

## SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSALS: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

### PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

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#### *Research Quality*

Research documents a wide range of programs expanding public schools' involvement with communities in which they operate, but is limited to case studies. Variation and fragmentation in the US educational system makes conducting large scale, experimental studies difficult.

#### *Research Findings*

**Past and Present:** Late 19<sup>th</sup> century school-community outreach stressed “Americanizing” immigrants. Today, rising numbers of children in crisis, and curtailed resources for the poor, have prompted attempts to rebuild schools' community involvement in order to improve academic outcomes and stabilize the social environment.

**Catholic Schools as Communities:** Sociologist James Coleman theorized that Catholic schools generated better student outcomes because they were “functional communities” whose members shared an interest in children's welfare. Skeptics noted that Catholic schools serve the academically strongest populations, were voluntary, and were free to expel non-conforming students.

**Full-Service Schools:** More than 800 recent projects have sought to bring social service providers together with schools to create “full-service schools.” Projects were commonly associated with improved attendance, lower substance abuse, and lower dropout rates. Organizational and legal issues have presented obstacles.

**Parental Involvement:** Students whose parents are involved with their education tend to have fewer behavior problems in school, fewer absences, and higher rates of academic achievement and graduation. Traditional methods of soliciting parental involvement can limit information from flowing back to the school, and often fail to reach many families.

**Expanding Participation:** “Open Schools” allow parents and other adults to drop in any time. The model demands flexibility on the part of school personnel, but also provides parents with a sense of ownership of the school and of their children's education.

**Parental Education:** Parent education programs help parents become their children's resident teacher, as well as caretaker, nurturer, and educational advocate. A Houston parental education program serving African-American parents built parenting skills and parents' teaching and coaching skills. It produced strong evaluations from participants, whose children scored significantly higher in math and reading than children of non-participants.

**School-Based Management:** Research is conflicted on achievement effects of school-based management, which delegates policy authority to local teachers, parents and administrators.

**Extracurricular Activities:** Extracurricular offerings inhibit dropping out and connect students, families, schools, and community; dropping them may be unwise in budget-stressed urban schools.

**Community Development:** School systems can be seen as critical economic resources that provide services and employment in order to help rebuild social stability and reduce urban social pathologies. They are a vital social institution, not a drain on the community.

### ***Recommendations***

- Basic parental involvement programs should be enhanced to include multiple opportunities for formal and informal communication between school personnel and parents.
- Parental involvement programs should be developed that embrace the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, racial, and religious diversity of the parents.
- Parental involvement programs should be designed to be sensitive to the special needs of poor parents, single parents, parents with large families, and those families in which both parents work outside of the home.
- Written materials should be provided in the language with which parents are the most familiar.
- Schools and other social organizations wishing to provide school-linked services should carefully consider the scope, funding needs, organizational and professional complexities, and types of services to be offered.
- Funding for new community involvement projects should be kept consistent and stable. The bigger and more complex the project, the greater the need for adequate funding.
- Extracurricular programs should be kept strong to help foster strong parental involvement.
- Educational leaders and policy makers should be encouraged to reconceptualize the public school as a vital economic resource that must be nurtured.

The foregoing is a summary of a chapter in the book *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Information Age Publishing, 2002), edited by Alex Molnar. The full chapter can be viewed at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsI/EPRU/documents/EPRU 2002-101/Chapter 07-Lugg-Final.pdf>