Parent and Community Engagement- The Better Together Approach

Dr. George Otero

Around the world the talk is all about parents and their profound effect on their children’s achievement, well-being and life chances. I have been tracking this important trend for over thirty years. As founder of the Center for Relationalearning, (www.relationalearning.com) I have been promoting the power of positive relationships in teaching and learning and year by year the evidence pours in about the critical role parents play in their child’s learning.

The biggest factor in a child’s learning turns out to be how parents relate to the school, each other, their children and to fellow citizens. This factor can be improved and does not involve money or legislation or even finding and keeping great teachers, all good tools for improving education.

Study after study now support that an educational partnership between school and parents is the biggest factor in a young person’s learning and development. Just last month, one more international study showed parental involvement is the largest single determinant in academic achievement. The overseer of the Program for International Student Assessment says the biggest gains come “when parents read a book with their child, when they talk about things they have done during the day, and when they tell stories to their children.”

The educational power of parents was demonstrated in Australia recently when a group of parents were asked to simply play a board game one night a week for four weeks with their children. The results were stunning! Playing board games at home just once a week helped improve the children’s concentration, social interaction and cooperation with siblings. It also boosted their patience, concentration, teamwork, sharing, communication, sportsmanship, critical thinking skills, maths and spelling. OMD Insights got 125 families around Australia with children five to twelve to down the Nintendo and play board games at least once a week for a month. Family relationships improved and parents were amazed children did not need to be glued to the TV. (Herald Sun, Wednesday, August 19, 2009, page 27.)

Recent research conducted over a ten year period in Chicago, USA (The Essential Supports for School Improvement, Consortium on Chicago School Research, September 2006.) establishes that parent and community ties are one of five “essential supports” to ensure that all children are improving in reading and math. A key finding, schools with strong parental involvement were 10 times more likely to improve substantially in math than schools with weak parental involvement.

Moving beyond the schoolhouse doors, the researches found strong interconnections between schools and their communities. Community factors, like church going and crime are inexorably entwined with school effectiveness. Schools in communities where people did not believe they had the ability to make a positive change were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities where people believed they could. It’s clear, to educate children to their full potential, families, communities and schools must be partners. Families and communities need their schools and schools need their families and communities.

Parent engagement in their child’s learning and development takes many forms. Parent involvement in the school is important yet as indicated in the board game research, parents impact educational opportunity and experience in many diverse ways and in many different environments. Children simply spend much more time with and around their parents, families and communities than they do in school.

Learning manners, values, compassion, hard work, play habits, kindness, religion, and citizenship are all contained in the relationships children experience at home, in the neighborhood, on trips, in church, at a restaurant, visiting other families and participating in sport.

Children learn while living in families, neighborhoods, and communities. All children will learn better and learn more when the school and parents and the wider community find ways to work together, bringing the strengths, experience and resources of all to the educational process.

Again, the national government has been exploring specific strategies that allow schools, parents and communities to work better together educating the young.
The resource, Strengthening Family and Community Engagement in Student Learning, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations documents practices that schools have taken and intend to take that foster a partnership with parents, families and communities to ensure effective education, wellbeing and life chances for all children.

A few of these practical approaches and actions for partnering are:

- Offering opportunities to parents for their own learning and development, including accredited and community based learning, and providing a dedicated learning space for parents.
- Connecting with parents in the early years so that parents can begin to network with other parents, find out about school organization and how children learn from play experiences.
- Reaching out through making personal contact with families and creating opportunity for parents and school staff to regularly talk and meet informally, such as phone calls to parents or after school as parents pick up their children, as well as formally.
- Creating a school environment that welcomes parents. This may include dedicating space within the school ground as a meeting place for parents or creating a community hub.
- Offering opportunities for parents to learn about child development and contemporary teaching practices in areas such as literacy and numeracy and by providing practical suggestions about what parents can do to assist children’s learning.

Any parent reading this article could take this list to the local school and begin actions to work in these ways, or why not simply start a weekly board game evening at your home. Everyone will be better for it.

We need effective schools. We need effective families. We need effective communities. When schools, families and communities work together in education, everybody does well.

Our center, working with associates around the globe have developed a simply framework for families, communities and schools working better together. We call our approach the “whole school community approach.” This framework makes working in partnership easy. It shows any school how to partner education by focusing all conversations planning, activities and relationships on four basic domains; (1) parent and family as primary partners (2) community engagement (3) personalized curriculum and (4) community based extended learning for all. (Creating Powerful Learning Relationships: A Whole School-Community Approach, George Otero, Robert Csoti, David Rothstadt. Hawker Brownlow, Melbourne. 2011.)

The evidence base is growing. Schools and communities that work together can indeed enhance a child’s life chances, wellbeing and achievement. Effective schools have always been reflections of effective families and communities not the other way round. It’s time we get back to working together as necessary partners.

George Otero is an educational consultant who was born and raised in New Mexico. He has worked as a teacher, educator, international consultant, social entrepreneur, and author. He and his wife Susan, operate the Center for RelationaLearning based in Santa Fe, New Mexico where he has worked for many years in Australia and the United Kingdom as well as the United States.