3. Do you think it is effective to use websites in getting parents (families) involved in education? Please elaborate your opinion explaining its advantages and disadvantages.

Reference

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Post-discussion Summary

All the subscribers positively responded for the question 1 about parental involvement in education. Frank Egereonu (foe2001@COLUMBIA.EDU) provided literature on the merits of parental involvement: a series of publications developed by Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla: *The Evidence Grows* (1981); *The Evidence Continues to Grow* (1987); and *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement* (1995). According to the research studies, parent and family involvement increases students' achievement and their school quality. To improve parental involvement, the research studies recommend that schools or programs for parents need to communicate frequently and effectively with parents or families (National PTA <http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/standards/pfistand.asp#Research>).

To communicate with parents frequently and effectively, it is one of good methods to use websites. Many responders agreed that school websites are good for getting parents involved in education. By using the school websites, parents can get information about their children's educational progress in school and educational advices from school teachers at anytime and at anywhere. Yoon's study with Korean parents was successful in getting parents involved in education through her school websites.

However, some teachers found that they have increased their work times beyond normal 8hrs a day. Since students and parents use the Internet as a tool for communication at anytime and at anyplace, they expect teachers will respond to their messages right away. Sometimes (like emergency), to provide fast feedback to parents and students, teachers need to be in front of their computers all day long. Richard Daddio said about the instances on Long Island. Parents on Long Island expect immediate feedback even during class time.

As a solution to the increased work time, Derek Chirnside suggested setting times for responding. Teachers schedule for their responding time and let students and their parents know the schedule. Then, students and their parents can know when they are going to have feedbacks from their teachers. Yoon recommended responding twice a day, morning and evening. That's the way teachers can communicate with students and their parents frequently and effectively.

Yoon pointed out another problem found when she worked with parents who are economically low and lack educational backgrounds. It was so difficult for the parents to use websites as a communication tool. They did not have computers at home. So the school where their children go provided the parents the access to the school computer lab, but the parents could not find a time to use the computers because they needed to go out and work for living. Besides, they did not know how to use computers.

Frank Egereonu emphasized the cooperation between teachers and parents for the school web site to be successful regardless of their economic situation. "The teachers need to be dedicated enough to provide information and materials necessary to keep the Web site up-to-date." These materials can be in the form of homework assignments, projects, student-grades and schedules, etc. For parents, they need to have a time to appreciate school website and then, get more involved in it. Also, he added that schools need to provide parents computer training and access to computers before the communication starts.

Niall Watts provided very precious information for parental involvement in education by using website. As a parent, she worked for making and updating a website for her child's school. But she found it was difficult to keep updating websites because of other parents and teachers' time and computer skills. Therefore, to get parents involved in education, it is necessary to train teachers and parents for developing computer skills. Professor Muhammad Betz includes developing websites with FrontPage as a part of syllabus for pre-service teachers.

According to Niall Watts, teachers and parents have time and energy in the evening to go online to check assignments, ask/answer, questions about homework etc. Therefore, if websites are well-updated and teachers and parents are well-trained, possibly parents get involved in education through websites.

Mitchell Weisburgh provided his successful experiences of getting parents involved in education by using websites. He ran a class website for a 5th to 6th grade class for two years. According to his experiences, to get parents involved in education, there are two things required: 1) make a lot of efforts in maintaining the website and 2) build website per class. Weisburgh took pictures of class events, posted schedules, ran various discussions, sent out reminders to parents, posted student projects, and went to school to pick the most current information. When the most current information and pictures were on the website, parents liked to go to web. Also, he found out that when one website was developed for one class, the same group of kids could stay together and their parents had one place where they could get the information directly related to their kids at school, so that parents got successfully involved in education through the class website. But as Weisburgh mentioned, to maintain the website, it requires long time and efforts. He, as an expert, took 10hrs a month to keep up the site and also worked a lot for making the site interesting.

Frank Egereonu pointed out the maintaining issue again to successfully get parents (especially male parents) involved in education. According to Egereonu, female parents tend to communicate more by e-mail than males do. However, male parents are more active at Internet usage like game-playing. Yoon's study with parents also supports Egereonu's idea. Yoon talked with mothers over the Internet but not with a father when she studied with parents. Therefore, to get male parents involved in education, it is necessary to make the site interesting. Yoon suggests a cyber café for chatting where people can select their animated images that represent them to talk. The animated image talks to the other image whenever people type their messages in a chat room. With the program, male parents can feel like they play a game, chatting with others face to face, thus actively participating in communication.

Another way to get parents successfully involved in education by using website is to give computers to them (Frank Egereonu). Lack of time is one of the obstacles to parental involvement. A lot of parents may not have the time to visit the school computer. Therefore, when they have computers at home, it can mitigate the time barrier to parental involvement. The successful stories about making people involved in educational websites by providing computers can be found in many studies. Most parents had computers at home when Watts worked for developing a school website and communicated with others through the website. Also, Yoon's study with Korean parents showed that all of them had computers at home and the study with them to get parents involved in education was successful. Frank Egereonu pointed out that one of the reasons why parental involvement in America is not successful is lack of computers at home. "In a typical public school in the USA, a majority of the families do not have a computer at home. This has been said to be the main reason why a school Web site may not be an effective home-school communication tool." Only by having computers at home, parents can not be involved in education but having computers at home or near at home makes possibility bigger to get parents involved in education through websites.

Besides of providing computers, it works more effectively to use websites for parental involvement in education when schools make events where parents need to participate. According to Mitchell Weisburgh, when he maintained the class websites, the class made events, like exhibitions and meetings. So, parents had 10 times during the year they were expected to be in school, in addition to helping out on the exhibits. That's the way parents go to school and see how their children learn in the school and meet teachers face to face. Then, they have more passion to contact school frequently which brings parents to the website.

Overall Summary and Reflection

Everybody knows that when parents and families involve in education, their children's performance in school and their school's quality increase. But because of time, parents cannot frequently participate in education. To mitigate the barrier to parental involvement, the subscribers provided suggestions:

1. Schools or programs need to provide interesting and well-maintained class websites (or small size websites);
2. Schools or programs need to provide access to computers (or computers) and training for computer skills.
3. Schools need to make events where parents need to participate. That's the way parents and teachers can make cooperation among them.

Even though parents are busy making money for living during daytimes, they can make a time during night for checking websites if schools provide websites that parents want to use. Therefore, schools need to make more efforts to improve educational websites that parents can get involved in.

For future discussions

Georgia pointed out that parents play a very important role to improve the educational outcomes of their children. But to do educational improvement in their children's performance, he suggested sanctions and monitoring family behavior. But the question is in what form those sanctions could realize and how the monitoring of families could stand up against the privacy rights.

To his question, Yoon provided her experience with Korean parents. Jiyeon monitored parents' behavior by interviewing based on questions that she prepared. The Korean parents who signed up for the study liked to be monitored regularly with the researcher. By on-line chatting or discussing, parents' behaviors can be monitored and if web-cameras are added, it is better to monitor parents' behavior. But the forms of sanctions are still questionable.