



**The School–Family Partnership Project:
Preliminary Evidence from Two Washington, DC Schools**

by

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The School–Family Partnership (SFP) project at the University of Illinois at Chicago has been a collaborative site of the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) since December 1995. Over the years, the SFP project has conducted extensive literature reviews to identify the major issues in the area of SFP, as well as existing strategies and materials that facilitate home–school relations. Staff members have also surveyed and worked collaboratively with parents and teachers to identify and develop specific ways to make school–family communication more effective and foster parental involvement in children’s learning. Based on this work, SFP developed a philosophy on school–family partnerships (Patrikakou & Weissberg, in press; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999; Patrikakou, Weissberg, & Rubenstein, 1999) which laid the foundation for constructing a research- and practice-based program and creating an SFP Teacher’s Guide (Rubenstein, Patrikakou, Weissberg, & Armstrong, 1999).

The SFP program focuses on three areas: (a) two-way, home–school communication, (b) parent involvement at home, and (c) parent involvement at school. Under each area, a series of goals that facilitate and enhance home–school relations has been developed. The program includes 38 goals, offering

teachers a specific set of objectives to achieve. Each goal includes a rationale for its importance, several strategies to achieve it, and materials that can make fulfilling the goals easier for teachers.

After a pilot phase in the Chicago sites and the refinement of the SFP Teacher’s Guide, project staff began preparations for disseminating the SFP program in two elementary schools in the Washington, DC area. The ground-work included presentations and workshops to familiarize primary grade teachers and other school personnel with the SFP Teacher’s Guide and the nuts and bolts of its implementation. Community for Learning (CFL) Implementors and Facilitators already at the schools were instrumental in making the initial contacts and assisting in coordinating the presentations and meetings. In August 1999, implementation was launched with a full-day workshop, then a follow-up plan was put in place that includes monthly visits to the sites by members of the Chicago-based SFP team, frequent calls to the schools, and the installation of a toll-free number to facilitate two-way communication and make it easier for the Washington, DC collaborators to reach project staff.

Staff members have also added one more implementation-support component to the already existing CFL structure of Facilitators and Implementors:

the “master teachers.” At each school, one or two teachers who had displayed high levels of interest around SFP issues were recruited as “master teachers.” These individuals utilize their leadership skills and motivation to implement school–family partnerships as a means to encourage and assist their participating colleagues with the process of the SFP program’s implementation.

Participating teachers have reported that the SFP program, with its specific goals, strategies, and materials, has helped them simplify and systematize the process of establishing a home–school partnership, and enhance their communication with parents. They have shown their dedication to improving home–school relations and including the parents’ perspective in their planning in several ways. Information on a recent parent survey (which had a 71% return-rate) has helped teachers better understand the needs of the families they are serving and has shaped current planning efforts to address these needs. For example, 94% of parents said that the best way to contact them is via a phone call at home whereas less than half (44%) reported that a written note is the optimum means of communication. Considering that most school communication is in written-note form, one wonders

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what percentage of notes achieve their intended effects on parents. Participating teachers have initiated efforts to match parent communication preferences in order to facilitate ongoing communication and encourage active parent involvement.

To inform SFP practices and improve upon the SFP manual, staff members are monitoring and documenting the SFP project's degree of implementation (DOI). They have constructed a 61-item, yes-no, DOI questionnaire which is divided into three temporal components, and subdivided according to the three focus areas of the SFP project: two-way communication, parent involvement at home, and parent involvement at school. SFP staff asked participating teachers to complete the first part of the DOI form (which applies to the first phase of implementation and includes 28 items asking teachers if they have implemented the program goals) in order to get a preliminary picture of the implementation process. Such a "mid-program" check will assist staff to further calibrate the program and make it more user-friendly for practitioners.

Initial DOI findings reveal that all teachers provided students and families with necessary contact information and they also gathered contact information and preferences from families. Both these components are necessary in establishing the foundation for two-way communication, which is one of the SFP program priorities. Foundations have also been laid to support an effective set of methods to ensure that parents can support homework completion. For example, all teachers have developed a standard format for students to record, organize, and transport homework assignments. While teachers have begun to facilitate the process of parent involvement at home, there are additional steps that need to be taken such as providing parents with guidelines for the children's TV viewing and engaging families in systematic reading activities. Finally, teachers have achieved a significant level of parent involvement

at school. All of them report that they held an initial parent-teacher conference and also worked to create a classroom environment that welcomes families and supports parent involvement at school. Future priorities include teacher efforts to maximize parents' interest in, and attendance at, classroom-based activities and events, as well as to provide orientation and training for parents so they can act as helpful resources in the classroom.

The SFP team from the University of Illinois at Chicago has been visiting the schools monthly to provide on-site consultation and ask teachers for their program impressions and suggestions for improvement. During those visits, team members have had the opportunity to meet with participants and discuss aspects of the implementation, as well as obtain samples from the materials that teachers have used in their communication with parents. Teachers agree that the various materials have been extremely helpful in providing them with a framework for involving parents. In particular, teachers note that the information gathered from the parent survey was extremely useful for their planning and communicating with parents. Teachers have also responded favorably to the provision of reproducible and ready-to-use materials which make the SFP Teacher's Guide a practitioner-friendly tool. They have also suggested ways to enhance the guide's user-friendliness.

In order to make it easier for teachers to document their outreach efforts, SFP staff have provided them with a teacher portfolio, an expandable folder with monthly organizers, in which they put samples of materials they use in their communications. Teachers have found this record-keeping strategy useful and the SFP team has had the opportunity to obtain a fuller picture of teacher implementation efforts. The wealth of samples in the teacher portfolios indicates that teachers have been actively involved in parent outreach. Teachers have used the SFP ready-to-use sample materials to facilitate parent-

teacher communication, and also have adapted the content and format of the materials to better fit their classroom needs.

By better understanding the process of implementation at these two Washington, DC sites, staff members are striving to create a coordinated set of research-based SFP practices that can be documented more broadly to schools throughout the nation. In their quest to make SFP an integral part of the educational process, they try to cut down the time and effort that teachers need to put into facilitating the SFP process, acknowledging their multiple responsibilities and pressing time demands. Teachers are the glue that holds school-family partnerships together and, with concrete, systematic assistance, they can keep parents informed and view them as partners, maximizing the benefits of education for children.

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