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# ACHIEVE!



## An Update on Student Retention Issues

This newsletter, published periodically as part of the League's student retention study, provides information on various aspects of the dropout problem, legislative issues relating to the crisis, prevention programs, and ways to encourage student retention.

### PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

#### Part One

#### Barriers to Participation

Government Publications

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Prominent among school reforms being tried today are those which stress community interdependence, like business or university partnerships, meaningful parental involvement, and other cooperative endeavors. But schools (and elected school boards) have been slow to adapt to the changing American family, and particularly to the changing roles of women.

#### THE PARENT GAP

There is a lot of rhetoric about parental involvement in education, says Dorothy Rich, founder of the Home and School Institute in Washington, DC, but almost no real support for it in practice: little or no significant funding, no training for teachers in working with parents, few

policy commitments by school boards or school/business partners. An educational reform movement that looks almost exclusively at schools and ignores the role of the family results in a "parent gap," according to Rich. The absence of parents in policy making can be seen in almost all facets of education, from the length of the school day to the choice of textbooks. Schools remain unresponsive, for the most part, to changes in the family and the work place: the rise in the number of mothers working outside the home, the rise in divorces, the rise in single-parent families.

Antiquated school schedules, for instance, based on an earlier agricultural economy, still release children in the early afternoon and for a long summer vacation. Studies have enumerated the risk factors for "latchkey" children going home to an empty house after school; other studies describe the summer learning loss for disadvantaged students over the three-month break. Research on these issues has been plentiful and persuasive, yet most schools remain unchanged.

If more parents participated in their children's education at the school level, would these issues be addressed? If parents saw themselves and their children as consumers in an educational marketplace, would more parents participate, and more schools respond?

#### ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This *Achieve!*, the first of two issues on parental involvement in public schools, looks at the barriers which discourage parents from actively participating in their children's education. The second issue will report on programs which promote parental involvement and how they affect the dropout problem.

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## GETTING PAST THE BARRIERS

There are numerous barriers to effective communication between schools and parents which affect not only parents' involvement in



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*In cases of divorce, how many schools provide report cards and notices to the noncustodial parent, even when they are requested?*

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schools but also the success or failure of their children. These barriers result from differences in language, misperceptions of responsibility, and the persistence of myths or outdated shibboleths like "Schools Aren't Babysitters," "Teachers Aren't Social Workers," and "Parents Don't Care."

Attitudes like these reflect the long struggle of teachers for professional standing in the community, but they also reveal an ostrich-like denial by nearly everyone of demographic changes over the past two decades:

- Only 7% of U.S. families today are headed by two parents with one parent staying home.
- By 1995, two-thirds of all preschool children and four out of five school-age children will have working mothers.
- Unprecedented immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia has brought children speaking more than 150 different languages into American schools.

Increasing numbers of teenage parents, working parents, single-parent families, children in poverty, students with limited English proficiency—all of these factors contribute to parents not participating in their children's education and to children not performing well in school.

Other barriers — the attitudes and expectations which separate schooling from the rest of a child's life—are more artificial than

insurmountable. For parents to participate in the education of their children, they need to be welcome in the public schools; realistically, that requires debunking any myth which prevents change.

## "SCHOOLS AREN'T BABYSITTERS"

No one is happy with the makeshift arrangements for latchkey children. Parents leaving their children on their own too much after school was the number one criticism of parents by both teachers and parents in the Metropolitan Life "Survey of the American Teacher" in 1987. Alternatives open to parents, however, are few, if any. Even though 60% of students live in families where both parents—or the only parent—work, there are no readily available child care options in most school districts.

The lack of facilities is not the result of lack of interest. In the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Polls from 1969-1984, for instance, 76% of parents said schools should provide before- and after-school activities. The Metropolitan Life survey in 1987 revealed that most parents wished to enroll their children in either educational or non-educational after-school programs. A majority of parents, even low-income parents, were willing to pay fees for the after-school care.

The fact is, however, that only about three percent of elementary schools in the nation offer child care before the school day, and only six percent or so provide some type of after-school care. If care is not provided by the



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*How many working parents can care for a child at the end of the school day, at 2:30 or 3:30 in the afternoon?*

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school itself or by a parental program which recognizes the need for after-school activities, there are alternatives which could overcome this hurdle for parents. School buildings themselves, for instance, could be made available to other

agencies that provide child care. Nationally, the YMCA is the main provider of day care on school sites; other typical sponsors include YWCAs, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, Campfire, and Extend-A-Care.

### “TEACHERS AREN'T SOCIAL WORKERS”

Federal programs have existed for some time to provide needy school children with free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches, but children undergoing stress in their families from divorce, poverty, or drug or alcohol abuse, teachers say, come to school with other needs that outstrip the resources of the school.

In a survey of 22,000 teachers by the Carnegie Foundation in 1989, 89% identified “neglected children” as a problem in their schools and placed the blame squarely on parents. As far as their own role is concerned, teachers are vocal about being teachers, not social workers: “The difficult part of teaching is not the academics,” a junior high teacher told the Carnegie Foundation, but dealing with “the

great number of kids who come from socially stressed homes.”

With families undergoing stress from factors that may well be beyond their control and teachers feeling ill-equipped to deal with social issues, it is not surprising that effective dialogue between home and school breaks down. Programs like Communities in Schools or Schools of the Future, however, which deliver social services directly to children at the school site, show potential for alleviating the problem (see “Social Services In Schools: An Holistic Approach To Education,” *Achieve!*, April 1991).

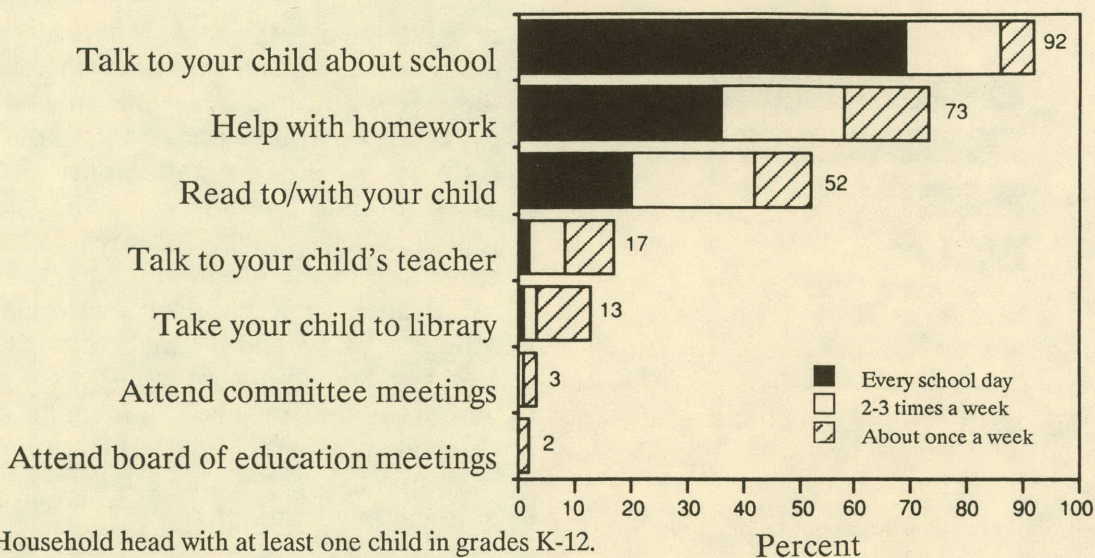
### “PARENTS DON'T CARE”

It is true that a large number of parents do not have much contact with their children's schools. According to a study of Maryland elementary schools by Prof. Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, more than one-third of the parents surveyed did not have any kind of conference with a teacher during the school year; about 60% never had a phone conversation with a teacher; and most did not

Figure 1

## How Parents Are Involved

How frequently do you. . . ?



Base: Household head with at least one child in grades K-12.

Source: The PTA/Dodge National Parent Survey, 1990.

have frequent or in-depth discussions with teachers about their children's progress.

It is also true that parental involvement lessens as children grow older, with a steady decline during the elementary school years through junior high and high school.

Parents as volunteers in traditional ways in the public schools, as classroom or library helpers or chaperons on class trips, are a dying breed. Epstein's surveys showed that only about four percent of all parents (only one or two per classroom) were highly involved as volunteers in schools.

It would be misleading to surmise from this evidence, however, that parents don't care about their children's education; the high number of parents who report they help their children with homework challenges such a conclusion. **What research has uncovered is not that parents don't care, but that they are reluctant to go to schools and to talk with teachers.** This

reluctance has many roots: parents' own unhappy histories in school, lack of transportation, inability to leave work, need for child care for other children in the family, even cultural differences.

It is believed by many educators, for



*How many teachers are available for conferences with working parents in the evening or late afternoon, or on the weekend?*

example, that poor or minority families are not supportive of their children's education. On the contrary, according to an article in the October 1987 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, low-income, poorly educated parents want to participate but don't know how. "What's lacking in most schools and school districts," the authors contend, "are appropriate strategies or structures for involving low-income parents."

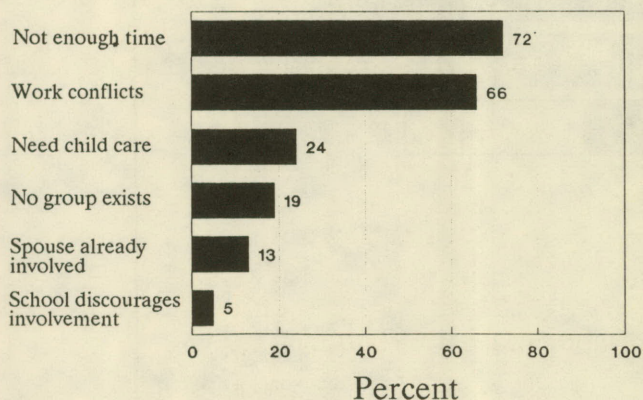
Ethnic differences can also cause misunderstandings that become barriers to parental involvement. Low-income Hispanic parents, according to a study in *Education Week* (May 2, 1990), especially those from immigrant and migrant populations, tend to defer to teachers as "the experts." Reserved and non-assertive, Hispanic parents are often perceived as passive and uncaring, when actually they feel intimidated and overwhelmed by expectations they are unequipped to meet. Activists in Asian-American parents' associations maintain that the parents they represent are highly motivated to promote education in the home, but "are reluctant to try to advance their children's interests to school officials," *Education Week* reported (Feb. 27, 1991). The apparent apathy of many Asian parents is due mostly to language barriers and cultural passivity, low educational status, a traditionalist respect for educators, and fears of political involvement.

Do working mothers and single parents participate less in their children's education?

Figure 2

### Why Parents Aren't More Involved

*Which reasons help explain why you choose not to be included in a parents group?*



Base: Household heads who do not belong to a parents group.

Source: The PTA/Dodge National Survey, 1990.

Yes and no. Yes, obviously, if absence from the job is difficult. No, according to several studies. Researcher B. Heyns in 1982 found that working mothers spent nearly as much time caring for their children as mothers who were not employed outside the home. The Appalachia Education Laboratory in the same year discovered that single parents talk to teachers approximately as often as other parents and also are likely to spend as much time working on homework with their children.

### THE BIGGEST BARRIER:

#### PARENTS WHO DROPPED OUT

Educational researchers are still struggling with dropout definitions, workable formulas, and at-risk variables, and the ability to predict who actually will drop out remains beyond the reach of researchers or school practitioners. One key correlation that has emerged in dropout research, however, is the link between young people leaving school before graduation and the educational attainment of their parents.

Studies in the 1960s found that three-fourths of the parents of dropouts being interviewed were dropouts themselves. More recently, studies based on the U.S. Department of




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*How many PTAs still meet during the afternoon or morning when most parents are at work?*

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Education's "High School and Beyond" data have shown that children of parents who did not complete high school were twice as likely to drop out as were children of high school graduates. Among dropouts in 1986 aged 14-34, according to a 1988 report from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 61% came from families in which the male or female head of household was also a dropout.

A 1990 public policy paper from Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government suggests that while dropping out is a demonstrated problem for poor minority youth, ethnicity is not

the conclusive factor. Rather, it is the factors of parent education and income, linked to race or ethnicity, which account for the generally higher dropout rates of minorities. "Although both




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*How many parents make sure their children have a place and a time to study, establish a bedtime, and monitor TV watching?*

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race-ethnicity and parental education have strong effects on state dropout rates," according to the authors, Lawrence Hepburn and Rudolph White, "the greater effect is from parental education."

Compared to the homes of non-dropouts, say Hepburn and White, the homes of dropouts are characterized by a lower level of educational attainment for the parents, lower educational expectations for the children, less parental interest in school activities, fewer study aids in the home, and fewer opportunities for non-school learning such as summer camp, scouting, or after-school hobby clubs. It is when parents are able to emphasize school-related goals in their own lives, they add, that children identify with and participate in the life of their schools.

If schools don't actively work to recruit all parents, including poor or minority or dropout parents, asserts Prof. Epstein of Johns Hopkins, then the level of parental education and family social class will end up determining who becomes involved in children's education. The result: educational opportunity will be based on family lifestyle. "But if schools take parent involvement seriously, and work to involve all parents," she states, "then social class and parents' level of education decrease or disappear as important factors."

Since dropping out appears to be linked from generation to generation as "the culmination of a long conditioning process" of negative or indifferent attitudes toward education, public policy toward dropout prevention, contend Hepburn and White, must

have a two-generation focus: very young children and their parents. The fact that female dropouts in the 18 to 24-year-old cohort of "High School and Beyond" studies are three times more likely to be mothers than are the females who finished high school underscores the family cycle of failure. The children of those dropout mothers are very likely to be among the next generation of school dropouts.

### DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

There is no question that educators support parental involvement, although the type of involvement is still debated.

Gallup polls and surveys conducted by professional journals consistently reveal that teachers support parents acting in traditional ways, such as assisting with homework or holding a bake sale, but not in other, more active, roles.

A 1985 study by the national Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), for example, showed very different perceptions of "involvement" by parents and administrators. About 75% of parents surveyed said they were interested in attending classes and workshops with teachers and principals and in serving as school advocates in school board meetings or on advisory



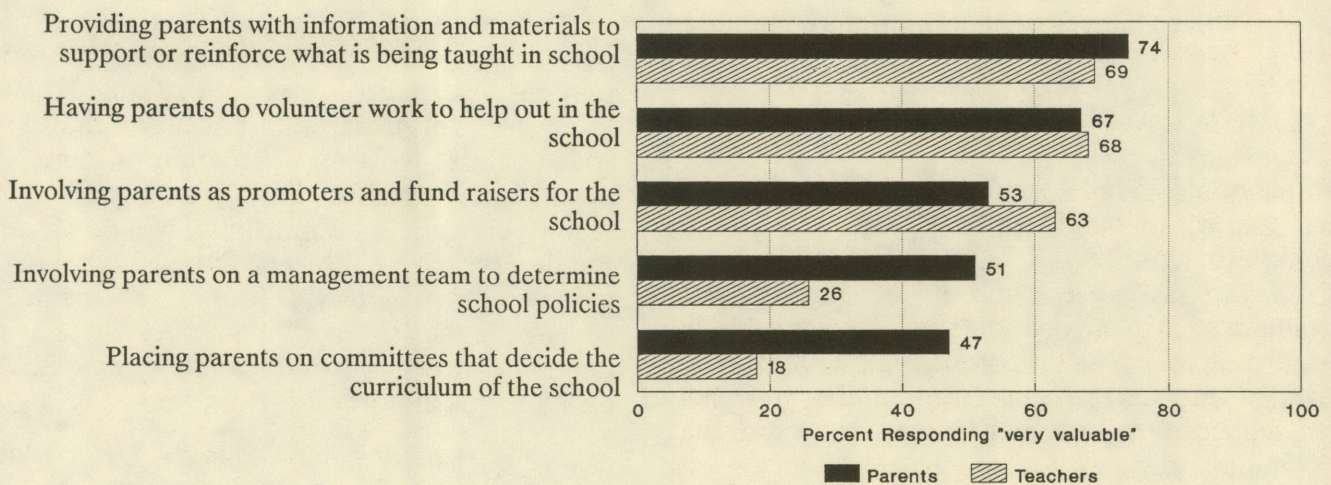
*How many businesses grant employees paid leave to meet with a teacher during the workday?*

committees, as well as the traditional activities of fundraising and chaperoning. Most of the principals surveyed, however, did not approve of parents serving as advocates or on advisory committees.

Figure 3

## Parent and Teacher Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

*Here are some possible ways that parents might be involved with the school. How valuable do you think each would be — very valuable, somewhat valuable, not too valuable or not valuable at all?*



Base: More than 2,000 parents and more than 1,000 teachers.

Source: The Metropolitan Life "Survey of the American Teacher," 1987.

Figure 3, taken from the 1987 Metropolitan Life survey, highlights the differences in attitude between parents and teachers about parental participation in the non-traditional matters of curriculum decisions and school management.

According to a *Newsweek* special issue (Fall/Winter 1990), the "parent gap" in school reform could best be closed by the PTA or similar parent-teacher organization. The national PTA president, the article said, recognized the need for a new agenda for a different demographic age. "We're hoping schools that say, 'We want parental involvement,' will back that up with outreach programs," she told the magazine. "Too many parents don't have relationships with schools until there's a problem."

While there is a long history of parental involvement through PTAs for individual school populations, particularly for children needing special education or bilingual education, between 1962 and 1982 the national organization lost half its membership. In recent years, the PTA, still the largest advocacy group for parents in school affairs, has begun to increase its membership.

### IS BUSINESS BEING SHORTSIGHTED?

It may be that "the business of business is business," not parenting, but evidence is strong that many employees are negatively affected at work because of their concerns as parents. *Parent Support Programs: A Step-by-Step Corporate Guide*, a 1989 publication of the Bureau of National Affairs, documents that the stress for workers between conflicting demands of family and work is significantly related to employee depression, decreased energy, and decreased job satisfaction. In one study of 1,500 parents, according to the Bureau, 71% of the men and 54% of the women reported that family responsibilities were blocking their job advancement. Another survey reported that 37% of the working parents polled had considered quitting their jobs because of difficulties in raising their children.

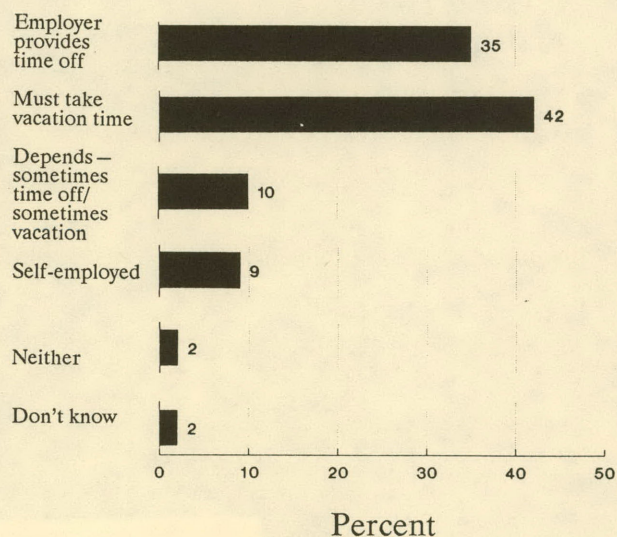
It is uncommon for businesses to grant salaried employees time during the work day to

visit their children's school, and it is almost unheard of for hourly workers. Having to take off from the job and not get paid for the time lost is a real deterrent for many parents. While optional and not required by law, many businesses do grant paid leave if an employee is called to jury duty or needs to be absent for training in the national guard or reserves.

Since the frustration of many parents from not being more active in their children's lives is showing up in studies of the work place, it makes sense for business not only to encourage parental involvement but also to provide the means to make it happen. **Granting "parental leave" to employees for meeting with teachers or visiting their children's schools would be an affordable and effective contribution by business to local education.** There is little to lose by such an enlightened business policy, but very much to gain.

**Figure 4**  
**Parents' Time Off From Work**

*Does your employer provide you with time off for important school conferences or activities, or must you take vacation time to attend these school affairs?*



Base: Household heads with at least one child in grades K-12 and who are employed.

Source: The PTA/Dodge National Survey, 1990.

**Next Issue: The Role of Parents  
in School Reform.**

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