

Students' Academic Performance (SOL'S) and Parental Involvement

by Jamie Chapman and Lora Friedman

A Look at the Problem

The latest release of test scores for the Standards of Learning (SOL'S) Tests showed incremental improvements, but alarming differences still exist among schools and school divisions. As anticipated, schools with students from affluent neighborhoods outscored schools with students from poor neighborhoods. The expectation that schools with high numbers of students born and raised in poverty can produce the same test scores as schools with high numbers of students born and raised in advantaged homes is unreasonable. Yet, hard-nosed politicians have lost patience with educators using socioeconomic status as the excuse for poor academic achievement. They demand high standards and academic success for all students. Until our system of public schools accepts responsibility for increasing parental involvement, the solution to the vast disparity in student academic achievement will continue.

Research studies for over thirty years have made the connection between student achievement and socioeconomic status (Coleman, 1966). Comprehensive studies reveal that the active ingredient of socioeconomic status is the level and quality of parental involvement, beginning at birth and continuing through adolescence. Henderson and Berla (1994) have compiled the results of sixty-six studies that provide repeated evidence that the most accurate predictor of student achievement is the extent to which the family is involved in the child's education, not the family's level of income.

Increasing parents' involvement in their children's education, starting at birth and continuing through secondary school, is the foremost way to significantly improve academic achievement in Virginia's schools. The vast majority of children who are doing well in Virginia's system of public education came to school ready to learn and have parents who are actively involved in their education. Many of the children who did not come to school ready to learn and did not have parents who were actively involved in their schooling are performing poorly, despite expensive remediation programs.

Educators and those responsible for education policy have known for a good while that the largest barrier to reaching high academic achievement, for approximately two-thirds of all students, is a lack of parental involvement in these children's education. New compelling evidence proves that parental involvement is even more crucial to a child's intellectual development and academic success than believed even a few years ago.

Language and Brain Development

What we are finding out is that this parental involvement is most important during the first thirty-six months of a child's life (White, 1993). Language and cognitive development are inextricably linked to the quality of parenting the child receives. Fortunately this research also indicates that merely talking and reading to infants and toddlers significantly enhances language development and brain development.

Children are born with an abundance of brain cells and nerve cells called synapses that connect the brain cells. The networking of brain cells is dependent upon mental exercise. Unstimulated, many cells die. "However, since infants and toddlers are dependent upon parents, older siblings, and care givers for their experiences, the fate of a child's brain development - what goes and what grows - rests with a parent," claims Jim Trelease (1995), speaker and author of *The Read Aloud Handbook* (p. 62).

Except for a small number of children, who are born with a disability all children enter the world

with the genetic ability to learn 3,000+ languages. The language they learn is the language they hear. It is really that simple. The largest part of school readiness (language and cognitive development) is the sheer volume of language a child hears the first three years of life. Engaging infants and toddlers in generous doses of direct conversation on a daily basis is the foremost challenge we face.

Hart and Risley (1995) have compiled years of research in their book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. They have documented startling differences in the amount of interaction between parents and children. Advantaged children enter school after hearing 45 million words in direct conversation. Most children enter school after being exposed to 26 million words. Some children, who often become identified as "at risk," hear only an average of 13 million words. These differences in early family experiences translate into striking disparities in children's later vocabulary growth rate, vocabulary use, and intelligence and achievement test scores - critical measures of a child's ability to succeed at school and ultimately in the workplace.

Policy makers are now aware of the profound impact that parents and care givers have on the brain development and language development of children in their earliest years. Coupled with the knowledge that parents' involvement in their children's schooling has a significant impact on achievement, it is poor public policy to make little or no attempt to increase parental involvement. Be it an economic imperative to spend taxpayers' money efficiently or a moral imperative to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed in school, accepting the responsibility to increase parents' involvement in their children's education must become a primary mission of public education. Once schools accept responsibility for increasing parental involvement, continuous improvement in student achievement is truly obtainable for all students and all schools.

Higher levels of parental involvement will cause students' academic achievement to increase. Higher levels of parental involvement will also increase the expected level of schools' academic performance. By seriously including parents in the education process of children, all key players will know what must be done to guarantee academic success. All key players will be working together and held accountable. It would become clear to the community and most importantly to parents that their efforts make a difference in their child's individual success and in their child's school's overall academic performance.

Compiling Data on Measures of Parental Involvement

Daily Reading - Parents of elementary school students could be asked, "How many days each week do you or another member of your family sit with your child and read with him or her?" "About how many minutes do these family reading sessions last?" Parents of middle and secondary school students could be asked, "How many days each week do you make sure that your child reads for at least twenty minutes?" Surveying could be done at the beginning of the year, when parents are requested to complete several forms for the school or it might be done in conjunction with the issuing of report cards or during the mid-term examination period. These data could also be reported directly by students or through sampling techniques of parents and students.

High Expectations on Academic Success - A family practice that is considered very important to students' academic success is discussion of the importance of learning and doing well in school. The parental involvement indicator might well be the frequency of such discussions. Parents might be asked how often each week they talk with their child about doing well in school. Another way of collecting the data would be to ask each student on a predetermined day if a parent or adult talked to them that morning or the evening before about doing well in school.

Management of Television Usage - Another parental involvement indicator might be managed use of television. Research indicates that regulating the use of television/ electronic games can have a positive impact on student achievement. Generally, the more time that children spend watching television, the less time they spend reading or doing intellectually stimulating activities that lead to high achievement. Consequently, gathering data from students on the amount of time they spend watching television each day could be used to indicate the degree to which parents regulate the amount of time their children are allowed to watch television.

Homework and Studying - A suitable place to study and complete homework has been shown to lead to academic success. A parental involvement indicator might be to determine the number of children at each school who are provided with or consistently use a suitable study area in their home. Helping children with homework or helping them study for tests could be measured as indicators of parental involvement. Again the data could be gathered directly from parents or students or most likely a combination of both.

The Research

A student survey has been designed that can capture the four main aspects of parental involvement. Each classroom teacher prior to the start of the instructional day may ask the four questions. The entire process takes less than five minutes and provides a rich source of data to record important aspects of parental involvement at the classroom, grade level, and school wide basis. The questions are:

1. Did mom or dad or someone read to you last night or this morning?
2. Did mom or dad or someone tell you to work hard or be good in school today?
3. Do your parents or someone at home have rules for when or how long you can watch TV?
4. Did mom or dad or someone check your homework last night or this morning?

Discussion of Survey Results from an Urban Elementary School

It was the night before the November 28 Parental Involvement Survey at an urban elementary school and all over the school zone parents were reading to their children for pleasure and in hopes of helping them do well in life. More reading was taking place with children in the lower grades than with those in the upper grades. Sixty-five percent of the school's kindergarten children were able to listen to a story by mom, dad, or someone providing care. Over half of the first grade children were read to. Fewer than one in three third-grade students had someone reading to them. Only one in ten fifth-grade students listened to a story or were read to by a family member. Table 1 shows the number of students at each grade level and how many of those students were read to by mom or dad or someone the previous night or morning of the survey.

Table 1 Children Who Were Read To

Grade	N	Read to	Percent
K	86	56	65
1	97	51	53
2	126	51	40
3	95	27	28
4	105	18	17
5	93	9	10
School	602	212	35

Parents of students at this school consistently encourage their children to be good and work hard in school. Overall, 79% of the students reported being told to be good or to work hard in school. Upper grade students were just as likely to hear their parents' or care givers' expectations as those in primary grades. This was the one aspect of parental involvement that remained consistent across the grade levels. Table 2 shows the distribution of students who were encouraged to be good or work hard in school. The percentage of third-grade students being urged to be good was the highest of all grade levels and this percentage was high in each third grade classroom as well. It would be interesting to ascertain if the third grade teachers, as a grade level, have asked parents to pay particular attention to student deportment or effort in school.

Table 2 Children Encouraged to be Good or to Work Hard in School

Grade	N	Be Good	Percent
K	86	64	74
1	97	78	80
2	126	93	74
3	95	86	91
4	105	81	77
5	93	75	81
School	602	477	79

Limits on watching television or what might be watched dropped off as students progress up the grade levels. While 53% of all students reported that their parents limit what they watch or how long, parental involvement is highest at the kindergarten level (85%) and least at the fifth grade level (25%). Table 3 indicates the number of children whose parents or care givers have rules for when or how long they can watch television.

Table 3 Children Whose Parents or Care Givers Have Rules for Television

Grade	N	TV Limits	Percent
K	86	73	85
1	97	58	60
2	126	66	52
3	95	55	41
4	105	43	41
5	93	23	25
School	602	318	53

The percentage of parents checking homework decreases as children get older. Only 47% of fifth grade students have their homework checked as compared to 86% of the first grade students who have their homework checked. Table 4 shows the variation between grade levels in the number of children who have their homework reviewed by someone at home. There were some differences between classrooms at specific grade levels. At the fourth grade level, only 28 percent of the students in one classroom reported that their work had been checked, while 100% of the students in another classroom claimed their work had been checked.

Table 4 Students Who Had Their Homework Checked

Grade	N	Work Checked	Percent
K	86	72	84
1	97	83	86
2	126	100	79
3	95	69	73
4	105	67	64
5	93	44	47
School	602	435	72

Tables 5, 6, and 7 provide all of the data from the Parental Involvement Survey administered at this urban school on November 28, 2000. Table 5 shows the exact count for each of the four aspects of parental involvement. Table 6 shows the percentages by grade level, Table 7 shows the percentages of students in each classroom at the school. Charts 1-6 were compiled from the data shown in Table 7.

More insight on the survey results will be gained as more elementary schools complete the Parental Involvement Survey.

Conclusion

Parental involvement will not just happen. Schools need to actively develop programs that will help parents and caregivers develop strategies for engaging parents/ caregivers, and children in mutually beneficial interactions, with emphasis on the importance of increasing children's independence without decreasing the guidance as children grow and move through the grades in school.

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