School District Parent Involvement Policies and Programs

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Abstract

Superintendents of 200 school districts in 15 states across the United States responded to a survey asking about their adoption of 6 major types of parent involvement policies at the district level and the programs in place to implement these policies. The 2 most commonly reported policies were to communicate with parents about their child's progress and school programs (79.9%) and to provide parents with opportunities to be decision makers about school policies and practices (73.3%). Districts (38.7%) were least likely to report policies to train teachers to work with families. Districts serving areas with greater percentages of at-risk students were more likely to report adopting parent involvement policies of almost every type. Superintendents' responses to open-ended questions about the programs implemented in support of policy revealed that these programs often are less than completely effective in addressing policy goals. Recommendations are made to promote more effective parent involvement policies and programs.

Researchers and educators have long considered parent involvement a major pathway to children's school success (e.g., Coleman et al., 1966; Epstein & Becker, 1982). Recent major legislation—The Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—has made parents' involvement in their children's education a national priority. School districts nationwide are being encouraged to reexamine their parent involvement policies and programs and to demonstrate innovative initiatives in order to obtain federal education funds. For example, eligibility for Title 1 money is now contingent on the development of school-family compacts in which families and schools declare their mutual responsibility

for children's learning. To receive ESEA money, a district must earmark at least 1% for parent involvement programs. Partnerships are to be forged between homes and schools, with an unparalleled level of contact and communication between parents and educators (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The challenge now is for parents, educators, employers, policy makers, and community leaders to make these partnerships work.

This new stream of federal initiatives creates a national vision of enhanced school-home partnerships along with specific funding mechanisms for schools to enact this vision. Actual change, however, will take place at the local level. As with the implementation of most educational innovations, school boards and district leaders will be playing crucial roles in translating this federal initiative into meaningful local policy and practice (Huberman & Miles, 1984). As district school boards and their superintendents respond to federal and state mandates by adopting policies promoting parent involvement, school district superintendents, as the educational, financial, and managerial leaders of their districts (Committee on Economic Development, 1994; Johnson, 1996), must decide how to translate policies into programs. Decisions must be made about the programs to be implemented within a given organizational hierarchy, how best to use limited funds and resources, and whether and how to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs implemented. Districts function as gatekeepers through which national and state parent involvement policy agendas become translated into school programs and practice (Huberman & Miles, 1984; Musella, 1989).

In spite of considerable national media and public policy attention to the issue of parent involvement, current national data are not available on the nature and extent of school district policies and programs or on the effectiveness of these programs in achieving the goals of parent involvement policy. To address these gaps in knowledge, we conducted a national survey of school districts in the spring of 1995. The goal of the survey was to generate information about current district policies, programs, and practices regarding parent involvement in order to build on and extend the knowledge base concerning strengthening school-home collaborative partnerships (e.g., Davies, 1994; Epstein, 1992, 1995; Moles, 1993a, 1993b).

Policies and programs in six areas of parent involvement were of interest: (1) providing parents with opportunities to be decision makers, (2) regular communications with parents about school programs and their child's progress, (3) communicating with parents about ways they can help their children be successful in school, (4) training and supporting staff to work with families, (5) reaching out to diverse families, and (6) providing links to social service agencies to address family needs. These six types of parent involvement have been advocated by policy makers, educators, and researchers as key for children's school success (Baker, 1996; Epstein, 1992; Moles, 1993a, 1993b). In addition, parents have cited them as the types of involvement they would like to have and feel comfortable with in promoting their children's academic achievement (Baker, 1997a).

The first type of involvement, parents' involvement in decision making, has been mandated by Title 1–funded programs because of a strong belief that educational programs will be more relevant and effective if parents participate in the development of these programs. Comer has consistently called for involvement of parents in a decision-making capacity as part of any schoolwide reform project (e.g., Comer & Haynes, 1991). Comer and Haynes argue that parental participation in all aspects of school functioning results in an enhanced school environment in which parents, teachers, and children develop a shared goal of high student achievement.

The second and third types of involvement—to communicate with parents about

school programs and their child's progress and to communicate with parents about how to help their child succeed in school—are the types of school-to-home communication teachers report to be critical (Baker, 1997b). Epstein (1985) found that student achievement and students' attitudes and behaviors improved when teachers communicated with parents about specific ways they could help their children learn at home. In addition, Barth (1979) has documented the importance of individualized feedback about children's progress. Parents who received these communications were more effective reinforcers of positive school behaviors.

The importance of training school staff to work effectively with families has been noted by Shartrand, Kreider, and Erikson-Warfield (1994) as critical to enhancing schools' parent involvement practices and programs. Research has shown that in the absence of training not all teachers are effective at engaging parents in assisting their children's learning (Epstein & Becker, 1982). The need for additional teacher training has been of concern also in light of current policies favoring mainstreaming and inclusion of children with special needs (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

The need to reach out to diverse families by considering ethnic and cultural differences in parents' educational attitudes and beliefs, ethnically based attitudes toward authority figures such as teachers, and children's culturally based classroom behaviors has been advocated repeatedly (e.g., Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 1993; Ellsworth Associates, 1997; Foley, 1996; Goldenberg, 1993; Parker et al., 1992). Goldenberg (1993), for example, argued for the importance of parent involvement for bilingual children and their families. He concluded that forging links between home and school is perhaps especially important for language-minority children because for several reasons their parents are less able to create those links on their own.

Finally, acknowledging the social service and health needs of many public school families has been the subject of much public policy debate over the past decade as several different models of providing comprehensive services to school families have been suggested (e.g., Behrman, 1992; Committee on Economic Development, 1994). The underlying principle is that children and families preoccupied with meeting basic needs are not able to direct their full attention to school and academic activities. Therefore, in the present study we wanted to collect data on the extent to which these six types of parent involvement have been sanctioned formally by district-level policy and the ways in which they have been incorporated into the educational programs and practices of school districts across the United States.

Because many districts do not yet have formal parent involvement policies, a second focus of the present study was the exploration of district characteristics that may be associated with the adoption of parent involvement policy. Understanding which districts are less likely to adopt parent involvement policies would be of use to policy makers who can then develop strategies to more effectively encourage these districts to improve their parent involvement policies and programs. In this portion of the study, we explored the question of whether districts differing in size, educational resources, and proportion of at-risk children also differ in the likelihood of having parent involvement policies. Two alternative general hypotheses were considered: School districts with more educational resources, less culturally diverse populations, and serving more affluent areas will be more likely to report formal parent involvement policies. Parent involvement often has been credited as being a major pathway through which more affluent and educated parents enhance the school success of their children (Comer, 1988; Epstein, 1992). Alternatively, districts with fewer resources and serving greater proportions of culturally diverse and at-risk students might perceive a

greater need for parent involvement to improve students' academic outcomes. Thus, these districts may be more likely to report the adoption of parent involvement policies. Therefore, we explored relations between district characteristics and reported policies in bidirectional tests. Six school district characteristics were considered in this study: size, location (urban to rural), student/teacher ratio, median income of households with children within the district's catchment area, percentage of minority children in the catchment area, and percentage of children with limited English in the catchment area.

The third related issue addressed in the study entailed an exploratory examination of the types of programs and practices districts and their schools reported using to implement their parent involvement policies. Qualitative data were collected for an initial examination of the types of programs that districts perceive as fulfilling district mandates for parent involvement.

In summary, the present study addresses three major questions with regard to school districts' parent involvement policies, programs, and practices: (1) To what extent do districts report formal policies supporting six major types of parent involvement? (2) Are district characteristics associated with the adoption of parent involvement policies? (3) What kinds of programs are reported by districts to implement parent involvement policies?

Method

Sample of School Districts

Four hundred and thirty-five school district superintendents in 15 states across the United States were mailed surveys. Superintendents of 196 districts responded, representing a response rate of 45.1%. Survey responses indicated that the responding districts included 4,073 schools with 3,131,620 students. Elementary schools comprised 65% of the schools within each district. Middle schools comprised 19%, high schools 13%, and alternative schools 3%. The responding districts were diverse in geographic area, socioeconomic characteristics, ethnicity, and urbanicity. Ninety-eight percent of the districts reported receiving Title 1 funds.

The sample of districts is limited in that it is not a probability sample; the sample selected for the mailing was based on geographic location of the volunteers conducting the survey. In order to address this limitation, we used data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1996) to compare our sample to the national population of school districts in order to relate our findings to the national arena and to understand how our sample differed from the population of school districts. We found (in the analyses reported below) that our sample of districts is weighted toward those who are more likely to report having parent involvement policies. This bias suggests that gaps in policy adoption as revealed by our data may actually understate the full extent of the need for improvement in the field. We discuss this issue further in subsequent sections of this article.

Measures

Parent involvement policy survey. The survey was developed to generate information regarding the existence of formal parent involvement policies as well as actual practices and programs. Development of the survey took several steps. First, we canvased over three dozen education organizations to determine if a survey of district parent involvement policies, programs, and practices already existed. Next, because no such measure was identified, we examined several parent involvement surveys for parents or teachers. Items relevant for district policies were selected and sorted into categories covering six major types of parent involvement. Therefore, the measure included six questions regarding the existence of various types of parent involvement policies: Does this district have a policy to (1) provide opportunities for parents to be decision makers regarding school pol-

icies and practices? (2) communicate with parents about ways they can help their children be successful in school? (3) reach out to engage diverse families in school activities? (4) train and support staff in their work with families? (5) communicate clearly and regularly to families about school programs and about their child's progress? and (6) provide links with social service agencies and community groups to address family needs?

It is important to note the ways in which these six policy categories are similar to and different from Epstein's (1995) six types of parent involvement because her system has emerged as a widely adopted framework in the field. Although we created our survey categories independently, there is considerable overlap between her policy categories and ours. Four of the six types of involvement addressed in our survey are represented in Epstein's framework: involving parents as decision makers, providing links to social services in the community, communicating with parents about helping their children learn and succeed in school, and communicating with parents about school programs and their child's progress. Therefore, our data on the prevalence of these policies, the predictors of policy adoption in these areas, and the types of programs implemented in support of policy can inform researchers, educators, and policy makers using Epstein's framework.

The two frameworks are different in that ours includes two important types of involvement that are not separate categories in Epstein's system: training teachers to work with families, and reaching out to culturally diverse families in the community. Although Epstein (1995) advocates parent involvement programs and practices that are consistent with these two policies, her system does not delineate these as separate policy categories. Epstein (1995) notes benefits for teachers resulting from all of her six types of parent involvement, and she advocates involving teachers with parents and community representatives. However, her framework does not emphasize as much as ours the need to formally train teachers and school staff to provide them with skills to work effectively with parents and to minimize conflict.

The second type of parent involvement in our framework that is not a separate category in Epstein's is reaching out to culturally diverse families in the community (although Epstein advocates practices in this area, such as providing language translators to improve school-home communication). We agree with Goldenberg (1993) that culturally diverse families may require special attention to overcome the language and cultural barriers to parents' involvement in all aspects of their children's education. To the extent that emphasizing policies by placing them into separate categories increases the attention given to them by researchers, educators, and policy makers, our framework more strongly encourages efforts toward improving home/school partnerships in these two areas.

Epstein's framework includes two aspects of parent involvement not included in our school district survey: parenting (basic obligations of families to provide for their children) and volunteering (family involvement on the school premises). Therefore, our study does not provide data with respect to these two types of policies.

The survey also contained 12 open-ended questions asking superintendents to list the programs and practices implemented to support each policy and how those programs and practices were funded. Respondents were asked to describe programs and practices that were implemented even without a specific policy. It is likely that for districts with formal policies, all the possible types of programs and practices were sampled by our survey, but it is also possible that our survey did not provide an exhaustive accounting of all of the practices implemented in each district. However, it is likely that districts that reported some—and not all—of their relevant practices for

each policy listed the most important practices while omitting the less important ones.

The descriptions of programs and practices in support of policy reported by the superintendents were coded into categories using qualitative methodology—coding by content and theme. For each policy, each open-ended response was written on a separate index card. A team of education graduate students independently sorted the index cards into categories based on commonalities among the program descriptions (e.g., school advisory committee, advisory committee meetings at school). The coauthors defined the category labels. The program descriptions provided by the districts were in general clear and unambiguous. The coders discussed any disagreements until consensus was reached. The survey also contained open-ended questions asking for number and types of schools (e.g., elementary, high school), number of students in the district, whether the district had a formal written parent involvement policy, when the district's most recent policy was developed, and whether the district received Chapter 1 or Title 1 funds for the 1994–1995 school year.

School district characteristics. Data on three school district characteristics were obtained from the Common Core of Data (CCD) (NCES, 1996), the primary national database on elementary and secondary public education in the United States. Researchers, educators, and policy makers use this database in considering issues of public school education. The Common Core Data are drawn from several surveys, including the Public Elementary-Secondary School Survey, the Public Elementary-Secondary Agency Survey, and the State Nonfiscal Elementary and Secondary Education Survey. These surveys gather data from the universe of approximately 16,000 school districts in the United States. The CCD data on district size (ranked in descending order by number of students), location (urban to rural), and student/teacher ratio were available for the 1993–1994 school year, the year immediately preceding the district survey.

Three additional variables characterizing the districts' catchment areas—percentage of minority children, percentage of children with limited English, and median income of households with children—were taken from 1990 census data that are also part of the CCD database. Catchment area data may not precisely describe the public school population because some parents in the catchment areas may send their children to private school. Therefore, the data may underestimate the level of risk in the district, resulting in a conservative test of our general hypotheses.

The six district characteristic variables included in this study were used in three ways: (1) to describe our sample demographically, (2) to relate our data on prevalence of parent involvement policies to the national population of school districts in order to develop recommendations for policy makers, and (3) to identify possible predictors of the likelihood of adoption of parent involvement policies for use by policy makers in developing strategies to encourage districts to adopt these policies.

Procedure

Trained volunteers obtained lists of school districts in their geographic areas. Either all of the districts within an area were surveyed, or if an area was very large, a random subset of districts was surveyed. Surveys were mailed to district superintendents in the spring of 1995 along with a return envelope, a project overview, and a cover letter. Two weeks after the initial mailing, follow-up phone calls were made to each nonresponding superintendent to increase response rate.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of the Districts

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the district characteristics of our sample and those of the national popu-

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Responding Districts and the National Population of Districts

Demographic Characteristics	Respondents	National Population
District size	N = 173	N = 15,050
M	2,847	7,523
SD	2,599	4,342
Z	−14.16***	...
District location:		
Large central city	N = 16 (9.2%)	N = 306 (2.0%)
Mid-size central city	N = 14 (8.1%)	N = 945 (6.2%)
Urban fringe/large city	N = 82 (47.4%)	N = 1,478 (9.6%)
Urban fringe/mid city	N = 15 (8.7%)	N = 1,055 (6.9%)
Large town	N = 7 (4.0%)	N = 354 (2.3%)
Small town	N = 28 (16.2%)	N = 4,394 (28.6%)
Rural	N = 11 (6.4%)	N = 6,815 (44.4%)
χ^2	$\chi^2(7,165) = 371.80$**	
Student/teacher ratio	N = 156	N = 14,407
M	17.55	15.9
SD	3.35	5.47
Z	3.77***	...
Minority children in catchment area (%)	N = 173	N = 14,228
M	16.70	11.4
SD	16.70	17.66
Z	3.95***	...
Children who do not speak English well in catchment area (%)	N = 173	N = 14,458
M	1.86	1.05
SD	2.6	2.6
Z	4.10***	...
Median income of households w/ children	N = 173	N = 14,227
M	$49,730	$33,800
SD	$20,100	$13,072
Z	16.03***	...

**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

lation of school districts. Analyses were conducted to compare the means of the sample with the population means. For five of the six district variables, we conducted *z* tests. For the sixth variable—location—we conducted a one-sample chi-square goodness-of-fit test to compare the geographic distribution of the sample districts with the population distribution.

The analyses in Table 1 comparing our sample to the national population indicate that our sample is overrepresentative of larger districts, urban and urban fringe districts, districts with greater median income and cultural diversity than the national population, and districts with higher student/teacher ratios. We explain the fact that our sample has a higher mean income and also a higher mean proportion of minority students as due to the overrepresentation of urban and urban fringe districts in the sample. That is, location was associated with income such that large areas were significantly more likely to have higher mean incomes ($r = -.29$, $p < .0001$) than towns and rural areas. In addition, location was similarly associated with significantly greater proportions of minority students ($r = -.36$, $p < .001$).

These differences between our sample and the national population raise the issue of whether our data on the prevalence of reported parent involvement policies can be used to comment on the national popula-

tion of districts. Although it is important to remember that our sample is not nationally representative, our data are useful in gaining a preliminary estimate of the national arena with respect to the prevalence of reported parent involvement policies. Our analytic strategy uses these differences in developing a picture of parent involvement policy adoption. This strategy is presented in detail with our results in subsequent sections.

District Adoption of Policies Supporting Six Types of Involvement

Districts were asked about the existence of formal policies in six major areas of parent involvement. Table 2 presents the frequency distributions of districts' reports of these six policies. As can be seen in Table 2, the two most commonly reported parent involvement policies of the six sampled were the policy to communicate with parents about school programs and about their child's progress (79.9%), and the policy to provide parents with opportunities to be decision makers regarding school policies and practices (73.3%). In contrast, only about one-third (38.7%) of the districts reported having a policy to train staff to work with parents.

TABLE 2. Percentage of Districts Reporting Six Types of Parent Involvement Policies

Parent Involvement Policy[a]	% of Districts
Communicate about child's progress and school programs	79.9
Parents as decision makers	73.3
Provide links to other services	58.6
Communicate about ways to help child succeed in school	58.1
Reach out to diverse families	51.1
Train staff to work with families	38.7
Total number of policies:[b]	
Zero	8.9
One	10.7
Two	10.7
Three	12.4
Four	16.6
Five	14.2
Six	26.6

[a] *N*'s range from 181 to 191.
[b] $N = 169$. Districts missing at least one data point (13.8%) were not included in these analyses.

A summary score was created of the total number of policies each district reported having, ranging from zero to six (also see Table 2). Over 90% of the districts reported having at least one type of policy, and over one-quarter (26.6%) reported having all six. The average number of policies per district was between three and four ($M = 3.7$, SD = 2.01), indicating that districts that reported the adoption of parent involvement policies advocated greater parent involvement in several areas of school functioning. Among those districts reporting only one or two policies ($N = 36$), almost half (47.2%) reported a policy supporting parents as decision makers, and over half (55.6%) reported a policy to communicate with parents about school programs and their child's progress. In contrast, less than one in 10 reported policies to train staff to work with families. Thus, this last policy was least emphasized by districts overall as well as by districts with few policies.

District Characteristics and Adoption of Policies

We addressed the question of whether important district demographic characteristics are related to the likelihood of adoption of parent involvement policies. The sample contained sufficient range in each of the six district/catchment area variables to warrant exploration of these relationships. To address this question, we performed tests of association between each of the six district variables and each of the six types of policy. One of the demographic variables, student/teacher ratio, was normally distributed. Thus, Pearson product-moment correlations were employed in analyses involving this variable. A second variable, district size, was rank ordered in descending order (e.g., larger districts have smaller ranks) in the NCES data set and thus available to us only in this form. For this variable, we computed Spearman rank

order correlations. Three of the variables—median income of households with children in the catchment area, percentage of minority children in the catchment area, and percentage of limited-English-proficient children in the catchment area—were nonnormally distributed. A logarithmic transformation was applied to these variables in order to normalize their distributions (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). We computed Pearson product-moment correlations for the three normalized variables. The sixth demographic variable, location (urbanicity), was a categorical variable that was collapsed into four levels (1 = large city and fringe, 2 = middle-size city and fringe, 3 = town, 4 = rural). Chi-square tests were used in analyses involving this variable. The question of whether district-level characteristics were related to the total number of policies adopted was also tested using Pearson product-moment correlations. Results of these tests are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, the results revealed a clear and significant pattern of relationships between several of the district-level demographic characteristics and the likelihood of adoption of parent involvement policies. Three of the district/catchment area characteristics indicating educational resources (student/teacher ratio) and risk (percentage of limited-English-speaking children and percentage of minority children in the catchment area) were significantly associated with adoption of several of the parent involvement policies. These three district variables also were significantly correlated with the total number of policies adopted by districts. Thus, districts with greater percentages of at-risk students were significantly more likely to report adopting parent involvement policies in many areas, suggesting that these districts may perceive a need for parents to be involved in many aspects of their children's education and their school's functioning.

A fourth district variable, size, was significantly associated with adoption of two types of parent involvement policies—those supporting parents as decision makers in the schools, and those supporting reaching out to diverse families. The other two district/catchment area characteristics, income and location, were not associated with adoption of any of the six parent involvement policies. Perhaps these variables are related to parent involvement policy adoption in a more complex way. One direction for future research might be an examination of the combined effect of median household income and cost of living (cost of providing educational resources) as a function of geographic area. Other conceptualizations and measures of income might prove more fruitful in predicting parent involvement policy adoption. For example, future research could examine the effect of percentage of children receiving a free or reduced-cost lunch on policy adoption. Further research is needed to understand the effects of income and location on adoption of parent involvement policies.

Overall, these data support the notion that districts with greater cultural diversity (percentage of minority and non-English-speaking children), greater educational needs, or those serving populations more at risk may be more likely to promote parent involvement as a way to meet these needs. We interpret this as a positive finding in that, like Goldenberg (1993), we believe that culturally diverse families in particular can benefit from schools' efforts to reach out to them, because many of these parents might be unfamiliar with the norms, expectations, or procedures in U.S. schools or be wary of contacts with the school. To explore this idea further, we created a cumulative district-level risk factor score from the three district variables that most clearly imply educational risk. The variables and cutoffs indicating risk were (1) more than 30% minority children in the catchment area (18% of the sample), (2) more than 3% limited-English-proficient children in the catchment area (17% of the sample), and (3) a student-

TABLE 3. Correlations between School District/Catchment Area Characteristics and Adoption of Parent Involvement Policies

District/Catchment Area Characteristics	Parents as Decision Makers	Communication about Child's Progress	Communicating Ways Child Can Succeed	Training Staff to Work with Parents	Reaching Out to Diverse Parents	Providing Links to Social Services	Total Number of Policies
Agency size[a]	−.24**	.06	.00	−.08	−.19*	−.06	−.15+
Location (chi-square)[b]	.36	5.53	4.44	.71	3.99	5.82	18.5
Student/teacher ratio	.16*	.13	.20*	.11	.22*	.09	.24**
% minority children[c]	.19*	.11	.14+	.12	.17*	.19*	.23**
% limited-English children[c]	.30***	.09	.13+	.11	.18**	.13	.22**
Median income of households with children[c]	−.01	.02	−.02	−.04	−.04	.10	.04
Cumulative risk index	.25**	.14+	.17**	.14+	.23**	.10	.26**

NOTE.—*N*'s range from 150 to 175.

[a]The correlations with agency size are negative because the rank order of districts is descending (1 = largest, 2 = next largest, etc.).

[b]Location coded as follows: 1 = large city/fringe (N = 100), 2 = midsize city/fringe (N = 29), 3 = town (N = 35), 4 = rural (N = 11). *N*'s range from 151 to 171; df = 3 for each type of policy. For total number of policies, df = 18.

[c]These variables have had a logarithmic transformation applied to them to normalize their distributions.

$^{+}p < .10$.

$^{*}p < .05$

$^{**}p < .01$.

$^{***}p < .001$.

teacher ratio greater than or equal to 20 (21% of the sample).

Districts received a risk score ranging from zero to three that represented the number of risk factors as defined above. This variable was then correlated with reported policy adoption (yes or no) of each of the six policies and with the total number of policies reported (ranging from zero to six).

As expected (see Table 3), districts with a greater number of risk factors were significantly more likely to report adopting several of the individual parent involvement policies as well as a greater total number of parent involvement policies.

Comparison of Sample Data on Frequency of Policy Adoption with the National Population of Districts

We used the obtained relations between district characteristics and adoption of parent involvement policies to gain an understanding of how our frequency data on policy adoption could be related to the national population of school districts. Although it is important to remember that our sample was not nationally representative, some preliminary statements may be made. First, although our sample of districts overrepresented those with higher income and those in urban and urban fringe areas, these two variables (income and location) were not associated with adoption of parent involvement policy. Thus, the frequency data reported for our sample may not differ significantly from the national population due to differences in these district characteristics.

Our sample also differed from the national population by having districts in catchment areas with higher proportions of minority children and children with limited English proficiency. Our sample also had higher student/teacher ratios. Thus, our sample represented on the average a higher-risk sample than the national population. These same risk factors, however, were associated with more parent involvement policies, leading us to infer that our prevalence data in all likelihood may have *overestimated* the frequencies of such policies. Thus, the existence of parent involvement policies may be even less frequent in the national population than in the sample described here. Given that even our sample data suggest many areas for improvement in adoption of parent involvement policy, the policy implementation of the national population of school districts may be even more in need of improvement. Thus, there is ample room for improvement in the implementation of policies such as reaching out to culturally diverse families, training staff to work with parents, and providing opportunities for parents to be decision makers, especially because districts with culturally diverse students may benefit from involving parents in the education of their children.

Programs Implemented to Support Policies

The final issue examined in this study was the types of programs implemented in support of parent involvement policies. Data from the six open-ended questions were used in these analyses (see Table 4). A review of the types of programs the districts reported revealed several interesting findings. First, the most frequently mentioned type of program to provide parents with opportunities to be decision makers was for parents to serve on a school improvement council. However, because few parents in a school can serve on such committees, most parents never have the opportunity to function as decision makers. Therefore, an important next step would be to determine the extent to which parents are satisfied that they are represented adequately by these councils. Data also are needed on the process by which these parents are chosen as representatives, the characteristics of parents who serve on these councils, and the qualifications of the council members to make decisions on the issues they face.

A second finding was that the two most

TABLE 4. Major Programs and Percentage of Districts with Programs and Practices Supporting Parent Involvement Policies[a]

Policy and Associated Programs and Practices	Percentage of Districts with Program/Practice
Parents as decision makers (N = 135):	
Individual school council	72.6
Specific task forces	25.9
District council	24.4
Other advisory committee	19.3
Parent Teacher Association	13.3
Chapter 1 advisory committee	11.9
Communicating about child's progress and school programs (N = 142):	
Written reports on child's progress	64.8
Meetings about child's progress	64.1
Written communication about school rules/events	52.8
Parent orientation events	14.8
Parent training programs	3.5
Homework assignments	2.1
Communication with parents about ways their child can succeed in school (N = 102):	
School-level written information	52.0
Parent-teacher meetings	39.2
School offers parent programs	33.3
School orientation events	13.7
Written reports about child	12.7
Parent committees	10.8
School implements interventions	9.8
School offers social events	1.0
Training staff to work with parents (N = 56):	
In-service training by school staff	67.9
Early intervention programs	16.1
In-service workshops by specialists	7.1
Staff development on curriculum	5.4
Off-site staff training	3.6
Reaching diverse families (N = 81):	
Social events	18.5
Parents as advisers	17.3
Programs for minorities	14.8
Material adaptation	12.3
Early intervention programs	11.1
Outreach to specific families	8.6
Diversity appreciation programs	8.6
Special personnel	7.4
Multicultural task forces	6.2
Services for all families	3.7
Staff training	1.2
Providing links to social services (N = 95):	
School hires social workers/psychologists	26.3
School provides services	22.1
School creates community partnerships[b]	20.0
School provides health services	11.6
School collaborates with social services	11.6
School provides early intervention	8.4
School provides drug awareness programs	6.3
School informs parents of outside services	4.2

[a]The N's represent those districts answering both the policy and program questions.

[b]It was not clear whether these partnerships involved referring families to agencies outside the school or bringing community services to the school.

frequently mentioned programs for supporting the policy of communicating with parents about school programs and their child's progress were written reports sent home and meetings with teachers. However, these programs do not fully satisfy some parents' expressed desire and perceived need for more frequent information about their child's progress (Baker, 1997a). Parents in focus groups have indicated that meetings with teachers about their child's progress and other communications from teachers were too short, too infrequent, and often occurred only after a problem had been apparent for some time. Indeed, only 2% of the districts reported using homework assignments as a means to provide parents with information regarding their child's progress. This is noteworthy because this type of practice has been found to be effective in providing feedback to parents about how to help their child by asking them to monitor or sign off on their child's homework.

The practices reported by districts to support school-to-home communication with parents about how parents can help their child succeed in school did not specify whether parents were told specific ways to increase learning opportunities at home. Because this type of parental practice is often cited as resulting in strong effects on student achievement, future research should gather in-depth information about these types of communications and their efficacy.

Third, there appear to be several different positive approaches for dealing with the issue of diversity within a school. Respondents reported activities related to different levels of the school such as having special programs for minorities, having parents as advisers, and providing multicultural curricula in the classroom. Only one district reported training staff to reach out to diverse families. Given the different values, behaviors, beliefs, and expectations of different cultural/ethnic groups, such training could be especially valuable (Comer, 1988; Goldenberg, 1993).

And, finally, many of the strategies districts reported to support the policy of providing parents with links to services within the community entailed providing services within the school (i.e., implementing early intervention programs, providing health services, drug awareness programs, etc.) rather than providing links to services outside the school. These data are consistent with the model of school-linked services that advocates placing health and social services families receive within schools (Behrman, 1992). The goal of the integrated model is to increase the likelihood that families will receive the services they need without further taxing the resources of the school staff. Because the funding available for these programs is separate from the funds offered by the federal government, these programs may be especially important in helping eligible families receive benefits under the new welfare reform laws (e.g., child health services) or in providing substitute or alternative services. However, these programs may not have the resources to meet the needs of all of the families who have been refused services elsewhere. Research is needed to identify the ways that school-based and -funded social services can most help in-need families affected by the new welfare reform laws.

Districts also were asked to list programs that existed in the absence of policy. Analysis of these data suggested that few parent involvement programs are initiated in the absence of a formal district-level policy. Less than 5% of the responding districts without a policy listed programs in that area of parent involvement. However, we do not consider this finding to be definitive because respondents may not have remembered the instructions at the beginning of the questionnaire asking them to report programs in the absence of policy.

Summary and Conclusions

In this study we surveyed over 200 district superintendents about their parent involve-

ment policies, programs, and practices. Six types of involvement were included in the survey because they either are directly or indirectly associated with children's school achievement and academic success. Our data yielded several important findings and highlighted several issues for further consideration by researchers, educators, and policy makers.

Prevalence of District Parent Involvement Policies

Consistent with the recent federal legislation mandating increases in home-school partnerships, over 90% of the school districts responding to our survey report having at least one policy supporting parents' involvement in their children's education. The most frequently adopted policies are communicating with parents about school programs and their child's progress, and supporting the participation of parents in making decisions regarding school policies and practices. However, a substantial portion of districts do not have policies in specific areas where parent involvement might be important. Notable is the low percentage of districts with policies to train staff to work effectively with parents. As the frontline workers in these school-home partnerships, teachers must have such training if programs are to be effective (Shartrand et al., 1994). Nonetheless, such a low percentage of districts with policies to train teachers was not altogether surprising given how few resources schools devote to teacher training in general (Bradley, 1993). Not training teachers as the frontline workers who must make these programs work is a serious policy omission and one that needs to be addressed quickly.

Approximately half of the districts have a policy providing links to social services. This type of policy, with its associated programs providing services within the school and using school funds, is especially critical in the current era of welfare reform. Schools may become important suppliers of services that will substitute for reduced federal and state benefits and services previously provided by AFDC.

District Demographic Characteristics and Parent Involvement Policies

Our results support the notion that important district characteristics are associated with the adoption of parent involvement policies. Several district/catchment area characteristics are related to the adoption of specific types of parent involvement policies as well as to the total number of policies. The effects of three of the district characteristics suggesting educational risk are cumulative such that the more risk factors characterizing the districts, the greater the likelihood of adoption of parent involvement policies. Thus, our results suggest that districts more at risk may perceive parent involvement policy as an important way to improve students' academic performance. Because of the correlational nature of these analyses and methodological limitations of the district data available to us, definitive causal inferences about the influence of district characteristics on the adoption of parent involvement policies cannot be made from these data. Nevertheless, our results, although exploratory, strongly suggest that further clarifying the district characteristics that predict the adoption of specific parent involvement policies and programs is a fruitful and important issue for future research. A better understanding of the factors associated with the adoption of parent involvement policies and programs can inform federal and state policy makers and educators in their efforts to increase parent involvement at the local level.

Generalizability of Results on Frequency of Policy Adoption

The data on the frequency of adoption of parent involvement policies show that in our sample substantial percentages of districts lack policies supporting parent involvement in several critical areas. However, because our sample is not a probability sample, the question of generalizability

of the results needs to be considered. The evidence suggests that our results may actually overestimate somewhat the proportion of districts with parent involvement policies. Our sample overrepresents districts with larger proportions of minority and limited-English-proficient children in their catchment areas. Because these factors are associated with a greater frequency of adoption of several parent involvement policies, our sample may overestimate somewhat the proportions of school districts with these policies. Thus, our analyses suggest that many districts still do not have parent involvement policies in critical areas. Because districts without formal policies appear to have few parent involvement programs, the need for formal policies may be even greater than what can be concluded definitively from our data.

Although our sample is biased toward higher-income and urban districts, location and income are not associated with adoption of parent involvement policies. Therefore, the generalizability of our results may not be limited by these sample biases.

Parent Involvement Programs and Practices

Although substantial proportions of the districts in our sample report having parent involvement policies, many of the programs implemented in support of policy may not completely fulfill the policy's goals. Future research should address the effectiveness of the practices in fulfilling each of the different policies. For example, these data do not address whether receiving a newsletter from the district is sufficient information for parents to help their children succeed in school. Nor can it be determined from these data how many parents participate in the programs and practices reported, and to what extent. Similarly, it is not known whether parents are aware of such options. Other available data (Baker, 1997a) suggest that parents' needs may not be addressed fully by these programs (e.g., parents perceive that teachers inform them of a problem with their child's performance after it has gone on for some time [Baker, 1997a]). Focus group data also suggest that parents may not have the resources to participate in some programs that would otherwise be effective. For instance, many working parents state that having to spend an hour a day on their child's homework is a physical and psychological burden.

In implementing programs to support parent involvement policies, only a few districts report model programs such as HIPPY (Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999) or Parents as Teachers (Wagner & Clayton, 1999). Because these model programs have been evaluated, it is noteworthy that they are not more widely implemented. Our data do not show whether district leaders are unaware of these programs or whether they prefer to develop their own programs.

Although superintendents' responses to our open-ended questions provide a good indication of the diversity of programs and practices supporting parent involvement policies, in general, the open-ended format of our questionnaire did not elicit in-depth information on the programs. For example, little information is provided on the nature of the training programs for teachers. Nor is there information about the areas of school functioning addressed by decision-making and advisory groups that include parents. Some superintendents mentioned funding sources rather than programs or practices. Thus, our first steps in gathering national information on district parent involvement also highlight for future research additional gaps in knowledge of parent involvement policies, programs, and practices.

Recommendations for Practice

This study was designed to provide an initial examination of district-level parent involvement policies and programs. More research is needed on how district leaders can be provided with the most up-to-date and accurate information about the efficacy

of parent involvement policy in improving children's academic achievement, about successful policy adoption and implementation, model programs, evaluations of programs, and the administrative and financial aspects of these programs.

The results of the present study highlight the importance of studying district-level parent involvement policy, programs, and practices. Despite the need for more research in this area, based on the national policy agenda and on results of the survey, we offer the following seven recommendations for districts to use in taking stock of their current parent involvement policies in order to identify potential areas for change:

1. Consider the value of district-level policies to enhance parent involvement. District leaders could reexamine the current status of policies regarding parent involvement. Although practices may be in place in individual schools, setting district-wide policies might create a coherent vision and reconfirm the importance of this area of school functioning (DeRoche, 1997). Parents and teachers could participate in such a policy review process.

2. Evaluate the extent to which actual practices fulfill the spirit of the policy. A practice review committee could be called together to consider the extent to which school practices reflect the spirit of the policy. Particular attention could be paid to the extent to which practices are reaching and engaging diverse families.

3. Examine the opportunities offered for parental decision making and the methods of notifying parents of such opportunities. The extent to which parents have a decision-making role in all aspects of school functioning could be reviewed to ensure proper fulfillment of policies mandating such involvement. The extent and nature of parental notification of such opportunities could also be examined. For example, are opportunities for parental participation on committees translated into the necessary languages and written for parents with lower levels of literacy?

4. Examine communications sent home from schools and determine if there is a need to provide parents with more individualized information regarding their children. A review committee could examine the range of materials sent home to parents to provide an overall picture of the nature of school-home communication. Efforts could be made to assess—formally or informally—parent and teacher satisfaction with the goals and execution of such communications.

5. Provide parents with detailed information on how to increase learning opportunities at home. Particular attention should be paid to informing parents about the many ways that they can enrich the home learning environment and increase opportunities for learning at home. Particular attention should be paid to increasing practices that research has shown to be most effective in improving students' school achievement.

6. Evaluate the school's need for training teachers to work with families. The need for formal and ongoing support for teachers' increased contact and involvement with diverse parents could be evaluated. Ways to include teachers and parents in the development and implementation of such training could be considered.

7. Become familiar with model parent involvement programs and practices. Prior to the implementation of new parent involvement programs within a school, an effort could be made to consider all model parent involvement programs currently in operation. Issues to consider include cost of program, staffing needs, goals of the program, whether parents participated in its development, and whether it has been evaluated.

Note

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