

Inviting Parents to the Middle. A Proactive Stance for Improving Student Performance

Henry A. Peel

*East Carolina University
Greenville, NC*

Elizabeth S. Foster

*East Carolina University
Greenville, NC*

When teachers and administrators express concerns about middle schools, they frequently cite a lack of parental involvement as a major problem. (Office of Educational Research, 1992). As students enter middle school, parents become less involved. The end of the elementary years seems to coincide with a decreasing attendance by parents in school activities as well as a general decline in their school involvement. The question is, "Do parents drop out, or are they pushed out?"

In this article, we explore the challenge of keeping parents involved in their children's education beyond the elementary school years. We also suggest the invitational model (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987) as a proactive approach for keeping parents involved in the lives of their children, particularly during the transition years of middle school education. Before examining this approach, it is helpful to understand the nature of the pre-adolescent and parents' frustrations with this period of their children's development.

Nature of the Pre-Adolescent

The pre-adolescent stage is one of change and growth. During this period, the person who used to be a child is now coping with a seemingly ever changing new body, a sometimes confusing set of new feelings, and a strong need to belong to a peer group. Each child wishes to be included and may feel a reduced need to be academically successful in school. Consequently, there is less need to please teachers and other adults. Preadolescence calls for understanding and diligence on the part of all adults who deal with this age child. In general, this group of students, ages 10-14 years old, represents such a broad range of emerging

characteristics and behaviors that no other time in life offers so many same age individuals who are so different from each other (Messick & Reynolds, 1992).

Middle school children assert themselves more and become increasingly less dependent on their parents (Berla, 1991). During this time, students try to declare their individuality by looking and behaving like everyone else in their peer group. This contradiction extends beyond dress and includes attempts to separate from families in public settings. At the same time, however, students seek assurance from adults that their decisions are wise and acceptable. This conflict between the need to separate and win acceptance simultaneously from adults is a hallmark of preadolescence. Even though young people attempt to pull away during this time, there is strong evidence they benefit from continued involvement with families in the same way they did as children in their early school years.

Often, pre-adolescent children verbalize their movement towards independence by issuing restrictions to parents regarding parental interactions with the middle school. It is common for teachers to hear parents say that children do not want them at school. These factors, combined with the nature of the pre-adolescent, tend to frustrate many parents as their children enter middle school and progress towards adolescence. A common parental response is to drop out of school activities. Hence, the challenge for schools is to develop approaches that encourage more parental involvement, rather than less.

Keeping Parents Involved

The excitement and novelty of having children start school often are enough incentive for parents of elementary age children to stay actively involved during these early years. At this time, children are still dependent on their parents and enjoy seeing them play an active role in the school. The nature of the elementary child and the elementary curriculum lend themselves to a high degree of teacher and parent interaction. For example, it is relatively easy to develop a close relationship with the teacher at the elementary level, because the child is generally assigned to one self contained classroom. Who would know children better than an elementary teacher who sees each child as many waking hours as the parent?

Though there has been a great deal of study and research about the involvement of families in the education of children, it has been a relatively new endeavor in middle schools. Most information about parental involvement at this level did not appear until the mid-1980's (Myers & Monson, 1992). Briefly, the literature concludes that many factors change when children enter their middle school years. Not only do parents become weary of the schooling process by the time the child has been in school for six years, but the novelty of school is often

replaced by fatigue with school and exhaustion from work (Chavkin & Williams, 1989). If one parent has stayed home during the elementary years, it is more likely that this parent will begin working in the middle school years. Similarly, single parents typically work outside the home.

In addition to the weariness of parents, organizational elements of middle and junior high schools often inhibit an open door policy toward parental involvement. Less personal structure at the middle school and the reality that parents may see as many as seven teachers to get a picture of the child's progress create demands on both time and patience. Another example of how middle schools are depersonalized is the larger number of students, typically 150 students per day, with whom teachers interact each day. It is difficult to be personally involved with each of 150 children in addition to each child's family. This arrangement is challenging for both teachers and parents.

Effective middle school teachers and administrators understand students, recognize the benefits of parental involvement, create a welcome environment, and invite parents as colleagues in the educational process. To accomplish these goals, educators begin by assessing the current level of parental involvement that exists in their schools.

The State of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in middle schools is related to the level of encouragement that schools offer. Studies by the John Hopkins University Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (1989) found that parents are more involved at school and at home when they perceive that schools have strong programs and encourage their involvement. According to these studies, the "data are clear that the school's practices to inform and to involve parents are more important than parent education, family size, marital status and even grade levels in determining whether inner-city parents get involved with their children's education in elementary school and stay involved through middle school" (1989, p. 10).

Students' perceptions of their parents' involvement often are dramatically different from parents' perceptions of their own involvement. A survey of 25,000 eighth graders and their parents conducted by the US Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1991) showed that three fourths of the parents said they talked regularly with their children about school experiences. By contrast, half of the students said they had such discussions less than twice since the school year began. There were similar contradictions about the amount of help students received with their homework. In this study, the data show that only half of the parents had attended a school meeting since the beginning of the school year, and fewer than 3 in 10 had visited their children's classes. Nearly half of the

parents said they had not contacted the school about their child's academic performance and nearly two-thirds of parents said they never had talked to school officials about the academic program being pursued by their eighth-grade child.

A study conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals surveyed 1,365 students and found 6% of the students said their parents were not at all involved in their education, 24% said they were rarely involved, and 44% were somewhat involved (McGowan, 1992). Only 14% of the students said that their parents were heavily involved. These findings highlight the need for schools to consider the benefits of involving parents, and to plan ways of increasing parents' participation in their children's education.

Benefits of Parent Involvement

Comer (1986) and others have described the benefits of parental involvement. When parents and professionals share responsibility for the outcomes of formal schooling, children improve their academic achievement, school attendance, and discipline (Flaxman & Inger, 1992). Parental involvement is related to increased homework completion and improved attitudes and performance of students (Bauch, 1990). In addition to higher achievement, other positive effects include: an improved sense of wellbeing, enhanced student behavior, better parent and student perceptions of classroom and school climate, higher aspirations among students and parents, increased educational productivity of time that parents and children spend together, and greater parental satisfaction with teachers (Myers and Monson, 1992).

There is ample research to demonstrate that parental involvement is a correlate of children's success in school (Henderson, 1988; Kagan 1985; Bloom, 1985; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Cotner, 1986). Parental involvement "in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement" (Henderson, 1988, p. 149). Henderson's (1988) review of a number of studies concluded that parental involvement was a key component in student performance. This finding is consistent regardless of the child's ability or family conditions. Henderson (1988) reported that children whose parents collaborate with the school achieve higher than children with similar aptitudes and family backgrounds whose parents are not involved.

Since parents are the first and most important teachers of children, a continuous bond between home and school ensures high achievement and success. For this reason, there have been a number of statewide efforts across the country aimed at increasing parental involvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1991). Keeping parents active in the middle school is an important part of a continuous effort to form collaborative relationships that benefit all children. The question is not whether or not to involve parents at the middle school, but

rather how to involve parents. The invitational approach (Purkey & Novak, 1984) offers one framework by which beneficial programs can be created to encourage parental participation in schools.

An Invitational Approach

What makes the invitational approach the appropriate model for inviting middle grades' parents into the schools? The four major tenets of the invitational stance, respect, trust, optimism and intentionality, underlie the belief that helpful and cooperative relationships in life are critical to productivity (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990). Without these ingredients, all relationships are at risk. The intentionality of a school is best expressed through people, places, policies, programs, and processes that illustrate its beliefs and commitment to education. These five "P's" provide a structure by which schools can assess their current status and develop specific plans to invite parents to become more involved.

The Five "P's"

The first step to increasing parental involvement is an internal diagnosis of the five powerful "P's" (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987; Purkey & Stanley, 1991). An examination of the five "Vs" gives middle school professionals a concrete starting point for assessing climate, attitudes, and other factors that influence parental involvement.

The first P, places, refers to the school facility. The entrance way, offices, classrooms, waiting areas, and hallways are all a reflection of the how the school feels about visitors. The often read sign "All Visitors Must Report to the Office," for example, could read "Welcome to Your School--Please Come by the Office for Assistance or Direction," and might elicit more positive responses. Additionally, the front entrance should be clearly marked. School renovations often make the "front entrance" difficult to determine. How can parents and other visitors be involved if they cannot find their way in?

A comfortable place for parents while they wait to see principals, teachers, counselors, or other school personnel is another example of inviting places. Parents will quickly sense if their presence is appreciated through an initial assessment of the appeal and comfort of the school facility.

Closely related to places are the policies established and maintained by schools. (Purkey and Schmidt, 1990). These policies refer to written and unwritten guidelines, the framework that outlines school rules, and the organizational structure that allows the school to function efficiently. Policies often communicate strong messages and need to be reviewed in light of the multiple interpretations that can be made of any type of guideline. For example, many schools tend to form their policies by using negative language. It is just as

easy to establish rules that are stated in positive terms. Rather than saying, "No running in the halls," a sign may say, "Please walk and respect the safety of others in the hall." The more negative the rules appear to be stated, the more likely the school will be viewed as an unfriendly, cold place. In addition, the number of rules established by a school is a reflection of its regulatory posture. For every rule there is procedure to enforce the rule. It stands to reason that people would shy away from a place that is constantly enforcing its many rules and policies. A school that limits its policies to essential regulations has more time to foster helpful and cooperative relationships.

The third P relates to the programs that are offered within a particular setting. In this instance, analysis of the types of programs offered to parents and their children is important. Programs that are available to parents need to be broad, varied, and accepting. They should offer a variety of time schedules, include appropriate information for a range of educational levels, and encourage a wide spectrum of roles for parents. Whether a parent orientation night is planned, or a parent training seminar for at risk parents is developed, all programs should provide equal access. There should be equal and consistent treatment of all parents in school programs with the message always reading, "Welcome."

The fourth powerful P stands for processes that either develop or destroy the school's rapport with parents and students. Processes involve all the procedures and plans that help to establish on-going and long term development of parental participation. In creating inviting schools, the "how" is as important as the "what." How the professional staff interacts with parents is crucial in encouraging parents to accept the invitations offered by the school.

The fifth P signifies people, and represents the level of understanding that people have for each other, and the effort they make to establish relationships based on mutual trust and integrity. Professional staff members who understand and accept their responsibilities in developing relationships with parents will determine appropriate and effective means of dealing with each family. This level of understanding establishes the school's willingness to invite families to participate. The goal is clear and attainable.

Levels of Functioning

Once the diagnosis of the five "P's" is complete and the foundations of respect, trust and optimism are in place, the middle school staff can begin consciously, systematically, and continuously issuing invitations to parents. According to invitational theory, the messages that schools create and send to parents take countless forms and are extended at different levels of functioning (Purkey & Novak, 1984). The best way for middle schools to successfully involve parents is to be intentionally inviting (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990).

In the absence of intentionality, schools are sometimes unintentionally disinviting. Phones may be answered in a disinviting way, parents and visitors may be received by the office staff too casually, or parents' concerns and comments may be overlooked or minimized. Only through an organizational consciousness of being intentionally inviting can a middle school faculty and staff be sure that parents always feel welcome and a part of the school. To function at the intentionally inviting level for all parents is the desired outcome for an effective middle school. By consistently inviting all parents to become involved, schools assure that equitable relationships will be established. All parents are treated in ways that value their role and affirm their ability to be a positive force in their children's lives.

Invitations that involve all parents take numerous forms. Specific invitations that could be sent to parents from an invitational middle school might include a variety of types and approaches. The following is a starter list for schools interested in establishing an invitational climate:

- *Training opportunities (workshops, seminars, classes) on issues in parenting, schooling, technology and education.* These opportunities should be structured to support the needs and interests of parents. The workshops, seminars or classes would be scheduled at flexible times that will maximize the opportunity for parents to participate.
- *Homework helplines for both parents and students.* Often students will proceed with homework, only to find that they did not understand the directions or have all the information. Other times parents may be unclear about the expectations of the homework, or who assistance in helping the child understand the assignment. This type of helpline benefits the parent, the school, and ultimately the performance of the student.
- *Directories with the numbers of all professional personnel who are responsible for student assistance.* This type of directory is an easy guide to create and well worth the time involved to make it available to parents. The message sent with this type of system is one of inclusion as opposed to exclusion. It says that we are all here to help, just call.
- *Promotion and recognition of all parent efforts.* Recognition of parents truly represents an advocacy effort to support the work that parents do with their children, both in and out of school. Ceremonies, luncheons, pins, business recognition, certificates, and newspaper announcements are but a few of the countless ways schools can promote and recognize the efforts of parents.
- *Casual social affairs that involve parents in opportunities to discuss their interests.* In addition to being pleasant celebrations, social activities provide a relaxed atmosphere in which parents can better get to know the people who

work with their children during the day. The types of social events that can be planned include morning coffee gatherings, luncheons, early evening get-together, pot luck suppers, open house tours, orientations for parents of children of a specific age or grade, fall harvest feast or celebration programs for both the students and parents. Weekend and holiday events can be planned when the entire family can participate. Leisure activity plans can be a great way to get whole families out together and be involved with school personnel in activities such as tennis tournaments, bowling, picnics, lake or river extravaganzas and evening star gazing adventures.

- *Surveys of needs and interests.* Current needs should be updated through assessments and surveys. This will assure that the plans are not only relevant, but practical.
- *Communication bulletins and newsletters to inform and share news about students, the school, parents, teachers, and the community.* Though many schools use bulletins to send information home, they often miss opportunities to use this form for great public relations. This type of newsletter or bulletin can highlight the efforts of parents, can be the primary vehicle for recognizing voluntary service, and it should highlight all the social activities, school business, and student successes. This type of communication should be regularly scheduled and delivered to insure that the information gets to the parents at home.
- *Telephone trees and chains to share information.* Establish different types of communication devices for committees and groups to organize their information so that the responsibility is shared and spread by many.
- *School "welcome wagon" packet with treats, coupons and surprises, as well as, important information.* This kind of special treatment can emphasize to parents how important they are in the overall educational program. By being given special treats and "welcome" information, parents will experience a liaison with the school that is open to all.

Conclusion

Recent research and initiatives in school reform in the United States have stressed the importance of parental involvement and its relationship to student success. Parental involvement seems particularly crucial in middle schools where a correspondingly decreasing role for parents appears to be the rule rather than the exception. In this article we have advocated the invitational approach as a framework for developing strategies to improve and increase parental involvement in middle schools.

Schools that want to embrace the invitational model might begin by training teachers and staff in the some of the elements presented here. These include the four tenets of optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality, the five "P's," and the four levels of functioning: intentionally disinventing, unintentionally disinventing, unintentionally inventing, and intentionally inventing. Through this training and by assessing their current levels of functioning across the five "P's," schools will be better able to encourage parents to become a productive and welcomed part of their child's middle school program. Inviting middle schools benefit by having parents as true colleagues of teachers and other professionals who together face the challenge of educating preadolescents.

References

- Bauch, J. (1990). The transParent school: A partnership for parent involvement. *Educational Horizons*. 187-189.
- Berla, N. (1991). *Parent involvement at the middle school level*. The ERIC Review. U. S. Department of Education: Washington, D. C. 1(3), 16-17.
- Bloom, B.S. (1985). *Developing talent in young people*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Chavkin, N.F. & Williams, D.L. (1989). Working parents and schools: Implications for practice. *Education*. 111,(2), 242-248.
- Comer, J.P. (1986). Parent participation in the schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 442-446.
- Council of Chief State School Officers. (1991). *Families in school: State strategies and policies to improve family involvement in education*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Dornbusch, S.M. & Ritter, P.I. (1988). Parents of high school students: A neglected resource. *Educational Horizons*. 66,75-77.
- Flaxman, E. & Inger, M. (1992). Parents and schooling in the 1990s. *Principal*, 72(2), 16-18.
- Henderson, A. (1988). Parents are a school's best friends. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 149- 153.
- Kagan, S.L. (1985). *Parent involvement research: Afield in search of itself*. Boston, MA: Institute for Responsive Education.

- McGowan, S. (1992, July) Students speak out on parents, teachers. *Guidepost*, 19.
- Messick, R. G. & Reynolds, K. E. (1992). *Middle level curriculum in action*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Myers, J. & Monson, L. (1992). *Involving families*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Office of Educational Research. (1992). Decade sees progress in research on school and family. *Research and development report center on families, communities, schools and children's learning*, pp. 12-13. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.
- Purkey, W. W. & Novak, J. (1984). *Inviting school success: A Self-concept approach to teaching and learning*, (2nd Ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Purkey, W. W. & Stanley, P. H. (1991). *Invitational teaching, learning, and living*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Purkey, W. W. & Schmidt, J. J. (1990). *Invitational learning for counseling and development*. Ann Arbor, MI: ERIC Counseling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse.
- Purkey, W. W. & Schmidt, J. J. (1987). *The inviting relationship: n expanded perspective for professional counseling*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Staff. (1991). Parents key to classroom experiences. *Middle Ground*. 18,(4).
- The Johns Hopkins University Center for Research On Elementary and Middle Schools (1989). *Teacher attitudes, parent attitudes, and parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools*. Baltimore, MD: Author

Henry A. Peel is assistant professor of educational leadership and Elizabeth S. Foster is assistant professor of middle grades education at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC

MEMBERSHIP FORM

The International Alliance for Invitational Education

The International Alliance for Invitational Education consists of professional helpers representing education, child care, counseling, social work, psychology, ministry, and related fields who seek to apply the concepts of invitational theory and practice to their personal and professional lives. The Alliance is chartered by the State of North Carolina as a not-for-profit organization. In addition to publishing its journal and newsletter, The Forum, the Alliance sponsors workshops and conferences in the United States and other countries. Annual dues are \$20.00 (U.S.).

_____ Yes! I would like to join the International Alliance for Invitational Education. My check for \$20.00 is enclosed.

Name: _____ Home Phone: _____

Address: _____

_____ ZIP: _____

Profession: _____

Title: _____ Office Phone: _____

Areas of Interest: _____

Please make check payable to The International Alliance for Invitational Education, and mail to the Alliance at the School of Education, Curry Building, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27412-5001.

Thank you for joining our group! We look forward to being with you at our conferences and workshops.

Guidelines for Authors

The Journal for Invitational Theory and Practice promotes the tenets of invitational learning, self-concept theory, and perceptual psychology. Articles that examine and expand the theory of invitational learning and development, investigate the efficacy of invitational practices, and relate these beliefs and findings to other theories of human development and behavior are encouraged.

The journal uses an anonymous review of articles and final decisions regarding publication are made by the Editor. On publication, authors receive two copies of the journal. Authors are asked to follow these guidelines when submitting articles for publication:

1. Manuscripts should be prepared in APA style. Refer to the Publication Manual, Third Edition of the American Psychological Association.
2. Manuscripts of 2,000-2,500 words are preferred. Authors should include an abstract of 50-100 words.
3. Double-space everything, including references, quotations, tables, and figures. Leave generous margins on each page.
4. Use tables and figures sparingly, and type them on separate pages. All art work and diagrams should be camera-ready.
5. Place authors' names, positions, titles, and mailing addresses on the cover page only.
6. Lengthy quotations require written permission from the copyright holder for reproduction. Authors are responsible for obtaining permissions and providing documentation to the journal.
7. Avoid the use of the generic masculine and feminine pronouns.
8. Please do not submit material that is currently being considered by another journal.
9. Authors are requested to provide a copy of the manuscript, when accepted for publication, on 3.5" computer disk, preferably formatted for the Macintosh.
10. Send three copies of the manuscript to:

John J. Schmidt, Editor
Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice
PO Box 2428
Greenville, NC 27836-0428