Revisiting Family Involvement
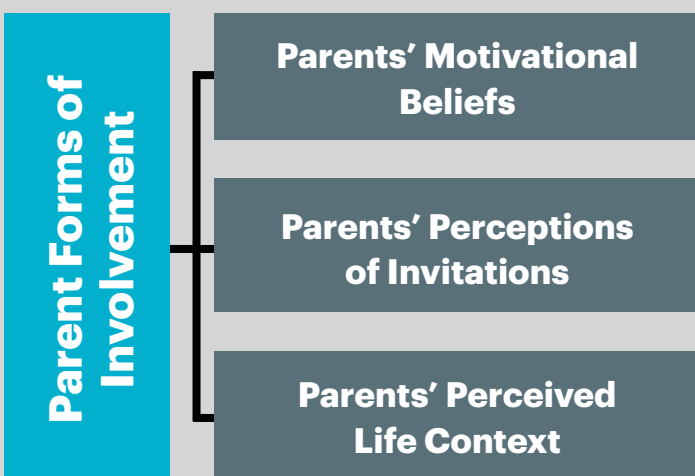## A Practice Brief for All School Personnel
By **Meca Williams-Johnson, PhD**

Reimagining Involvement to Tackle the Long-Term Effects of COVID Together

- *Why Family Involvement Matters:* Family involvement is significant to learning and student achievement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Daniel-White, 2002; De Gaetano, 2007). Parents and guardians who give educational support at home and in school, while working together with teachers, increase the chances of their children thriving academically (Baker et al., 2016; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Park & Holloway, 2017; Orozco, 2008).
- *How to Do It:* As digital learning tools are now a major part of the educational landscape, schools will need to use online tools to transform parental relationships during the age of COVID-19. Messages from schools should consistently highlight ways to meet collaborative expectations and the benefits of doing so (Jones, 2003). While COVID-19 has received worldwide attention, there is a disproportionate impact of COVID on families and communities of color. School personnel must communicate how they will identify community issues that influence classroom culture as a way to reach collaboration between home and school.

Consequences of COVID & Family Involvement Connection

Several school districts report a considerable number of students who are not showing up or making little if any progress within virtual school options (Goodnough, 2020). Additionally, districts with concentrated levels of poverty report only half of the students engaged in online classes (Kraft & Simon, 2020). Schools are dependent upon family members to facilitate online learning environments; therefore, it is a critical time to reimagine methods to increase family involvement.

To further explain facets that inform family members' decisions to become involved, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) constructed a parental involvement model to illustrate the psychological underpinnings of parents' thinking that lead into action (see figure).

Parent Forms of Involvement

- Parents' Motivational Beliefs
- Parents' Perceptions of Invitations
- Parents' Perceived Life Context

(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997)

Summary of Family Involvement Model

Below is a brief description of the parental involvement model and how it relates to the COVID crisis.

- **Beliefs.** Family members' beliefs about their parental responsibility and ability to assist with educational tasks are factors that will influence when and how they choose to become involved. These internal factors support family members' motivational beliefs.
- **Invitations.** Next, messages families receive from school invitations are powerful. As we are all discovering the impact of COVID on our emotional well-being, student learning, and classroom assessments, it is reasonable for schools' invitations to reflect compassion.
- **Life Context.** Lastly, the perceived time and energy to work on building the relationships with school stakeholders is critical when initiating involvement. The logistics of finding time to join in school meetings, while juggling hectic schedules that are likely impacted by COVID, represents how teachers and families must negotiate the life context.

These 3 facets aid in constructing family members' perceptions of their role in the educational process that translates into forms of involvement. Given the current COVID crisis, it would be helpful for schools to discuss the goals and expectations for students and listen to family members' views concerning their children's wellbeing and success in blended learning formats (i.e., online, face-to-face, and hybrid). Clear discussion with families could help schools to better understand what facets in the model cause greater concern for families and how schools can address issues in each of the areas.

Evidence That Family Involvement & Collaboration Within Schools Matter

Increasing family involvement was a challenge for schools pre-COVID crisis, yet the current COVID disruption allows us the opportunity to reimagine ways to collaborate. An innovative study by Oswald et al. (2018) found that factors such as parents' education level and satisfaction with how the school interacts with parents predicted greater parental involvement. Exploring families' expectations and satisfaction through short surveys or small focus groups would be one way to re-engage families who are struggling with COVID restrictions and online learning.

Work by Warren et al. (2018) involved parents of students in kindergarten through 12th grade, and results showed that parents' involvement positively predicted students' grade point averages and improved school climate. Similarly, Wilder (2014) found a positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement that was consistent across grade levels and ethnic groups. These studies also found that parental involvement must extend beyond homework assistance and involve forming deeper relationships to continually engage parents. In creating the new normal for schooling, families and educators will need to strategize blended learning plans for handling future disruptions and multiple levels of learners in the home.

Key References

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Recommendations for School Personnel

1. Promote safety and concern for students' health and socio-emotional well-being as a consistent message to families and teachers.

2. School districts should make every attempt to reach out to the families who may seem removed from the process of school involvement. Consider using positive video-recorded messages or early morning, late evening, or Saturday meeting times to explore options family members might be available.

3. Once engaged, relationships with families need to be sustained with regular communication (e.g., phone calls). Contact families regularly and often. Many family members need to feel that there is someone they can communicate with concerning their child(ren). The first contact with families should *not* involve negative news. Consider family liaisons that can work as peer influencers.

4. Create opportunities for families and students to establish short-term goals together. Track progress through an online app, send reminders, and send encouraging text messages about reaching specific goals to both the student and their family.

5. Model approaches to coping in this new normal while everyone is living under the pressures of the COVID pandemic. Practicing mindfulness and listening to concerns will help as people are making decisions for post-COVID contacts and activities.

6. Host student-led conferences and invite families. These can be hosted online or in person. Students can discuss their assignments and test scores with family members with the teacher present. Families will have increased interest to hear their children describe their learning and scores. Teachers can take time to learn more about students' backgrounds, academic goals, future plans, and family support systems.

7. Be willing to host and offer sessions on diversity, equity, inclusion, immigration, and language differences. Ask family members to serve as panelists along with others who can contribute to the conversation.

8. Offer families sessions and workshops to discuss critical issues involving academic achievement, school climate, and extra-curricular options for students under COVID safety precautions, as well as strategies for facilitating online learning from home.

These recommendations are related to the three facets in the parental involvement model, but most specifically to perceptions of invitations.