Parents as Partners in Schooling:

This volume reports on research performed by the OECD’s Centre For Educational Research and Innovation on developing partnerships between parents and schools. The study is divided into two parts: the first examines the socio-economic context of educational reform, and the second details the results of individual country studies. The OECD explored policy initiatives related to parent-school partnering in nine developed countries. The countries consist of Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom (England and Wales) and the United States.

The report identifies numerous reasons for an increased interest in partnership development between parents and schools. In particular, the report identifies parents as the first and in at least one country (Ireland), the primary-educators of children. Policy initiatives in each country indicate that there is, at a minimum, a shared responsibility between the school and parents in the educational process. As noted in the OECD report, there is considerable documentation in the literature suggesting that the home environment and parental involvement in teaching positively affects learning. The countries included in the study, with one exception, saw parental involvement as a means of improving lagging academic performance of school children. Japan, the exception, sees parental partnering as a means of encouraging a more balanced educational experience for children. Historically, the Japanese have focused intense effort on academic performance at the expense of physical and creative learning, as well as leisure.

Key to effective partnering is the network of established communication between parents and the school. There is little that legislation can accomplish with respect to requiring parents to communicate with the school. The OECD did, however, identify statutes in most countries that require schools to maintain a flow of information toward the home. This communication takes on numerous forms including report cards, parent-teacher conferences, homework notebooks that parents must sign, and newsletters. In addition, home visits are routine in Japan and Denmark. Canada has introduced modern technology into the communication process whereby schools publish an electronic newsletter and web page that can be read by parents and community members.

According to the OECD, increasing competition and globalization in economic relationships is requiring that students be educated to function in a rapidly changing environment. The rapidity of change affects not only school children, but also parents themselves. Economic competition is requiring that individuals of all ages become life-long learners. The report states that governments in many of the surveyed countries feel that partnerships will provide a convenient opportunity for adults to attend classes in the evening at local school buildings. This allows learning centers to experience economies of scale while aiding the current workforce in developing human capital. Further, the OECD report suggests that there are positive spillovers, especially for disadvantaged families, when parents or guardians are attending the school in the evenings. Obviously, the community as a whole benefits due to an increasing general skill level, but children also see that learning is important to their parents and thus take their own studies more seriously.

A challenge to the educational process in many OECD countries is an increasing heterogeneity of the population. According to the report, the wide diversity of ethnicity, culture and social class is creating an environment in which educational goals and objectives are more difficult to define. The United States, France, and due to reunification, Germany have experienced a considerable increase in the diversity of their student populations in the past twenty years. This has, to some extent, increased the difficulty in maintaining fluent lines of communication and establishing educational objectives. The OECD found that some schools are beginning to develop parental mentoring programs to address this communication problem.

Partnership initiatives are not, however, without critics. The OECD found that teacher unions and, in some countries (e.g., Ireland), the church are opposed to giving increased authority to parents. Particularly disturbing to these actors is the increasing level of legal parental involvement in school governance and curriculum design. According to the report, many teachers are concerned that education is being deprofessionalized and that their careers are subject to the whims of parents. Teachers and administrators also feel uneasy about parents visiting the classroom. Also disturbing is the finding that parent participation in education partnerships is primarily limited to affluent and well-educated parents. Given an increasingly diverse student population, there
is concern that committees heavily weighted with parents will elect to pursue policies that benefit middle and upper class children at the expense of less fortunate children.

The OECD report makes the point that parent-school partnerships are not fully developed. It is a process that will require time. The countries involved in the study are establishing policy efforts to ensure that children have the support both of parents and schools in the educational process. The report is thorough in its coverage of the topic and should be read by those involved in fashioning public policy and educational pedagogy.

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