

A New Paradigm for Parent Involvement

In two "Accelerated Schools" in California, educators, students, and communities are working as a team to accomplish their shared goal of success for all students.

Something in the basic structure of American public education is keeping parent involvement from achieving its full potential. I call this basic structural factor the "delegation model." It is the same rationale American society has used for delegating other functions to government agencies over the past 150 years—fire and police protection, sanitation, public health, welfare, child care, and the like. Once such functions have been delegated under this model, the primary responsibilities left for citizens are to pay taxes and hold officials accountable for the delivery of services.

Reliance on the delegation model in public education has created a fundamental gap between families and schools. Over the years, the model has become institutionalized in the roles, relationships, and mind-sets not only of school staffs but of parents, students, and citizens as well. As a result, efforts by school leaders to involve parents frequently meet with resistance. Parents often signal, subconsciously and overtly, that they don't have to be involved because the job has been delegated to the schools, just as they don't have to be involved in putting out fires once the fire depart-

ment has been given that job. School staffs, for their part, often do not see parent involvement as part of their professional role and, indeed, can quite justifiably see it as an interference with the jobs that have been delegated to them.

We are confronted, then, with the need to discover and implement new policies and practices, as well as to change basic structures, roles, relationships, attitudes, and assumptions. What approach does this analysis suggest? Perhaps an example will help.



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The Accelerated Schools Project

In 1986-87, the staffs of Daniel Webster Elementary School in San Francisco and Hoover Elementary School in Redwood City, California, spent a number of months deliberating whether to participate in the "Accelerated Schools" project developed by Professor Henry Levin of Stanford University. Oversimply put, the project called for trying to get all children in these poverty-affected, largely minority schools "up to grade level by the end of 6th grade."¹ In addition to many other conclusions—such as the need for a language-rich curriculum, motivational teaching methods, and new management structures—the school staffs concluded that there was no way they could reach this goal without the active cooperation and support of the parents. They also realized that they would need more than just a few parent volunteers; they would need *all* parents (or caretakers) involved in a variety of school, home, and community activities.

Today the teachers and administrators in these two schools actively pursue parent participation, and they do it not because of pressure from headquarters or from parent or community

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groups, but because they see it as *essential* for achieving the objectives they themselves have embraced. Further, they have reorganized their budgets to provide parent coordinators to help accomplish their objectives and have revised their professional roles to make this priority part of their own jobs. Indeed they have enlisted the parents themselves in reaching out to other parents not yet involved. (One parent spoke of how he knocks on his neighbors' doors to get them to come to the school to help the school achieve its ambitious goals for the community's children.)² Further, the staffs of these two schools do all this, not as a separate parent-involvement project but as an integral part of a comprehensive plan to mobilize all available resources, including community agencies and the kids themselves (through cooperative learning and peer tutoring), to achieve their shared goal of student success.

A Fundamental Shift

Although much remains to be done, these two schools have achieved a "paradigm shift." They may not have been aware they were making such a shift, but to an outside observer (and to the staff from Stanford who have been working with them), it is clear that they have been developing and implementing a different model for public schooling, with a different goal

structure and different relationships among the players. The actions of the participants are driven by their own sense of mission and their own methods for achieving that mission. Rather than concentrating on "improving test scores," as many school improvement efforts do, they have concentrated on really educating poor and minority children—all of them, not just the "bright" ones—to a particular level by a particular time.

Many of the things they do have been tried in other schools: newsletters in various languages, neighborhood communications networks, parent breakfasts, parent rooms with parent-initiated activities (such as sewing and cooking classes taught by parents), joint learning activities (e.g., Family Math), neighborhood meetings, workshops for parents (e.g., parenting, helping with homework), individual conferences (rather than mob-scene parent nights), and the like. The difference is that these schools do more of these things, more persistently, because they are now operating on a different model of schooling—a model in which parent involvement is a *necessity* and the school is seen as a collaborative community learning center.

The staffs of the Webster and Hoover schools were able to break out of the delegation paradigm for several reasons. First, they took the time to develop their own (rather than a delegated) goal. Second, they realized that the existing model of delivering professionalized and bureaucratized educational "services" to passive and apathetic students and distant parents would be inadequate for achieving their goal. We cling to existing paradigms because they are built into our daily routines and institutional relationships and because they provide the conceptual framework through which we think about our work—and even about ways of changing it.³ It was only when the staffs of the Accelerated Schools realized that the existing model simply could not get them where they wanted to go that they were willing to try fundamentally different approaches. The fact that they went through this process as a *team*

may be critical, since paradigms retain their hold on people through peer pressure as well as institutional inertia, and many people need peer support as they break away from old paradigms and embrace new ones. Finally, they worked in collaboration with families, community agencies, and the students themselves, building on their strengths and resources, which helped them gain a new perspective on their roles and objectives.

Toward Partnership Principles

The Accelerated Schools are not the only schools operating on a substantially shifted model. The schools developed by James Comer are built on a partnership rather than a delegation model.⁴ Some of the smaller "alternative" and magnet schools developed over the years also use many of the same principles.⁵ Indeed the whole concept of choice in public education represents a different paradigm, with a different incentive and accountability structure.⁶ Some school improvement committees have evolved toward partnership principles as they have developed enough trust to work together in new ways. And some school principals, without any special program, have used elements of this model for years. What is noteworthy in the Accelerated Schools is the in-

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tensity with which these principles are applied, the comprehensiveness with which the elements are woven together into a success-oriented whole, and, the clarity of focus on a worthwhile goal that can enlist the enthusiastic support and cooperation of the many different participants.

The Will to Do It

Educators may agree with this but feel that changing the fundamental model of public education is too tall an order. They may feel that projects such as the Accelerated Schools, the Comer schools, and other partnership experiments are merely hothouse exotics that can flourish only so long as special efforts and funding are available. This outlook must be taken seriously, since paradigm shifts do not come easily.

My first answer to the doubts about making such a fundamental change is that we know it can be done because it is being done—at least at the individual school level. Yes, it takes special efforts and usually some extra funding to help with the conversion costs of extra planning, trust building, curriculum and program revision, and outreach to parents and community. What it especially takes, though, is the *will to do it*—and the understanding that, rather than being impractically visionary, it is the most practical way not only to enhance parent involvement but to educate children successfully in today's world.

There are forces at work that make it more feasible to make such a shift today than in years past. Changes in the economy are causing policymakers to call for much higher levels of educational achievement to enable America to maintain its standard of living in the face of international competition and the demands of an information age. This in turn is leading to the recognition that the fundamental structure of public schooling cannot produce the educational levels now required and to powerful pressure for structural changes.

A second and related force is the movement to professionalize teaching, which is also leading to reconsideration of the basic management and accountability structure of public

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schooling. The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, for example, in seeking ways to recruit high-caliber teachers, recommended a "restructuring" of schools "to provide a professional environment for teachers," including "a radical reorganization of work roles" and indeed a whole "new framework" for public education, with management and accountability at the school level and changes in the existing top-down bureaucratic chain of command.⁷

Empowering All the Players

If these changes were incompatible with the new paradigm needed for parent involvement, it might indeed be impractical to attempt to move toward a partnership parent involvement model. Happily, however, they are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. Parent involvement would not have evolved as a powerful element in the two Accelerated Schools in California if there had not been a team effort—first of the school staff and then of the staff and parent leaders—to develop their own goals and their own plan for achieving them. The spirit and intensity of the effort to work together—which is at the heart of its potential success—could never

have been mandated by top-down bureaucratic directives.

Likewise, the new level of professionalism evidenced at these schools, and the new type of accountability that is developing around it, could not exist without the new relationships with parents, students, and the community. At these two schools, learning about the community and how to work with it is an important part of staff development. What is developing is not only accountability of professional colleagues to each other, but the mutual accountability of staff, parents, and students working together for a common goal. This brings a power into the relationship that supersedes the power of bureaucratic control.

The shift to a collaborative model will empower all the players in ways that promise higher levels of social and academic achievement. Without such a shift, it is doubtful that parent involvement will develop to the new levels now needed for excellence in American education.□

¹ H.M. Levin, (1987), "Accelerated Schools for Disadvantaged Students," *Educational Leadership* 44, 6: 20.

² Site visit and interviews by author, March 1989.

³ T.S. Kuhn, (1970), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

⁴ J.P. Comer, (1980), *School Power* (New York: The Free Press); and J.P. Comer, (1988), "Educating Poor Minority Children," *Scientific American* 259, 5: 42-48.

⁵ M.A. Raywid, (1984), "Synthesis of Research on Schools of Choice," *Educational Leadership* 41, 7: 70-80; and J. Nathan, ed., (1989), *Public Schools by Choice* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone Books).

⁶ D.S. Seeley, (1981), *Education Through Partnership* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger); and J. Nathan, ed., (1989), *Public Schools by Choice* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone Books).

⁷ Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, (1986), *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy).

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