

School-Parent Collaboration: A Labor of Love

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ust take a deep breath. Relax. That's it. Notice the warmth of your skin. Feel the sense of calm and peacefulness growing inside your mind. You are now relaxed, calm and ready to face new challenges. This little article is about such a challenge: collaborating with the school with the goal of improving your child's educational experiences and achievements.

Imagine you want to talk to someone at your child's school. It might be hard because maybe you didn't enjoy school all that much when you were a student and you're not sure who to talk to. Or perhaps you're concerned about what you might hear about your child's grades or behavior. That's okay, just take another deep breath and keep relaxing. Schools are a little different now than when we were young. Schools in the 21st century actually welcome parent involvement. As you feel your inner calmness, focus on the fact that your child's school really wants to work with you.

The word "collaborate" originally comes from Latin. It means "to labor together or work together." If you grew up in the 1970s or 1980s, you may not have noticed your school working together with your parents. Back then, school philosophy generally was a bit different. More like: "You drop off and pick up your kids. We'll take it from there."

But that was then and this is now, and now not only does your school want to work with you, it even has a designated person (aka: school counselor) available whose job description includes "collaborate with parents." You can take advantage of the school counselor's job description and contact him or her any time to begin working together. Of course, you can contact anyone at the school: the principal, teachers, or other administrative personnel. But personally, we think the school counselor is an excellent initial and ongoing contact for parents.

The school counselor at your children's school might offer some of the following activities to facilitate parent-school collaboration:

- Parent information night
- Communication/networking opportunities for parents
- Academic planning programs for parents and students
- Classes on parent and family education
- Invitations to parents for one-on-one conferencing
- Assessment results interpretation for parents
- Resource referral information for parents
- Exploration of college/career options with parents and students

Sometimes, despite interesting school activities, it can be hard to find the energy to become involved in your children's school. After a long day at work, it can be tough to get off the couch or find time among your many other household and parenting duties. It's easy to let the opportunities slip away. It takes time, energy and often money for you to be involved in your children's school activities.

Fortunately, the payoff to getting involved in your children's school is significant. Research shows that parental involvement and collaboration with schools helps children perform better academically. When parents work with schools and school counselors, their children get more A's and B's and fewer C's, D's and F's.

But that's not all. When parents work with schools, their children tend to have greater social

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adjustment. They get along better with fellow students and teachers. They spend less time in the principal's office and more time in the classroom. They communicate more effectively, and believe it or not, sometimes they do their homework more willingly.

However, parent-school collaboration requires tenacity because things don't always go perfectly. Your child might be embarrassed to be seen with you, or the teachers or counselor or principal won't recognize you. Both of these possibilities can leave people feeling disrespected and discouraged. The truth is, there's no guarantee a good time will be had by all. But we'd like to urge you to hang in there. Parent-school collaboration takes time and work. But after all, that's what the word means: to labor together.

As you work with your child's school, something almost magical happens. You get to glimpse the remarkable. You might have to watch closely, but sometimes you get to see learning happening right in front of your eyes. And sometimes, as you sit by your child, you can see her trying just a little harder, and you know she's more determined and confident, just because you're sitting there, in the right place at the right time. Other times, you'll see the sparkle in your son's eye as he gets to show off a little for you. That sparkle makes you proud about getting off the couch and down to your child's school. Your children (or even the school) may not say thanks directly. But if you get involved, you certainly will earn the school's gratitude in the long run for being the kind of parent who cares enough to engage in the labor of love that we call parent-school collaboration.

John and Rita Sommers-Flanagan are both counselor educators at the University of Montana. They wish you the best as you venture forth into your child's school.