

Rural Schools Facilitating the Success of Students Through Reaching out to Parents

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Few would disagree with the observation that there is a general restructuring of the family unit. The values, role models, and solutions that assisted families in solving problems in the past have changed, as have the challenges that families face today. Families are different today than 30 years ago. An elevation in the number of mothers in the work force since World War II represents a significant social change (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998). The increasing divorce rate has also brought new challenges to today's families. As a result of the changing dynamics of the family, the social consequences that families face include a change in time demands, role conflicts, and high levels of fatigue, stress, and tension.

Rural Communities are not immune to society's changes. Many love to romantically envision the concept of the rural family farm --family members spending generous amounts of time interacting as they work alongside each other in the fresh air while enjoying picnics of wholesome foods, served by mothers with rosy-cheeked smiling babies on their hips. However, the family dynamics of rural locations have faced change of even greater proportion, to some extent, than the urban population. Many rural small farms are now nonexistent as big business takes over the farming industry. In response, the rural community has had to adjust to finding and commuting to work outside of their rural areas, which has affected the dynamics of time and the rural family significantly (Danes & Keskinen, 1990). As children's roles change to adjust to the times, rural areas are also plagued with some of the same problems urban areas face, including an increase in youth participation in violent behaviors (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). For instance, in the last decade, most of the school-shooting sprees have taken place in rural communities.

Other problems that plague youth, in general, include more youth being left unsupervised, enabling them to participate in self-destructive behaviors at younger ages (McWhirter, et al., 1998). There is an increasing number of youth (a) becoming sexually active (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1999), (b) being abused (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1999), (c) displaying serious behavior problems (Bennett, 1994; Mack, 1997), (d) joining gangs (Fagan, 1999), (e) becoming addicted to drugs (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1999), and (f) dropping out of school (McWhirter, et al. 1998). Children and teens also are increasingly at risk of committing suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death after automobile accidents for teens in the U.S. (Mack, 1997). Practitioners suggest that teen suicide, along with the other aforementioned problems youth experience, have been linked to youth not having meaningful interactions with their families (Capuzzi, 1994; Wurm & Haskett, 1993).

The majority of research on parenting indicates that parent-child interaction at home is critical in shaping children's academic success (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990; Paulson, 1992; Peach & Reddick, 1993). For instance, Peach and Reddick (1993) determined that 70% of the failing rural high school students reported poor communication with parents or other family members. Parent-child interactions also impact: (a) self-esteem (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990), (b) mental and physical health (Hanson, 1986), and (c) relationships with others, including their future children (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990).

Healthy family interactions are also proactive in preventing self-destructive behaviors such as suicide and other problems (Graham, 1992; Wurm & Haskett, 1993).

Positive family interactions are not only threatened by changing family structures and the problems that youth and adults face, but they are affected by the increasing mobility of our society. Today's "parents without roots" may experience a lack of trusting friendships and access to extended family that traditionally, have been depended upon for support, guidance and the continual transmittal of parenting skills (Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Farrow, 1996; Hira, 1996; Lin, 1994). The absence of support systems perpetuate the effect of parents feeling isolated and overwhelmed, and has been linked to child abuse (Braun, Coplon, & Sonnenschein, 1984; Bruner, 1996; Farrow, 1996; Gates, 1996; Hamburg, 1995). Therefore, parents lacking support and resources may be inadequately prepared for the many challenges that await them (Bruner, 1996). To address the problems of youth in our increasingly mobile society, our nation is looking to its schools for solutions (Piele, 1986). One approach that is making a difference for students, and especially students in rural areas, is the school's dedication to play a more active role in reaching out to parents, who might otherwise lack support, for research indicates that a strong home-school connection is crucial to any intervention effort (Dwyer & Hecht, 1992; Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Hamburg, 1995).

Schools Reaching Out to Parents

The transactional approach recognizes that no micro-system, such as the family, and larger system (the school) operates without impacting other systems (App, 1991). Since what is in children's best interest is a primary concern for both schools and parents, it is desirable that both systems come together to collaborate, provide support for one another, and regard one another as allies (App, 1991; Hamburg, 1995; Henderson, Marburger, & Ohms, 1986).

Henderson et al. (1986) states that children become alienated from school by the age of eight if school expectations, behavior, and attitudes are significantly different than the ones at home. If children's home and school worlds are separate, or worse yet, they are opposed, the chance for students failing or dropping out are also much higher, for children's academic achievement correlates to a strong school-home connection (App, 1991; Hamburg, 1995). Providing parents with parenting support indirectly facilitates students' success, for students are better able to concentrate on academics if dysfunctional problems in the home are minimal. Therefore, it is worthwhile for schools to consider bridging the school-home gap by not just focusing on academics, but the needs of the family that impact academics (Flaxman & Inger, 1991). Schools can reach out to parents by providing them with opportunities to receive parenting support through newsletters, pamphlets, calendars, parenting libraries, and through facilitating parent support groups or education (Dwyer & Hecht, 1992; Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Hamburg, 1995).

Schools Supporting Parents through the Provision of Parent Education Opportunities

Newsletters, Pamphlets, and Calendars

Some parents feel that parenting information is inaccessible and they don't have access to essential services that provide them with valuable parenting information, especially in rural locations (Haring & Lovett, 2001). Schools can make parenting information more accessible to parents by using a variety of formats when reaching out to provide them with support, such as through newsletters and pamphlets (App, 1991). Nelson's (1985) study found newsletters to be an effective way to impact attitudinal and behavioral changes when 166 single parents were surveyed concerning their perceptions on the effectiveness of receiving a newsletter over a period of several months. Newsletters and pamphlets may not only provide parents with parenting information, but can identify the concepts that will be taught at school, and ways parents can support their children's learning. Armed with this knowledge, parents can ask their children more specific questions regarding the concepts they learn instead of the question, "What did you learn today?" which typically elicits a shrug of the shoulders. Specific questions enable more productive interactions (Zunin & Zunin, 1972). Calendars with daily questions or topics identified for parents can therefore, serve as an additional format schools can consider using when reaching out to parents. These approaches can be especially effective for working parents.

Parenting Libraries and Lounges

Dwyer and Hecht (1992) report that a lack of parent-school collaboration doesn't always exist because of time constraints related to work schedules. The organizational structure of the school may not provide parents with a climate that is conducive to the development of a relationship with them that is warm, personal, and trusting (App, 1991; Dwyer & Hecht, 1992). In response to this dilemma, schools have tried to be more responsive to their parenting needs by welcoming parents into a parenting library or center, in which books and games can be checked out by parents (Henry, 1996; Henderson, 1987; App, 1991). Some schools provide parents with a few shelves in the school library or even in some cases, separate rooms or lounges where parents can sit comfortably as they read provided books and journals, drink coffee, or meet with other parents or teachers spontaneously (Henry, 1996). Many parent centers are run by volunteers or staff persons paid through fund raising, donations, grants, or Chapter One funds (Johnson, 1993). Schools can provide further information for parents about strategies, such as how to improve parent-child communication, through facilitating support groups, parent education classes, and the presentations of guest speakers (Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Hamburg, 1995).

Support Groups, Classes, and Guest Speakers

A large body of research promotes parent involvement in parent support groups and parent education classes facilitated through schools (Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Hamburg, 1995). After studying 80 parent-support programs in nine states, Ertle (1992) determined that the communities where parents had access to parent-education groups in which communication skills were taught, there were fewer drug abuse problems than communities that did not have any parent-education programs. Furthermore, in Miller's and Borich's (1982) study, rural parents indicated that they felt that programs that provide parents with parenting strategies are the most important service provided to avoid child abuse (Miller & Borich, 1982). The results of participating in parenting groups are positive. Parent education groups can expand a parent's repertoire of knowledge on how to parent. They can learn skills on nurturing, what is developmentally appropriate, and healthy and how to create the optimal home environment (Hamburg, 1995; Parks & Smeriglio, 1986).

In Parks and Smeriglio's (1986) study of 126 families, it was determined that parenting knowledge was significantly associated with quality of interactions in the home. Parents also report positive changes in their parenting attitudes, such as their awareness of the impact they have on their child and their overall parenting competence. Other improvements include their confidence, competence, relationships with their children, parent-child trust, and their children's academics and behavior.

By providing group support and education, a parent's emotional and social needs can be met, resulting in the reduction of environmental and social stressors that affect children's development (Kiernan, Westrum, & Leahy, 1980). Many parents aren't comfortable talking to experts, yet they benefit from learning, within a parent group setting, skills on how to loosen the knots inevitable in any family structure (Braun et al., 1984). Since parents are the experts on their children, they can pool their expertise as they brainstorm limitless strategies on how to parent (Hamburg, 1995). Parents may develop friendships as a result of the groups that continue outside of the group (Braun et al., 1984). Therefore, parent groups can offer more than just parenting information. They put people together, encourage people to support one another, and help them realize they are not alone (Braun, 1984; Schmidt 1996).

The format of parent groups can be flexible to meet the needs of providing information for the pressing problems participants face. Literature describes a variety of formats including a support group, a single meeting with an arranged guest speaker, a workshop, or as a series in which a topic is presented (Edel-Herscovitch 1995; Hamburg, 1995). Groups that share a common characteristic can meet to pool information and serve as a resource and support system for one another such as a group established for parents of children with special needs (Brolin, 1994). Often groups are led by someone trained in the field such as a counselor (Hamburg, 1995), but could be facilitated by administrators, teachers, or even parents.

An abundance of literature advocates schools playing a more active role in providing parents with support through providing parenting information in various formats such as parent support or education groups, newsletters, pamphlets, calendars, and parenting libraries or centers (Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Hamburg, 1995). However, absent from literature are parents' perceptions of the role their schools are currently playing or should play in providing them with parenting support through

the various formats. Scarcer yet, is information that takes into consideration the different perceptions that rural and urban parents may have regarding the role schools are currently playing or should play in providing them with parenting information, which is significant because of the differences of their communities, especially in the way of available resources. Therefore, this study's purpose is to address these deficiencies.

Method

Subjects

The population for this study included 145 rural parents of elementary-aged students from three school districts and 152 urban parents of elementary-aged students from three school districts in the State of Washington. To determine the sample for the study, a stratified randomization method was used. The Washington Education Directory, the Rural Education Center, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction served as references to determine whether the districts were rural or urban. Urban school districts were those districts that were located in towns with populations of more than 25,000. Rural school districts were located at least sixty miles away from an urban area and were located in towns with populations of less than 5,000. The participating districts were randomly selected from the Washington Education Directory using a corresponding table of random numbers designed by International Mathematical & Statistical Libraries, Inc., as reprinted by Goldberg (1979).

The age of the sample ranged from 22 to 53, with 37 representing the median age. Most of the respondents indicated that (a) they were mothers (85.7%; 263), (b) they had one or two other children in their home (71.6%; 220), (c) they were Caucasian (87.3%; 268), (d) English was the primary language spoken in their home (95.1%; 292), (e) their annual income was in the range of \$10,000 to \$74,999 (70%; 200), with the highest concentration of respondents in the range of \$25,000 - \$49,999 (32.6%; 100), (f) they were married (77.2%; 237); (g) if they were single (14.7%; 45), they were employed full-time (68.1%; 32); (h) if there were two parents or guardians in the home, both of them did not work full-time (59.9%; 158), and the highest educational level of the second parent or guardian in the home (who was not the respondent) was high school or a two-year degree (58.1%; 141); (i) the highest educational level of the respondent was high school or a two-year degree (57.6%; 177), (j) they were not teen parents (94.8%; 292), (k) they attended a high school in Washington (54.4%; 167), and (l) they attended a small high school (with fewer than 100 graduates in each graduating class) or a medium-sized high school (with 100 to 300 graduates in each class) (55.4%; 150).

Instrumentation

A closed-question survey was developed through procedures recommended by Dillman (1978). Respondents provided information about whether they had received any information on parenting from their child's school, and if so, they identified if they were provided information in the following formats: a parenting center, newsletter, calendar with daily questions, pamphlet, class, support group, parenting library, or a guest speaker's presentation. Parents also indicated their level of interest in being the recipients of or participants in any of these formats. Finally, they rated how they felt about the adequacy of the school's role in providing them with parenting information. A section was also provided for parents to write additional comments. "Family" was defined as all persons who live in the same house or dwelling (Lin, 1994).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and non-parametric methods. Frequency of over-all responses for items were indicated by percentages. Data were compared according to the district's location (rural schools as compared to urban schools). When analyzing nominal data to determine if there was a significant difference in the responses of parents based on their location, a chi-square test of independence was used and the alpha level was set at .05. A chi-square test indicates the reliability of observed differences between two samples.

When analyzing ordinal data to determine if there was a significant difference in the responses of parents based on their location, the Mann-Whitney U-test for differences between independent samples was used. Hurlburt (1998) refers to the Mann-Whitney U-test as "the ordinal analog of the two-independent sample t test used with interval and ratio data" (p. 452). A Mann-Whitney U-test for large

samples (i.e. $N > 30$ per group) yields a z or critical ratio in which a value greater than positive or negative 1.96 is significant when alpha is set at the .05 level using a two-tailed test. The hypothesis of the Mann-Whitney test assumes that the medians of two groups is equal, but if a z value is large enough to reject the hypothesis, the possibility of the medians being the same is minimal. The Mann-Whitney test is also sensitive to both the central tendency and over-all shape of the distribution of scores (Bruning & Kintz 1997; Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1998).

Results and Discussion

Parent's Perceptions Regarding the Current and Future Role Schools Should Play in Distributing Parenting Information

Dwyer and Hecht (1992) and Edel-Herscovitch (1995) recommend that because of the needs of our changing society, schools can play a more active role in reaching out to parents through the dissemination of parenting information. A large body of literature presents a variety of formats that schools are recommended to use when reaching out to parents (App, 1991; Edel-Herscovitch, 1995; Hamburg, 1995). However, 42.3% (130) of the parents responded that they hadn't received any parenting information from their child's school. Only 54.7% (168) of the parents surveyed stated that they felt the school's role in providing them with parenting information was adequate. Therefore, it seems as if many of the parents in this study support the idea that schools should play a more active role in reaching out to them through the distribution of parenting information.

Parents indicate that the current formats the schools in this study are using (as listed in descending order of frequency) include: (a) a newsletter, 61.2%(188); (b) a brochure, 33.6%(103) which tied in frequency with a parent education class, 33.6%(103); (c) a guest speaker's presentation, 19.5%(60), (d) a parents' support group, 11.4%(35); (e) a parents' library, 11.1%(34) which tied in frequency with a parent center, 11.1%(34); and (f) a calendar with daily questions that parents can ask their children, 7.8% (24). From these results, it can be concluded that the most popular format being used (if any) was a newsletter. However, the least common approaches were the parent library, center, and calendar with daily questions.

Since this research has established that many parents in this study would like schools to play a more active role in providing them with more parenting information and that their schools are providing them with little parenting information in very few formats (if at all), it is then important to identify which formats parents are interested in being the participants or recipients of so schools can respond. In most cases, parents indicate that they are "very" (as represented by a "v") or "somewhat" interested" (as represented by an "s") in being the recipients of the various formats. Following, responses are listed in descending order of frequency of the items in which parents indicate that they are "very interested" in being the recipients or participants of: (a) a newsletter, v= 49.8%(153), s= 31.6%(97); (b) a calendar with daily questions that parents can ask their children, v=36.2%(111); s=25.1%(77); (c) a brochure, v=31.6%(97), s=39.1%(120); (d) a parents' library, v=27.7%(85), s=33.9%(104); (e) a guest speaker's presentation, v=22.1%(68), s=36.2%(111); (f) a parent education class, v=19.2%(59), s=31.6%(97); (g) a parenting center 18.2%(56), 37.5%(115); and (h) a parents' support group, v=12.4%(38), s=28.3%(87).

If schools want to meet the needs of its parent population, it is valuable to examine if the various formats they are currently using correlate with parents' level of interest and then adapt accordingly. From the frequency of parent responses, it can be determined that schools in this study are currently using parents' first and second most frequently chosen formats in which they are "very interested" in being the recipients of, which is a newsletter and a brochure. However, parents' second most popular preference is a calendar with daily questions and the calendar is the seventh most frequently used formats in schools. Also, schools more frequently offered a parenting class (which tied with brochures as the second most commonly used format) and support group (which was the fourth most commonly used format in schools) in contrast to parents' stronger interest in having a parenting library center and guest speaker's presentation.

Only a small percentage of parents indicate that they are "very interested" in a parenting center and this was also the fifth most frequently used format the schools, in this study, are currently using to reach out to parents in distributing parenting information. However, it would be interesting to see if parents'

interest level would increase if childcare were provided while parents used a parenting center, as one parent suggested in the “comments” section of her survey.

A Comparison of the Perceptions of Rural and Urban Parents

When the perceptions of rural and urban parents were compared, results indicate that significantly fewer rural parents receive parenting information from their child’s school, district, or teacher: chi-square (1, $N = 304$) = 12.820, $p = .000$. Fewer rural parents had parenting centers in their school: chi-square (2, $N = 302$) = 29.849, $p = .000$. Fewer rural parents respond that their child’s school uses a (a) brochure: chi-square (1, $N = 307$) = 9.378, $p = .002$, (b) parenting education class: chi-square (1, $N = 307$) = 41.629, $p = .000$, (c) parenting library: chi-square (1, $N = 307$) = 19.297, $p = .000$, or (c) a guest speaker’s presentation to provide them with parenting information: chi-square (1, $N = 307$) = 45.273, $p = .000$. Significantly fewer rural parents indicate that they are interested in a guest speaker’s presentation being used as a format to distribute parenting information to them: chi-square (1, $N = 307$) = 45.273, $p = .000$. Finally, significantly fewer rural parents indicate that the school’s role in providing them with parenting information is adequate: chi-square (1, $N = 285$) = 10.724, $p = .001$.

It is clear that when compared to urban areas, parents in rural areas report that they do not have as much access to any type of parenting information distributed in the format of parenting centers, brochures, parenting education classes, a parenting library, and a guest speaker’s presentation. It then seems logical that fewer rural parents than urban parents describe their school’s role as being “adequate” in the role schools play in providing them with parenting information. Rural schools could be more responsive to the needs of the parents in their community by offering them more information on parenting and communication strategies in more formats. In doing so, rural schools should consider acknowledging that rural parents’ prioritization of the formats, in which they prefer to receive parenting information, is similar to the prioritization of the over-all parents in this survey. However, rural parents indicate that they are less interested in a guest speaker’s presentation than urban parents; therefore, offering rural parents information in this format may not be as productive as using other formats.

Conclusion

Children from dysfunctional families come to school facing challenges that can drive them towards failure. Schools that ignore the problems children face in their homes exacerbate the problem. When schools reach out to parents through providing support and parenting education in a variety of formats, they are demonstrating the act of caring and a willingness to cooperate in meeting the needs of children beyond the academic arena. They are providing indirect services to a large number of children, which is proactive in improving students’ academic success as well as preventing other family crises that affect children’s well-being.

Many parents in this study indicate that they had not received any parenting information from their child’s school and that they felt they would like the school to play a more active role in providing them with more opportunities in which to receive parenting information. This was especially the case for rural parents, which could be due to the fact that rural parents do not have as many community resources (outside of the school) that provide them with parenting support (Haring & Lovett, 2001). Therefore, the important role rural schools can play in providing parents with support and education, as an avenue to facilitate student success, must be communicated to current and future administrators, counselors, and teachers so that they may be aware of how to meet the needs of their specific populations. Rural and urban communities are different. They each have their own unique problems, interests, and community values. School professionals who are currently working within rural communities, or plan to do so in the future, must have the opportunity to study these differences carefully, so that they can build upon the strengths of their community and address areas that would facilitate students’ success.

Furthermore, school professionals could benefit from more training on how to design and implement reliable needs assessments in their schools. Obtaining information regarding parents’ needs and interests could then provide guidance when designing parent education programs. For example, an interest assessment could determine the specific types of support groups (if any) parents would appreciate schools facilitating. Finally, school professionals could profit from obtaining grant-writing skills. It is important for them to be equipped with the tools necessary to successfully find and obtain grant dollars that may be

needed in order to facilitate some of the parent education formats in which the parents within their communities show interest.

A limitation of this study is that some people chose not to participate in the survey, or the completed surveys were not returned, which narrows the generalizability of the results. Also, Dillman (1978) warns that parents who typically complete and return surveys may have more education or a higher socioeconomic status than those who choose not to participate, which could bias the results. It would be beneficial for future research to keep these limitations in mind and to expand this survey to a wider population in the future. Other future implications include studies that explore the relationship between academic success and parental participation in parent education and support programs. Researching other types of programs that schools are using in order to address academic success would also be an important consideration.

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