

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.

The Unusual Source of a Profound Insight

We believe that the great value and transformative impact of deliberately teaching “just” two skills is due to the unusual source of the original insight that guides the entire Right Question Strategy. The insight first appeared on the scene a little more than two decades ago. We were working on a drop-out prevention program funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Lawrence, Massachusetts—a former thriving textile industry hub that suffered a severe economic downturn when the factories left town in search of cheaper labor. Our task was to find ways to get parents more involved in their children’s education. In conversation after conversation with parents in the community, primarily low- and moderate-income Latino and white parents, we repeatedly heard that they didn’t participate in their children’s education and didn’t go to the schools because they “didn’t even know what to ask.”

We interpreted the problem as not having questions to ask. We thought we could solve that by giving a list of questions to the parents. We began to observe that one week, parents would come to us and say they didn’t know what their children were supposed to be doing for homework. We gave them a list of questions to ask about homework. The next week, they came and said they didn’t know what to ask about a new school disciplinary policy. We drafted another list of questions for them to ask about disciplinary policies. Then, a week later, a few parents came and wanted questions to ask because their children had been referred for testing for an Individualized Education Program.

The pattern quickly became all too clear. We were making parents *more* dependent on us. We thought we had an answer to the problem—give them questions—but we were wrong.

The problem was not about the lack of questions. They were actually sharing a profound insight by naming “not knowing what to ask”

as a fundamental yet overlooked obstacle to effective participation in any setting. However, like many an original insight, it can seem so obvious that its importance will be completely overlooked. The parents helped us understand that the ability to ask questions is not only a sophisticated thinking skill but also an essential advocacy one. They helped us realize that we needed to stop giving out lists of questions and figure out how to teach this seemingly simple but profoundly important skill. That was no small task.

There was no easily accessible model. Even though Socrates had demonstrated the power of questions more than a couple of millennia ago, the actual practice for teaching other people to ask their own questions—and not leave the skill only in the hands of the wisest person in the room—had not advanced much (Rothstein, 2012).

The assumption that the skill of question formulation is really the province of only the highly educated was made even clearer when Kate Zernike (2002) of *The New York Times* interviewed college presidents, asking them what a student should know after four years of higher education. The presidents of Bard College and the University of Illinois said because there is “so much knowledge and information” that cannot possibly be entirely learned and absorbed, the best thing colleges can do is ensure that students can “ask strategic questions” and find a way to get to the “right questions.”

Those were college presidents talking about students in college. Long before they were interviewed, we were asking ourselves if such a sophisticated thinking and learning skill could be taught on the fly as part of school efforts to engage parents. We got to work trying to figure out how to quickly teach this important skill in a way that *all* people, those with little education and those with lots of it, could improve their ability to ask their own questions.

It took a good many years, lots of trial, and many errors, but we eventually figured out how to teach a sophisticated thinking skill in a simple way. We developed the Question Formulation Technique

(QFT), a process that allows anyone who uses it to learn how to *produce* their own questions, *improve* their questions, and *strategize* about how to use them.

As we continued our work and research on the ground, we learned that the parents who were most effective in using their new skills began to ask better questions about decisions affecting them and their children. Based on our lessons from their actions, we teased out another accessible, easily teachable tool: the Framework for Accountable Decision Making (FADM).

The FADM also does something deceptively simple: it starts by defining a decision as the “selection of one option among two or more options.” This explanation emphasizes that a decision involves selecting an option. This then facilitates the use of three basic criteria when looking at any decision—specifically

- The reasons for a decision.
- The process for making the decision.
- The role of the person(s) affected by the decision in the decision-making process.

In Chapter 2, you will see the full description of the Support, Monitor, and Advocate (SMA) Model, the QFT, and the FADM. Then, in the case studies that follow, you will see how educators and parents use different aspects of the Right Question Strategy to help build their partnerships. In the Appendix, there are additional materials that will make it easy to teach the content of the strategy, prepare to use the strategy, and facilitate the strategy when working with parents.

An Evidence-Based Strategy: Data from Many Fields and Communities

The QFT and the FADM have been used across a range of fields and in a diverse set of communities. The results are consistently similar:

people who had previously not participated effectively in key decisions were now actively using their new skills, participating, speaking up, and partnering constructively with professionals. For example, in a randomized control study funded by the National Institutes of Health, the Right Question Strategy was taught to patients at community mental health centers in low-income Latino communities. The results were impressive—patients became up to three times as “activated” and engaged as they had been previously. This success led to a national expansion of the strategy (Alegría et al., 2008). This was followed by research and implementation projects including areas as diverse as New York City community health centers, where the Right Question Strategy was shown to be highly effective after being taught to patients in just 7–10 minutes while they were in the waiting rooms (Deen, Lu, Rothstein, Santana, & Gold, 2011; Lu, Deen, Rothstein, Santana, & Gold, 2011). The use of the strategy to activate patients continues to grow in places ranging from the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants (in collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Global Populations and Infectious Disease Prevention to promote engagement and retention in care for refugees) to the Kaiser Permanente Health Care System on the island of Oahu in Hawaii (Olinger & Nelson, 2015).

The QFT has proven to be an effective resource for educators in K–12 classrooms and in higher education. Since the publication of *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (Rothstein & Santana, 2011), there has been an explosion of use of the QFT in classrooms around the world. In more than 100,000 classrooms, teachers are finding that students who learn to ask their own questions by using the QFT are more engaged, take greater ownership of their learning, and are learning more deeply than ever before. Educators have also adapted the QFT for their specific teaching and learning goals in the classroom (Rothstein, Santana, &

Minigan, 2015). Teachers, principals, districts, and state leaders have led the way in this widespread adoption of the QFT—from a 3rd grade teacher in a Los Angeles elementary school starting a book club, to a teacher’s union leader and a state commissioner of education in New Hampshire introducing and supporting use of the QFT in all Title I schools across the state, to school districts across Appalachian eastern Kentucky.

In 2015, as the school was in the process of revamping its program of studies for first- and second-year medical students, Harvard Medical School reached out to us to learn more about how to teach the skill of question formulation to all people, including students like theirs who have excelled at answering other people’s questions. The robustness of the technique has been demonstrated for a variety of purposes across grades and subject areas, with students in urban, suburban, and rural areas and in border communities with large immigrant populations.

Using the Right Question Strategy to Build Partnerships with Parents

In 1995, we were selected in the very first cohort of grantees to receive funds to establish Parent Information and Resource Centers as part of the Goals 2000 U.S. Department of Education. Working with sites primarily in rural communities and small cities around Massachusetts, we saw a sharp increase in schools and families working collaboratively. Schools and community agencies made a commitment to invest in the capacity of parents to better support, monitor, and advocate for their children’s education.

The impact across many communities was quite moving. In a workshop at a homeless shelter in Cambridge, MA, one mother shared how “learning to ask questions gives me the confidence to meet with

teachers. I was always afraid of going and looking stupid and that would be bad for my kids. Now I feel like I know that it's OK to ask questions and I know what I want to ask." This kind of impact was widespread across the state as evaluations showed that there was a dramatic increase in parent communications with teachers (Black, 1998).

Our work began to be recognized nationally, and we were also in the first cohort of "parent involvement" grantees funded by the Wallace Funds (then the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund). We began to work with other Parent Information and Resource Centers around the country in Rhode Island, Indiana, and New Mexico. In Kentucky, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a non-profit education and advocacy organization, collaborated with the Jefferson County Public Schools to invite us to train parent liaisons in the schools to work more effectively with parents (Sexton, 2004). Our work with them was the forerunner to their highly respected Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, which has been a strong voice on behalf of strengthening schools and increasing funding and resources across the state for many years.

In a study they commissioned with support from Hayes Mizell of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, University of Louisville researchers found that there was significantly increased communication with teachers and administrators and nearly a doubling of the number of parents who felt a strong sense of accomplishment in their interactions with school staff *after* learning to ask their own questions (Ruscoe & Gaus, 1997). The parent liaisons who worked in the schools were also determined to teach the Right Question Strategy to parents wherever they could find them—in public housing developments, church groups, homeless shelters, and parent conference days at the schools. In the Wayside Shelter for Families, one mother reflected on what she had learned and said, "Now, I will do whatever it takes to get the information to help my child."

Theresa Jensen, one of the most respected principals in the Louisville, KY, school district, worked with parent liaisons and parent volunteers to offer workshops to all incoming parents at Englehard Elementary School. “We need,” she asserted, “more parents asking questions. It helps us and helps their children” (Garrett, 1997). She was but one of many school leaders around the country who began to support and promote use of the Right Question Strategy to build stronger partnerships with families. One elementary school teacher in central Massachusetts, for example, observed, “We have never had as productive a conversation with parents as we have had with parents who learned to ask their own questions.”

Schools also began to get more support in this effort to engage parents from social service agencies and community organizations. In Sacramento, CA, Faye Kennedy of the Center for Collaborative Planning (who works with immigrant parents of English language learners), said the process helps hesitant and shy parents “find their voice. They know they don’t need me to speak up for them. They can do it themselves.” One Mexican immigrant mother with whom she worked described how learning to ask her own questions made her better prepared. “You know what you want to know, and when you know *that* you can look for a way to get it.” Parents are able to get what they want because they have the skills that the Right Question Strategy builds to help them participate in decisions affecting their children (Nelson, 2003).

In the 20 years since we began teaching the Right Question Strategy for building school-family partnerships, we have also seen that the language of our strategy has influenced the national discourse about best practices when working with parents. The Harvard Family Research Project reported that the Right Question Strategy “provides a simple methodology of framing questions that parents can use in teacher conferences and parent meetings. Parents can be supported

in developing leadership skills to monitor school reform” (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2005, p. xxii).

In her courses on working with families at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Karen Mapp, a nationally recognized expert on family engagement, often devotes time to introducing her students to the Right Question Strategy, which she also has highlighted as a “best practice” that recognizes the strengths of families and what they can offer schools. Anne Henderson, who is also a national leader in the field of family engagement, cites the Right Question Strategy as a best practice in family engagement in her book *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). In their Framework for Family-School Partnerships, the U.S. Department of Education eventually adopted new guidelines for working with families that included our original language emphasizing three roles parents can play in their children’s education (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Over the course of the past two decades there has been a change in how schools define families’—and more specifically, parents’—roles in education (Epstein, 2001; Haskins & Adams, 1983; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The shift from a separation between involvement at home and participation at school to a more active and collaborative role stems from the schools’ understanding that every parent has something to benefit the school. It is important to note that even though the terms *parent involvement* and *family engagement* are commonly used, they are meant to represent the wide range of adults who might be responsible for a child’s education, which can include guardians, foster parents, grandparents, and even older siblings. We are emphasizing here, much as Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins has advocated, the use of the term *partnership*, which raises the level of interaction from “involvement” or “engagement” to a collaborative relationship. We feel that captures more accurately what happens

when the Right Question Strategy is deployed. In short, we agree with this definition of the working relationship: “[A] shared responsibility for the education of a child, between parents, schools, and communities, and is rooted in an asset-based understanding of the strengths of each part of the partnership” (Kammen et al., 2014, p. 9).

The Structure of This Book

In a series of case studies, we illustrate how the Right Question Strategy can help remove many of the traditional obstacles to more effective parent participation. In Appendix B, we provide additional teaching and learning materials that are designed to enable readers to learn the strategy one day and implement it the next. This apparent simplicity, however, belies the rigor and discipline in the strategy.

In Chapter 1, we fully unpack the Right Question Strategy and illustrate how its components fit together. Then, in each case chapter, inspired by all the people with whom we have worked, we present an issue that brings into sharp focus how the absence of effective parent engagement exacerbates the problem of inequity. We created composite case studies in order to capture as many of the parents’ and educators’ contributions as possible and lay out how the strategy can be quickly implemented and flexibly applied. A teacher will help a parent address the issue of a child not doing his homework. A school will engage parents around the issue of bullying. A parent liaison will help a parent prepare to fully participate in her legal role at an IEP meeting. A school district will bring parents into a conversation about equity and how to improve educational outcomes for all students. And a community of primarily immigrant parents of English language learners (ELLs) using skills taught by a staff member from a social service agency will mobilize around a crisis in their children’s school to ferret out and hold accountable the complex layers

of public decision-making bodies that affect the opportunities and resources made available to its children. Each case study includes a description of a significant challenge and a brief discussion of traditional approaches and their limitations. We then present how the Right Question Strategy can be helpful. The composite case studies are drawn from the hundreds of places where the strategy has been implemented around the country.

As we pieced the stories together from hundreds of examples, we were inspired anew with the intelligence, determination, and pluck of both educators and parents who, each day, face great challenges in their work and their lives. Their stories are so impressive that they could trigger a perception that they are just “too good to be true.” It is, indeed, accurate to describe them as best practices. They are not, however, impossible-to-achieve practices. Nor are they the kind of such extraordinary best practices that can leave one feeling incapable of emulating them. On the contrary, the case studies show how, in each situation, the use of the strategy is a lesson from and a replication of its use in some other setting by someone else. This is precisely how the strategy has been shared around the country: from trusted source to trusted source.

We also adopt an unusual practice in introducing the key characters in the case studies. We use initials in place of names. You’ll meet people like Ms. R, Ms. S, Mr. M, and people who are identified as a father, mother, neighbor, and friend. Why didn’t we just use the standard practice of pseudonyms? Here’s the reason. When relaying some of the stories appearing in the case studies, we occasionally hear negative responses from people working in demographically similar communities. They say, “Oh, *our* parents could never do this,” as if the ability to learn to ask questions and participate in decisions is simply beyond their intelligence level. Over the past two decades, in community after community, we have witnessed the extraordinary

intelligence and capability of people from whom not much is expected as they begin to think for themselves, advocate effectively for their families and communities, and participate effectively in their children's education. We are presenting a range of examples that are universally relevant and demonstrate just how much people who have not previously participated can do to help their children and partner with educators. We need to keep the focus on their actions, not on their names and whatever associations that might provoke. We use initials, therefore, to emphasize that the ability to learn the sophisticated thinking skills presented in the case studies is not beyond the reach of anyone, no matter what anyone may think their names or the spelling of their names might represent.

We encourage you, as you read about the people in the case studies, to think about the great untapped potential that exists among so many of the families of the students you serve. You can create partnerships to address the issues discussed in the case studies and much, much more. The use of the Right Question Strategy is not limited to the few topics, grade levels, and challenges described in this book.

There are key moments in each of the stories presented in this book when both educators and parents discover just how quickly they can transform their limited interactions into an active collaboration. Parents who were previously disengaged enjoy their newfound ability to support their children's education, monitor their progress, and even advocate for their children when necessary. Educators also benefit by having a strong partner outside the classroom. As parents learn to better support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education, they will not only work more effectively with individual teachers but also become advocates for helping schools obtain the resources they need to best serve their students. They become both powerful individual collaborators and a collective partner for change.

Creating New Sources of Expertise

We have, over the course of two decades of wide-ranging work, become experts of a sort. Our expertise is really about our ability to learn from others and then translate those lessons into teaching and learning methods that promote great independent thought and personal and political efficacy. Of course, we have arrived at this level of expertise because we have met the criteria about what constitutes an expert as set by the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr. An expert, according to Bohr, is “a person who has found out by his own painful experience all the mistakes that one can make” and there are no more to make (quoted in Teller, 1954, p. 62).

We’ve made many, many mistakes on the way to creating a deceptively simple strategy that is easy to implement and can build strong school-family partnerships. We not only have learned from parents and educators, as described here, but also have learned a great deal from one another and have benefited from the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that we bring to our team.

We invite you to benefit from the lessons we have learned (through much trial and many errors) through years of trying to make this strategy as simple as possible. We encourage you to take the wisdom and expertise of the educators and parents from whom you will hear in this book and then share it with colleagues and parents in your communities. By helping parents enhance their ability to ask questions, participate in decisions, and learn to support their children’s education, monitor their progress, and advocate for them, you help build their ability to actively and fully work on the wide range of challenges that appear throughout a child’s educational journey. Make that investment and you will experience, as the educators and parents in this book demonstrate, great new joy in your school community. It is an investment that has an immediate pay-off and

significant long-term value. You will be, of course, directly helping your students, but you are doing even more than that, without adding to your burdens. You will be building a stronger community. Furthermore, as educators working in one of the most important institutions in a democratic society—the public school—you will be strengthening democracy by making it possible for more people to confidently ask questions and participate in decisions that affect them.

We mentioned earlier that we offer this book as a modest contribution to help lessen the burdens on both educators and parents and make it easier to build strong school-family partnerships. We expect, however, that the outcomes will be anything but modest. Just as the lessons in this book were acquired from the people with whom we have worked in the past, we expect to learn a lot in the future from you. You will become the new experts (making, we're sure, fewer mistakes than we made), and your work will inspire others and make a difference on behalf of all the students you serve.



The Right Question School-Family Partnership Strategy

The Right Question School-Family Partnership Strategy (Right Question Strategy) is a deceptively simple strategy that can be used with all parents, including those who are already active and those who have not participated previously, to greatly enhance their ability to partner more effectively with educators on students' behalf. It has just three core components: one set of specific roles for parents to play and two skills that allow them to play those roles effectively. Research in different fields and diverse communities has shown that the Right Question Strategy, despite its simplicity, quickly and efficiently produces profound cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes, as you will see in the following chapters.

The strategy is designed to allow for a modular approach to make it easier to implement. There are many ways to mix

and match the three components in your work with parents and families. The case study chapters (Chapter 2–6) demonstrate the strategy’s flexibility by exploring a variety of adaptations depending on different challenges, goals, ages and other demographics, and student needs.

The three key components are as follows.

1. Question Formulation Technique (QFT): Developing the Skill of Question Formulation

- A step-by-step process that allows parents to produce their own questions, improve their questions, and strategize on how to use their questions.
- The QFT also makes it possible to use three distinct thinking abilities in one process:
 - » Divergent thinking
 - » Convergent thinking
 - » Metacognitive thinking

2. Framework for Accountable Decision Making (FADM): Developing the Skill of Participating Effectively in Decisions

- A clear analytical structure that allows parents to focus sharply on key decisions, ask their own questions, and apply specific criteria for ensuring accountable decision making.
- Use of the FADM begins with defining a *decision* as the selection of one option among two or more options and then using that definition to identify key decisions.
- Three criteria to apply to decisions:
 - » There is a legitimate *reason* for the decision.
 - » There is a transparent *process* for the decision.
 - » Anyone affected by the decision has an opportunity to participate—to play a *role* in the decision-making process.

3. The Support, Monitor, and Advocate Model: Partnering Effectively with Educators

Parents can play the following three roles:

- *Support* their children’s education.
- *Monitor* their progress.
- *Advocate* for them when necessary.

These components of the Right Question Strategy constitute the core content, the *what* of the strategy, but to use the strategy most effectively requires a clear understanding of the *how*—that is, the principles and best practices related to how the strategy is taught, facilitated, and shared (Karchmer, 2010). The entire Right Question Strategy is grounded in a strengths-based approach that recognizes the potential of all parents, regardless of their literacy level or background, to ask good questions, participate effectively in decisions, and partner constructively with schools. Teaching resources and templates to support your use of the strategy in a range of settings can be found in Appendix B.

The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

The QFT provides a rigorous process that helps all people develop their ability to ask their own questions. The technique has been effectively used in a variety of fields and communities and with adults across a range of educational levels. A full description of how it is used by teachers with students in the classroom can be found in our book *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (Rothstein & Santana, 2011). On the website of the Right Question Institute, you can also access many more examples of how teachers across the world implement the QFT with great success.

The full QFT process includes five general steps. In those five steps, parents (1) produce their own questions, (2) work with and improve their own questions, (3) prioritize their questions, (4) strategize on

next steps and how to use the questions, and (5) reflect on what they have learned by working with their questions.

It is not necessary to always use all five steps together, for there are situations where one or several of the steps are more important to use than others. In the case studies included in this book, you will see this flexibility and how educators use the QFT differently depending on the setting, their goals, and the people with whom they are working.

Preparing to Use the QFT and Facilitate the Process with Parents

The QFT is a simple process, but using it well requires some preparation and implementation is enhanced by specific best practices that ensure its maximum benefit when working with colleagues and parents. We will provide specific examples of how to do this, but before we do that, here are the basic steps in your use of the QFT.

In Step 1, you present four rules for producing questions, and parents then discuss the challenges they might face in following them. Then they start asking questions about a Question Focus you have created. In Step 2, parents categorize their questions as open- or closed-ended, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of questions, and practice changing questions from one type to the other. In Step 3, you provide prioritization instructions that will guide how parents work with their questions and prioritize them. In Step 4, parents strategize about how they plan to use their questions as they discuss their “next steps.” In Step 5, parents reflect on what they have learned by working with their own questions and how they can use what they learned.

Step 1: Produce Your Own Questions

Determine a Question Focus

A Question Focus is a catalyst for parents’ questions. Designing the Question Focus (QFocus) begins with the purpose and end goal in mind; do you want to use a Question Focus to start the question-asking

process about a specific issue, to set an agenda, to problem solve, or for another purpose? You can design a QFocus with any kind of goal in mind, but you should try to keep it as simple as possible, and you should assess it—test it out—to see if it is compelling enough to stimulate multiple lines of questioning.

The QFocus can be drawn from actual situations parents are facing—a child not making expected progress, a child being referred for a special education evaluation, a child at risk of being held back, or broader topics such as academic standards, safety, the school environment, or changes at the school. The QFocus should be designed with enough “hooks” to grab parents’ attention or create a sense of urgency, such as “Your child is being referred for an evaluation” or “There will be changes made on how a student’s progress will be measured at your child’s school.”

It is important when designing a Question Focus to consider how to take a topic that might be too broad and sharpen it; for example, going from “new school policies” to “New school policies on grading will be created this year.” The latter is more likely to stimulate a flow of questions.

You will see just how this plays out in Chapter 2 when a teacher considers how best to use the QFT with a student’s mother in order to engage her as a partner in solving a problem. In that scenario, the child has suddenly stopped doing his homework even though he had always turned it in on time. The teacher reaches out to the boy’s mother to set up a meeting and plans to use the QFT to engage her as a partner in problem solving. The teacher got to work thinking about some Question Focus examples. She knew that she had to come up with multiple options rather than just the first one that came to mind.

After she came up with several, she reviewed them. The first one, “S is not doing his homework,” might immediately put the mother on the defensive, as if it were the mother’s fault that her son was not doing his homework. She looked at another: “Something seems to have changed about S.” This one might also strike fear in the heart

of the mother, sounding all too worrisome. Then she thought about another factual statement: “Three times in the past two weeks S did not turn in his homework.” This one might work, without giving the impression that S *never* does his homework. She compared it to another one, “S seems to be having trouble doing his homework.”

The QFocus highlighting how many times in the last two weeks the homework wasn’t done could definitely start some questioning. She decided, however, to go with the simpler one, which was more observational in tone. The word *seems* left some wiggle room for interpretation and discussion and was less harsh than declaring a problem. Its tone also seemed to invite the mother into the thinking process in order to help the teacher figure out how best to help the student.

There is an art to designing the Question Focus. Teachers report that although it is a different way of working—it’s a small shift in practice from asking questions of students or parents—it grows on them as they see how it stimulates new thinking and more engagement. It also gets easier to design an effective Question Focus the more you practice.

An exploration of the QFocus and a step-by-step process on how to design it can be found in Appendix B.

Discuss the Rules for Producing Questions

There are four rules for producing questions. When you present them to parents, request that they think about and discuss what might be difficult about following them.

1. Ask as many questions as you can.
2. Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer the questions.
3. Write down every question exactly as stated.
4. Change any statements into questions.

As shown in Figure 1.1, these rules go much further than simply asking, “Do you have any questions?” or saying, “Ask some questions.” Instead, the rules provide a clear structure that shows *how* parents can generate their own questions. It took us close to eight years to come

Figure 1.1
Contexts for Creating a Question Focus

Your student . . .	General Education Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is not turning in homework. • Is doing OK but could work harder. • Seems bored. • Is very strong in some areas, but weak in others. • Will need to attend summer school. • Needs additional help. • Is having some behavior problems. • Is falling behind classmates. • Is struggling in _____ (e.g., math, science, reading, writing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report cards • Curriculum • Changes in schedule • School policies (attendance, discipline, class assignments, homework) • Testing • Parent-teacher partnership

up with these four rules. Now, if you’ve quickly done the math, you know that comes out to half a rule per year. We actually spent a good amount of time over all those years trying to figure out which of the 100 or so possible suggestions about how to ask your own questions could be eliminated. We tried to answer this question: *What is the absolute minimum number of rules needed in order to make it easier for all people to ask their own questions?*

Einstein said, “Make things as simple as possible and no simpler.” The wisdom of that observation is relevant here. We would be delighted if there were a need for only one rule, specifically the first one: Ask as many questions as you can. However, we have learned through much trial and error that without the other three rules, the first one alone is not sufficient to get everyone asking their own questions. The other three rules create a safe space and a disciplined “no judgment” zone that encourages people to think and question freely without fear of being considered to have asked a “stupid question.”

The four rules together create the safe environment within which even reticent parents can begin to identify what they don't know or what they want to know.

Produce the Questions

Following the rules, parents produce all kinds of questions without discussing, judging, or trying to answer them. They are also encouraged to number their questions in sequential order, which will make it easier to work on the next parts of the process.

Step 2: Improve Your Questions

Categorize the Questions

You will share with parents this simple definition of closed- and open-ended questions: Closed-ended questions can be answered with one word (e.g., *yes* or *no*). Open-ended questions require an explanation or more information. Parents then review their list of questions and categorize each one as closed or open.

This may appear to be a simple task, but it can be challenging at times and it can stimulate a lot of new thinking about questions and their structure.

Discuss the Value of Each Question Category

Parents are asked to name the advantages and disadvantages of asking each type of question. They learn that each type is useful based on purpose. This message may be contrary to the commonly held idea that some questions—the open-ended ones—are better than others.

Practice Changing Questions from One Category to the Other

Parents then practice changing questions from closed to open and from open to closed and gain a deeper understanding of question formulation. This exercise in categorizing and then changing their questions brings an important new awareness for parents. They often comment that they not only learned about the different kinds of

questions and how to change them but also discovered through the process that “how you ask a question can get you different kinds of information.”

Step 3: Prioritize Your Questions

Prioritization helps parents assess their own questions and prepares them for strategizing on their next steps. The discussion that occurs while prioritizing allows them to think more deeply about their questions.

Select Priority Questions Based on Prioritization Instructions

Parents choose three priority questions based on the prioritization instructions you will provide. Instructions will vary depending on specific goals, purposes, next steps, and many other factors. The design of the prioritization instructions should be part of a process for preparing to use the QFT. Examples include the following:

- Which three questions do you want to get answered first?
- Which three questions are the most important to you?
- Which three questions will help you address the problem immediately?
- Which three questions will help you figure out your next steps?

Step 4: Discuss and Strategize on Next Steps

Parents now are ready to work on their next steps, what they will do with their priority questions, and the insights they have gained through working with all of their questions. Next steps might be to gather new information, plan to meet with people who can or should be asked the questions, engage more parents and educators in thinking about the questions, or develop an action plan based on the questions. There are many avenues to explore, and selecting one will depend on the specific needs and purposes of each situation.

Step 5: Reflect on What Has Been Learned

Taking a moment for reflection may seem unnecessary at this point or, at best, a luxury that time does not allow. Parents have already done much of the intellectual labor, produced their own questions, refined their questions, prioritized them, and strategized on how to use them as they weigh next steps. They have done a lot. Why, then, is it important to now add a few minutes for them to reflect on such basic questions as “What did you learn?” and “How can you use it?”

These kinds of simple reflection questions stimulate a deeper awareness of what they, themselves, have discovered by doing all of this hard intellectual labor. They realize that they have not only done a lot of work but also learned a great deal “just” by working in a rigorous way with their own questions. They are thinking about their thinking. This helps reinforce all that they learned and allows them to see themselves as fully capable. Even though they are neither the professionals nor the experts, they are fully capable of engaging in a thinking process on an important subject. The small investment of time at the end of the process—even just 3–5 minutes—can greatly amplify the value of all that came before.

Changes after Going through the QFT Process

Going through the QFT process can be a transformational experience, influencing what parents know, how they feel, and what they are ready and able to do.

- *Cognitive:* Parents now know how to produce their own questions. They have a process and structure for doing it. They know four rules that help them do that. They know about open- and closed-ended questions and what happens when you change them. They know how to prioritize using specific criteria and instructions. They know how to use their priority questions to strategize and determine next steps.

- *Affective:* Parents feel better about their own intellectual abilities. They become more confident, moving from a sense of powerlessness—of “not even knowing what to ask”—to a sense of their own capability to think, ask questions, and speak up. The thinking process and identification of priority questions and next steps also generates a new sense of urgency to take action, play a role in their children’s education, and partner with their children’s educators. They also feel that they have a license to ask questions—permission they can grant themselves.
- *Behavioral:* Parents ask questions. They work with their questions. They prioritize. They strategize. They take informed action. They participate more. Teachers regularly report that they have the best and most productive meetings with parents who have learned to use the Question Formulation Technique.

Building these three thinking abilities and producing the cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes does not require hours and hours or multiple meetings or sessions. There’s no need to learn to teach a lengthy curriculum. You can facilitate a quick version of the entire QFT process in as little as 10 minutes with individual parents and in about 30 minutes with groups of parents. It would be better to have more time, even up to an hour for a workshop-type event with a group of parents, but that’s not absolutely necessary.

The Framework for Accountable Decision Making (FADM)

The Framework for Accountable Decision Making (FADM), one of the three core components of the Right Question Strategy, is a useful resource that can be used on its own. You will see, however, that when parents use it in combination with the QFT, they can become even more effective participants in their children’s education. Just as the QFT builds sophisticated thinking abilities in a simple and rigorous

manner, so does the FADM provide parents with a simple structure that makes it easier to understand and participate more effectively in critically important decisions that affect their children. It does this with just three parts:

- A simple and clear definition of a decision that then makes it easier for parents to clearly identify key decisions affecting their children.
- Three specific criteria for analyzing a decision. Parents need to be able to focus sharply on the basis for making the decision, the process for making it, and their role in the process.
- Use of the three criteria as a focus for asking questions. Parents can apply their question-asking skill with a sharp focus on the most important aspects of each decision.

Step 1: Define and Identify Decisions

The FADM begins with a two-part introduction to decisions:

- *Defining the term* decision: A decision is the selection of one option from among two or more options. The apparent simplicity of this definition should not detract from its importance. For many parents, there is a catalytic effect to discovering that a decision is not always a done deal but rather the result of choosing between different options. This new knowledge presents an opportunity to examine all options more closely and to inquire about the option that has been or will ultimately be selected.
- *Identifying decisions*: A definition of a decision is just a starting point for looking at decisions. Even armed with a clear definition, it can sometimes be surprisingly difficult to even recognize decisions that are being made. Parents might find out about new classroom assignments, changes in homework practices, and new disciplinary practices without realizing that each new topic presented to them is actually the result of a decision; that is, it was the option chosen. There are specific resources in

Appendix B that scaffold a learning process that allows parents to identify many decisions they make each day—how a decision about what to eat or wear or how to get to an appointment—are all the selection of one option from among two or more options. This awareness of their own decision-making expertise can then build confidence for examining decisions beginning at the classroom or school level.

Step 2: Explore Three Key Elements in Decision Making

Parents are introduced to criteria for good decision making. This includes the following key information they should look for in any decision that affects their children:

- *Reason:* the basis for the decisions. Decisions must be based on policies, standards, and rules that are fairly applied. Decisions should be legitimate. Zeroing in on the reason for a decision can help clarify why one particular option was selected (sometimes, there are multiple reasons for a decision, but there must always be at least one reason). Parents often report that even though they may not agree with a decision, or they may not get the outcome they want, knowing the reason and getting an explanation for the decision helps them understand the perspective of their children’s educators. Making clear that they expect to know a reason also makes clear that decision makers are accountable to the people affected by the decision.
- *Process:* all that goes into selecting the option and making the decision. Fully knowing about the process requires learning about the information used, the steps leading up to the selection of one option, who was (and was not) involved, and the logistics of when and where the decision was made. An accountable decision requires transparency. The people affected by the decision need to know *how* the decision was made. By learning about the

process, parents often discover the complexity of the decision making process, how many people need to be involved, and the many factors that must be considered.

- *Role*: the part a parent can play in the decision-making process. In an accountable decision-making process, it is not sufficient to know just about the reasons for a decision and the process for making it. Those criteria are necessary but not sufficient. It is also important to find a way to have a say, to play some kind of role in the process. This does not mean that the parent is the decision maker or has veto power. It does mean that at some point in the process, the parent can and should play a role in decisions affecting a child's education. This could be early in a process, inviting full participation. It could be late in the process to share results of initial work and planning and to discuss possible options. Alternatively, it could even be at the end of a process with clear information about how to appeal or change a decision. Parents who are consulted early and often understand more, are more likely to feel their voices are heard, and have a greater understanding of the complex factors that go into any one particular decision affecting their children.

Step 3: Ask Questions about Decisions

What, then, is the most direct way to learn about the reason for a decision, the process for making it, and the role a parent can play? Ask questions and deliberately use these three criteria to inform one's own questions. It is important to be able to ask questions about all three, for altogether they represent three fundamental democratic decision-making principles:

- Reason is related to Legitimacy.
- Process is related to Transparency.
- Role is related to Opportunities for Participation.

Accountable decision making, at any level in a democratic society, must meet all three criteria. Parents who ask questions about a reason but are not prepared to ask about the process—about how the decisions are made—are less prepared to advocate for their children and partner effectively with educators. The same is true for parents who ask about the process or reason for making a decision but fail to ask about the role they could or should play in the decision. Parents who ask questions about all three are well-equipped partners for educators who want to improve outcomes for all children in their school.

When parents combine the Framework for Accountable Decision Making (FADM) with the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), they are well equipped to partner effectively with their children's educators. They can more easily and confidently move from being passive bystanders to active, strategic participants in decisions. The FADM, similar to the QFT, produces distinct cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes.

- *Cognitive*: Parents gain new knowledge of a simple definition of a decision. They know how to discern decisions from general topics and issues. They know the meaning of three specific criteria for accountable decision making. They know how to create questions that address all three criteria.
- *Affective*: Informed by this new knowledge, parents feel more confident participating in decisions, asking questions, and exploring how they can play a role in decision making. Realizing the complexity of the decision-making process can produce both new feelings of empathy for the challenges facing educators and a greater sense of urgency to make sure their own voices on behalf of their children are heard.
- *Behavioral*: Parents pay attention to decisions, monitor decision making at multiple levels, ask questions about decisions, use the criteria for accountable decision making when asking questions,

participate in decision making, and partner more effectively with their children's educators.

Parents who are able to do all of this also become strong community partners and effective advocates on behalf of their children's schools and educators. From the individual to the community to the district to the state, parents who can participate in decisions and ask good questions are an invaluable resource for all schools.

The Support, Monitor, and Advocate Model

We learned a great deal from the parents with whom we worked when they began using their enhanced skills for asking questions and participating in decisions. They were the source for highlighting the importance of asking questions, and they also helped us learn about the significance of applying the skill of question formulation to participating effectively in decisions. As we observed them move into action, we learned about how they were able to partner most effectively with their children's educators when they played three distinct roles.

Support

Parents best support their children's education when they try, as best they can, to meet their children's basic health, nutritional, and emotional needs. They also communicate clearly to their children that they consider education a priority, create space and time for students to do schoolwork at home, and do the best they can to ensure students arrive safely to school and return safely to home.

Monitor

Parents who effectively monitor their children's education begin to ask more questions about how their children are faring in school, if they are making appropriate academic progress, and whether they feel safe and comfortable in the school environment. They check in

with their children, pay attention to homework assignments, review and exchange communication with the teacher and school, and take note of how their children are performing on tests and the grades they are getting.

Advocate

Sometimes, the heightened level of parent action—actively supporting and monitoring their children’s education—is not sufficient to meet their children’s needs. Parents who are actively monitoring might notice a decline in student performance, a sudden reluctance to go to school, or a more negative attitude toward school. Parents who notice this begin to use their question-asking skills to talk to the teacher and communicate with the school about the changes they have observed. Because they have been carefully monitoring how their children were doing and were able to notice a change, their advocacy means a lot—not only for their children but also for the school. Parents are an invaluable set of eyes and ears to keep tabs on how an individual student is doing. In classrooms with more than 30 students and schools with more than 1,000 students, it is hard for educators to stay on top of everything. Parents who can advocate for their children become partners in working to ensure student success.

The Value of a Simple Model for Effective Parent Action

The challenges in education are so great, in fact, that parents are sometimes blamed for all that they are not doing on behalf of their children’s education. There is much that is demanded of them. Parents may be handed a daunting laundry list of all of the things they should be doing to support their children’s education. Inadvertently, such well-intentioned sharing of information actually places additional pressure on parents who struggle every day to meet the health and welfare needs of their children. Juggling jobs, working two shifts,

searching for employment, struggling with health issues, or dealing with transportation challenges and safety concerns, parents already have a lot on their plate. Expecting them to get far more involved in their children’s education and check off a long list of suggested actions can have the opposite effect. Parents who are overwhelmed by a range of challenges may retreat from any involvement in education, trusting or simply leaving the job of educating their children to the professionals.

The parents with whom we have worked in many communities around the country have created and modeled a simpler pathway to effective partnership with their children’s educators. Their actions should be recognized as a model because that will make it easier for others to emulate. The Support, Monitor, and Advocate Model is both simple and fundamentally important at the same time. Effective partnership is far more likely when parents are confident that they can play three specific roles: support their children’s education, monitor their progress, and advocate for them when necessary.

We value and respect their initiative. Describing their actions as a model—the Support, Monitor, and Advocate Model for effective parent action—simplifies and demystifies what they actually need to do to help their children. They appreciate how the model makes it easier for them to focus sharply on just three key roles and allows them to name their actions as part of a larger effort to create a more effective partnership.

The Support, Monitor, and Advocate Model—as the third core component of the Right Question School-Family Partnership Strategy—is consistent with the simplicity and depth of both the Question Formulation Technique and the Framework for Accountable Decision Making. In the chapters to come, you will have the opportunity to learn how educators and parents have used the three components of the Right Question Strategy to build strong, lasting, and meaningful partnerships.

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About the Authors

We have greatly benefited from the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that we bring to our team.



Luz Santana is the codirector of the Right Question Institute and the coauthor of *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (2011). In the late 1980s, as a parent of children in the Lawrence, MA, public school system, she began to work with other parents as part of a drop-out prevention program. At the time, she was also traveling a path that led from her own personal experiences coming from Puerto Rico and then navigating the welfare and other public systems and continuing on to getting an associate's degree to a bachelor's and a master's degree from Springfield College School of Human Services. One of the founders of the Right Question Institute, she is now a nationally recognized educational innovator, facilitator, and keynote speaker in English and Spanish who has designed a

wide range of participatory learning curricula in many fields, including parent involvement, adult education, social services, health care, immigrant advocacy, neighborhood organizing, and voter engagement. Her work has been featured in the *Boston Globe*, international press in Spanish, and on National Public Radio.



Dan Rothstein is the codirector of the Right Question Institute and coauthor of *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (2011). He is a former National Academy of Education Spencer Fellow and earned a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education before becoming the director of neighborhood planning for the City of Lawrence, MA. He was one

of the founders of the Right Question Institute (formerly known as the “Right Question Project”) and has collaborated with Luz Santana and other staff at the Right Question Institute to create curricula, teaching materials, articles, and books that are widely used to support adoption of the Right Question Strategy. His work has been featured on NPR and other media outlets, and he is a frequent presenter and keynote speaker at national conferences and symposia.



Agnes S. Bain is a lifelong resident of Lawrence, MA, and began work with Santana and Rothstein when she was a parent of children in the Lawrence public schools system. She is one of the founders (and a past president and current board member) of the Right Question Institute. She has helped develop the institute’s original concept of micro-democracy and has contributed to innovative

teaching materials and resources for promoting greater citizen participation on all levels of a democratic society. She has a PhD from Boston University and is a professor of government at Suffolk University where she has taught courses on community advocacy and topics in democracy. Agnes's kitchen table has a special place in Right Question Institute history as the location where some of its best ideas and curricula were first developed.