

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Schools Seek to Channel Parent Involvement

**In well-to-do districts, high-powered families can bolster schools or be too demanding.**

By **Bess Keller**

Schools flush with students' parents showing up and helping out have long been the envy of those where classrooms echo on back-to-school night. But in recent years, incidents reported in the news media have dabbled shadows on that glowing picture of parent involvement, raising issues about whether demanding adults have made teachers' jobs harder and compromised learning.

In some cases, that's true, educators acknowledge. Important cultural shifts that call not only for greater civility but also new understandings between educators and high-powered parents may be occurring.

But an equally important point is that districts and teachers with a wealth of parent power available wouldn't have it any other way. Indeed, many are working on approaches that encourage parent participation. And educators are also devising means of ensuring that parents' contributions to school life are productive, while reining in negative behavior.

"In affluent areas, parents know they should be involved, but absent good guidance and a plan [from the school], they try to do too much," said Joyce L. Epstein, who heads the **Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships** at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "It's important for people to know they can take charge of this topic with research-based approaches ... that work."

Even without the dedicated framework Ms. Epstein advocates, teachers and administrators have hit on ways to foster support between parents and educators.

"The positives of having parent involvement far outweigh the negatives," said Kitty Ryan, an assistant superintendent in the 18,000 Naperville, Ill., district, a well-off suburb of Chicago. "The more, the better."

Naperville is one of the districts in Ms. Epstein's network and has adopted many of its ideas, including school-parent committees devoted to building mutual understanding and support, with no fund-raising attached.

In Naperville schools, parent leaders work on advancing school improvement plans and take part in "data retreats," where schools consider how well students are doing. Schools have been known to

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hold activities on the weekends to make it possible for high-powered parents putting in 90-hour weeks to attend.

Still, tensions arise.

"Parents are very supportive of children's work all the way through their school careers, and that's a blessing," said David G. Griffith, the president of the local teachers' union, the Naperville Unit Education Association, a National Education Association affiliate. "But along with that comes the high expectations of the community and the challenges of meeting those demands."

### **'Contract Mentality'**

Bill Simmer, a parent-relations consultant for Independent School Management, a private-school consulting firm based in Wilmington, Del., argues that the past three decades have seen a shift in the way parents view schools. The shift can throw off educators and lead to conflict if it goes unrecognized and unaddressed.

"Parents are approaching schools with much more of a contract mentality," he said. "Expecting results [from schools, for instance] has come well within the realm of parenting."

The shift may be more pronounced in parents who are paying tuition, but is present in the public sector, too, he said, especially when parents go to such lengths as moving to get their child in a certain school or district.

Mr. Simmer said the trick for educators is to make sure the "contract" that the parents envision has two sides: not only what the parents can expect of the school, but also what the school can expect of the parents. Further, the school needs a steady stream of communication to families showing that it is fulfilling its part of the deal by offering high-quality learning opportunities.

When the difficult moments come, parents may have begun to see the school as a place good for children generally and not just their own child, Mr. Simmer said.

Those moments still require time and care, though.

Ms. Ryan of the Naperville district recalls a parent who was alarmed at the slow speed of her young daughter's reading. The parent was convinced that the school's reading program lacked adequate phonics training, and she brought along a relative who had taught to help make the point in a conference with Ms. Ryan, then the principal of the school.

"I took all the time I could to explain [the curriculum] to her, and I brought in the reading specialist," Ms. Ryan remembered. "I don't know if we ever won this mom over completely, but she remained an active volunteer." The daughter continued to read more slowly than some of her peers, but with good comprehension, the administrator said.

Other educators reinforce Ms. Ryan's point that teachers and administrators have to take time with parents explaining the ways of the school or the classroom.

"The difference between reaction and resolution is usually conversation," even in a district where parents often see themselves as advocates for their children in competitive times, said Wendy

Garner, an English teacher at Amador Valley High School in the upscale San Francisco Bay community of Pleasanton.

The willingness of teachers and parents to resolve differences at Amador Valley High is bolstered by a positive environment that takes time to build, she added. Including parents in important school and district decisions makes a contribution to that, as do numerous means for keeping them up to date.

### **Getting Volunteers**

In Ann Arbor, Mich., Wendy A. Rothman started refining her methods for getting helpful parent involvement when she taught at a Head Start center serving low-income families. Now that she is working as a kindergarten teacher at a school where many of the parents are professionals connected with the University of Michigan, she finds that some of her techniques transfer.

For example, she starts the year offering a roster of opportunities to volunteers that call for showing up weekly, monthly, or once. "When people have busy schedules because they work two jobs or are physicians with 80-hour workweeks, giving people notice far in advance helps," she said. Posting the roster at a back-to-school night, as do all the kindergarten teachers at her school, Wines Elementary, puts positive peer pressure on parents to volunteer.

Ms. Rothman says she finds parents who can come to her classroom weekly are indispensable. "I have learned the curriculum is demanding," she said, "and the more help I have, the better it is."

A case in point is the writing workshops she conducts for her kindergartners. Parent volunteers allow her to provide the adult attention her 20 students need as they are taking beginning steps in getting their stories on paper.

"You have to be a bit of a risk-taker," she acknowledged. "Some parents do have an ulterior motive—their plan is to ... survey the way I'm teaching and hover over their own kid. But I have an infrastructure set up that doesn't allow for that."

Ms. Rothman grounds parents in the writing curriculum beforehand, explaining exactly what they are expected to do and why. And she sometimes intervenes, if a parent hovers.

"I find that gentle urging works great," she said.

When parents step forward not to volunteer but to offer a specific complaint, teachers appreciate being backed by a thoughtful curriculum laid out with detailed goals. That plan, in combination with a system for keeping track of student work, can help focus everyone on what needs to be done, teachers say.

"The more you rely on data, the less you have the problem of parents who are bullies," said Mr. Griffith of the Naperville teachers' union, a former 5th grade teacher.

Another part of the equation is a principal ready to step in with parents who are pressing teachers too hard, and adept at reaching out to families to engage them in the school community.

Here, well-to-do schools seem to have the advantage. Surveyed about their working conditions in 2006, Kansas teachers in high-income schools were far more likely than teachers in low-income

schools to note that their leaders communicated school expectations to parents and gave them opportunities to participate actively in the success of their schools.

"Parent engagement mattered for teachers to be able to get results with kids," said Eric Hirsch, who led the Kansas survey and similar ones in a dozen other states. The pattern observed in Kansas held elsewhere, if not so strikingly, said Mr. Hirsch, the director of special projects for the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based New Teacher Center.

### **Rules on E-Mail**

With communication between parents and teachers an important part of leveraging the advantages of parent involvement, many teachers have welcomed the advent of e-mail, classroom phones, and even cellphones as a way of getting in touch with and hearing from parents. But there's also a dark side to those tools.

"E-mail and the phone make it easier for parents to press their case and go over the top," said Sandra J. Gonnerman, who lives and teaches in San Diego County, Calif.

But just the speed and volume the mediums foster can leave teachers feeling bombarded, even without conflict in view.

"For some teachers, [e-mail] is a very useful tool, but other teachers say it is too much," according to Susan C. Mascaro, the director of staff relations for the 48,600-student Howard County, Md., district, which boasts the state's highest per-capita income.

To address the issue, the district convened a group representing the teachers' union, administrators, and the district that came up with guidelines for e-mail use. The ground rules include one that gives teachers leeway in how long to take before answering and another saying that if teachers feel parents are using e-mail "excessively or uncivilly," they are encouraged to involve administrators.

Ann De Lacy, the president of the Howard County Education Association, an NEA affiliate, said she sees the problem as broader than schools, parents, and e-mail. In a survey this school year of the district's teachers and other staff members, more than half said they had been "harassed" by parents at some point, according to Ms. De Lacy.

"It's not that [teachers] don't want parents involved; they love the involvement, the help, the support," she said. "It's the lack of civility."

Principals and teachers across the country say it is important for BlackBerry-toting, Bluetooth-device-wearing parents to hear the constraints on when teachers can answer messages, and for teachers to tell parents how and when they are willing to communicate.

Steven W. Burr, a social studies teacher at Palisades Charter High School in the tony Los Angeles neighborhood of Pacific Palisades, said he has cut the number of phone calls he receives by putting information such as course calendars on his school Web page, which is also packed with messages and reminders. His philosophy is to lay out as many expectations and requirements as possible—the earlier, the better.

"I typically don't have contact with parents unless a kid's struggling," Mr. Burr said. "And 95 to 97 percent of the interactions are pretty positive."

He said he makes use of a 2-year-old system bought by his school, which enrolls students from wealthy families nearby and others from hardscrabble neighborhoods, to communicate with parents. Called Teleparent, it allows teachers to check off brief alerts listed online about, say, an upcoming test, which are translated into automated telephone messages to students' homes.

Like many other teachers, Mr. Burr doesn't give out his cellphone number. "I'm pretty easy to reach by e-mail, and I understand why parents would want to be contacted quickly," he said. "Most of the time, I'm [in touch] within 48 hours."

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