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An Internship Experience in Educational Leadership  
at Pyne Poynt Family School  
Camden, New Jersey

by  
Carol W. Jones

A Masters Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirement of the  
Masters of Arts Degree in the Graduate School of  
Rowan University  
April 23, 1998

Approved by

Professor

Date Approved April 30, 1998

## ABSTRACT

Carol W. Jones

An Intern Experience at  
Pyne Poynt Family School  
1997-1998

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Theodore B. Johnson  
Master of Arts in School Administration

The purpose of this study was to improve parent involvement in the school as a result of an increase in school to home communication through the Parent Network.

In order to identify barriers to parent involvement in the school, both parents and teachers were surveyed. The parent survey, written in English and Spanish, was designed to ascertain their attitudes toward the school. The responses of sixty-six parents were analyzed. It was found that although a majority of the parents had a positive attitude toward the school, most felt that they did not have skills that could be helpful. Fifty-five teachers responded to a questionnaire regarding their attitudes toward parent involvement in the school. It was found that, contrary to parents' beliefs, teachers believed not only that parent involvement in the school was important, but also that parents had skills that could be beneficial to the school.

Three barriers to school to home communication were revealed: 1) a poor in-house system of distribution; 2) student failure to take flyers home; 3) parents' failure to keep promises to attend school activities. Although there was an increase in the number of parent volunteers, findings were inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of the Parent Network as a means of improving parent involvement in the school.

## MINI-ABSTRACT

Carol W. Jones

An Intern Experience at  
Pyne Poynt Family School  
1997-1998

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Theodore B. Johnson  
Master of Arts in School Administration

The purpose of this study was to improve parent involvement as a result of an increase in school to home communication through the Parent Network. It was found that there were barriers which contributed to the breakdown in communication. The effect of the Parent Network was inconclusive.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The support and encouragement of others were essential to the completion of this project. It is with heartfelt gratitude that I extend these words of appreciation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Focus of the Study

#### Introduction

A 1994 move by the United States Congress was the bipartisan passing of Goals 2000: Educate America Act. In addition to the call for higher standards by increasing teacher professional development opportunities, Goals 2000 recognized the importance of the role of parents in supporting their children's academic endeavors. In recent years, the issue of parental involvement has been the topic of much discussion and research.

Camden City Public School District has more than 19,000 students enrolled in its schools. The majority of the money that is used to operate the school district comes from state and federal sources. A requirement attached to receiving these funds is that parents and community must not only be informed about the funds coming into the district's schools, but also be invited and allowed to participate in the planning and determination of how these funds will be spent. Further, despite a district goal to increase the participation of parents in its schools, and the development of strategies that have been successful at a number of sites, parent involvement at the school under study is sporadic and limited. Parental visits to the school are often in response to a discipline problem, which is a negative experience. Although students are given notices to take home and inform parents of concerns and upcoming school activities, the response is generally poor. Parents often do not return requested forms in a timely fashion. Repeated efforts and incentives must be



provided in order to generate satisfactory results. The intern believes there may be several reasons for this problem.

First, this could be due in part to a breakdown in communication. Written communications to parents are generally given to the students to take home. The students at the school are adolescents who may not be reliable couriers for the flyers. Unless they perceive some immediate impact on their personal issues, they might not take the information home. Second, parents may not understand the importance of the need for them to be involved in their adolescent children's school. The intern has learned through discussions with some parents that there is a feeling that older children do not need to have their parents involved as much as the younger ones do. Consequently, parents who had been involved when their children were in the primary grades, stop once they get to higher grade-levels. Additional reasons for the limited participation need to be explored during the course of this study.

Because of the complexities that exist as a result of the numerous and varied families involved, the question of how to establish viable home-school relationships in a depressed urban area remains an enigma for the school under study. In an effort to increase parent involvement in the school, the intern has developed a multi-level home-school communication design intended to raise the awareness of the educational family and to pique the interest of parents toward more frequent positive interactions. Therefore, the focus of this study is the implementation of a Parent Network, and the participation of the school family in the process.

As a result of the establishment of the Parent Network at Pyne Poynt Family

School, the following outcomes are anticipated:

Project Product Outcome Statement

Parents will become more involved in school activities as a result of increased school to home communication through the Parent Network.

Purpose of the Study

As a result of the Parent Network, an increase in parent efficacy and participation will be observed. The school will fulfill its mandate to have parental involvement, and school climate will improve.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the specific reasons for the breakdown in communication between home and school, identify parents' feelings and attitudes about the school, and to provide opportunities for parents to have positive experiences in their children's school affairs.

Definitions

The following definitions and terms are an integral part of this study:

The **Parent Network** refers to the group of volunteer parents who will meet for the purpose of developing strategies to reach out to other parents. These parents will also play a role in actually calling and informing other parents about school-related issues.

**Homeroom parent** refers to a parent who has volunteered to serve as a contact person and representative for the parents of students in a particular class. The homeroom parent will serve on the Parent Network, and may assist the homeroom teacher with fundraisers, field trips, or other activities, as needed.

**Parent involvement** refers to any activity of parents in which they respond to a

request or need of the school or child. This could mean signing and returning forms, assisting the child at home, and/or participating in or attending school functions.

**Community/School Coordinators (CSC)** refers to the two individuals who are responsible for making home visitations upon the request of administrators or teachers. They also arrange parent training activities and coordinate parent attendance at school district activities. At Pyne Poynt, they are housed in the Parent Center and are supposed to provide a nurturing environment for parents who visit the school for student disciplinary reasons or to participate in meetings or workshops. The community school coordinators serve as liaisons between the school and the students' home and community.

**The Parent Center** is a room that has been designated for parent use. When parents must visit the school for various reasons, they are sent to the Parent Center where they can wait in comfort until school staff, administrators or teachers, can meet with them. Here, they might get a cup of coffee, a snack, and caring conversation. This is also a place where they may receive information about available resources or to discuss issues which concern them and their children.

#### Limitations of the Study

There are several situations which may have an impact on the current study. First, data collection through parent questionnaires may be incomplete or inconclusive due to the number of responses required from parents. This may occur if the questionnaire does not reach home because of student negligence or parents' lack of the knowledge of how to complete them as directed. Second, the community/school coordinators are primarily responsible for parent outreach activities at the school. The intern is required to

coordinate all activities through these individuals. Because of their methods of implementing activities, the intern believes that their behavior may cause some of the school's failure to achieve an increase in parent involvement. Although the community/school coordinators plan a number of training and informational activities for parents during the year, it appears that sufficient time and energy are not expended in order to adequately notify and motivate parents to participate. Letters and flyers are often not sent out in a timely fashion, follow up calls or person to person contacts are limited, and methods of distribution are often haphazard. In addition, when parents arrive at the parent center, the greeting and attention given to them may not be as inviting and nurturing as it could be due to the CSC's preoccupation with their own personal issues. There appears to be an ongoing personality conflict between the two CSC's which may result in confusion and failure to follow through with individual responsibilities regarding the implementation of various tasks.

#### Intern Setting

Camden city lies on the eastern shore of the Delaware River, directly across from Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. The land borders of the city are the suburban towns of Gloucester City, Merchantville, and Pennsauken. To the casual visitor, the city is just another blighted urban area, but it is a city with a rich historical past. One of the earliest recorded settlers is William Royden who is said to have landed in 1608. Later, a three hundred acre tract of land, purchased from the Indian Chief Arasapha by the King of England, was given to William Cooper in 1682. Cooper built a house on this land which he called Pyne Poynt House because of the abundance of pine trees growing there. Many

years later, a school bearing this name would be built across the road. In addition, the names Royden and Cooper remain prominent in the city. There is a Royden Street in South Camden and a Cooper Medical Center in the downtown section of the city. The city landmarks keep alive the memories of these notable first residents.

Evidence that education was a consideration is recorded as far back as the Revolutionary War era. In its plans, the town identified a site for a schoolhouse. The early schools were private and students were required to pay tuition in order to attend. In 1843, the first public schools opened in Camden. The following year, the first meeting of the Camden Board of Education was held. During this time, school board members also served as school principals. Some of the city's schools still bear the names of the prominent educators and civic leaders. The names Bonsall, Mickle, and Feters are just a few that remain from the past.

Camden's location was of prime importance for many years. The connection to waterways and roadways made it a natural hub for transportation, commerce and industry. Work was always available because of the shipbuilding industry, RCA, and Campbell Soup corporations. The city thrived from industry and the activity of its business districts along Federal Street, Broadway, and Haddon Avenue. It was the County Seat and a powerful political entity.

A city with a population of 124,555 residents in 1950, the 1990 census reported that Camden's population had dropped to 87,492, with approximately one-third of the residents children 17 years old and under. The reduction in population has been attributed to urban flight and a loss of jobs. Since 1970, there has been a steady decline in the

number of businesses that were located in the city. Campbell Soup permanently closed its facilities in 1990, and RCA was taken over by General Electric which laid off more than 1,000 employees. This left the once thriving city depressed and totally economically deprived.

Today, Camden is one of the poorest cities in the nation. Of the 87,492 residents, only approximately 16,000 pay taxes. This makes the city and the school district almost exclusively dependent upon the state for their survival.

### School Background

Pyne Poynt Family School is located in the North Camden section of the city. The school was built in 1957 and originally named Pyne Poynt Junior High School (Dowart & Mackey, 1976). The enrollment at that time was 1,084 students in grades 7 through 9. Although the school was racially mixed at that time, the majority were African American. In 1972, the school became Pyne Poynt Middle School, including grades 6 through 8. The curriculum underwent changes at that time in order to offer students more opportunity to explore various subjects. During the 70's the school suffered from severe overcrowding, with twice as many classes as it has today. In 1992, the school became Pyne Poynt Family School. The enrollment has declined significantly to 584 students. Grade-levels range from 4 through 8, with more Hispanic students on roll than African-American students. 71% of the students list Spanish as the first language spoken at home, with 29% speaking English.

In addition to the required curriculum of core subjects and related areas, Pyne Poynt provides several other support services. To help students with their academic and test readiness skills, tutoring is provided by Rutgers University students and selected Pyne

Poynt students. Peer mediation is available as needed for students who have conflicts with each other. Extracurricular activities include a range of intramural sports, student newspaper, student government, Dance and Modeling Club, the annual Cooper River Three Mile Run, Grade 8 Student Volunteers, and the glee club. The staff is comprised of 75 professional and support personnel.

In 1969, a scathing report from the New Jersey State Department characterized Pyne Poynt Junior High School as a “demoralized institution.” Over the years, the school has evolved from an institution with an extremely high rate of staff absenteeism and a negative image to one that has a much improved image and attendance rate among staff. This change can be attributed to a committed and stable staff, and the leadership of the principal, Vernon Dover.

The mission statement of Pyne Poynt Family School is as follows:

“The Pyne Poynt Family School endeavors to provide all students with an opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. We are dedicated to the advancement of our students in their academic, personal, social, emotional, physical, and aesthetic growth by providing a caring and safe environment through the combined efforts of the school, parents, community and Board of Education.” The staff continuously strives to fulfill its mission for the benefit of the students.

### Importance of the Study

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the study is threefold: to determine the reason for the possible breakdown in communication, to identify parents’ feelings and attitudes about the school, and to provide opportunities for parents to have positive

experiences in the school life of their children. This study is important because it supports the National Goals and may be a basis for the empowerment of parents in the school community. The responses collected from the parent questionnaires may offer significant information regarding how parents feel about coming to the school and interacting with school personnel. Answers to important questions about parents' perceptions may be used to initiate a dialogue between parents and school personnel that could build a bridge to understanding. Further, while there is a great deal of research about parent involvement, so many issues influence urban parents' ability to manage their lives and survive the daily turbulence, it would be beneficial to discern what impact, if any, a small percentage of parents might have in getting the word out and possibly motivating others to become more active in the school.

#### Organization of the Study

The next four chapters of this study will provide details regarding the basis of and methods utilized in the study. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature that is pertinent to the issue of parental involvement. Strategies that have been used or recommended will be discussed as they relate to the current study. Chapter 3 will provide a discussion of the research design of the study. Included in this chapter will be descriptions of the research instruments, sample, data collection approach, and plan for analysis. Chapter 4 will be a discussion of the research findings and an evaluation of them. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide conclusions that are drawn from the project and implications for further study. It will report the changes and growth that occur in the intern and the organization as a result of the study.



## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Improving parent participation has long been a goal of the Camden City School District. Because most of its students have been identified as being both economically and academically below standards, the district has been the recipient of money from both state and federal sources. These dollars are intended to be used to provide the resources that are desperately needed to help these students to be academically successful.

As part of an educational improvement initiative, the state attached a requirement that the determination of how monies would be spent would come from each school site. An educational improvement team consisting of all of the stakeholders, administrators, teachers, parents and community members had to be established. Involvement of parents was a mandate. More recently, with the rebirth of the Abbott case and its resolution again on the side of the urban districts in New Jersey, much needed money was restored. However, along with the promise of these funds came the mandate for parent involvement in the planning and decision-making on how this money should be spent.

Finally, on the federal level, Goal 8 of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, sets the tone for the nation:

“Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement

and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.” Further, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title I, Part A provided to enable districts to offer supplemental support to eligible students, advocates partnerships between school, home and community. Recipient districts and schools must document the on-going involvement of parents on all levels, planning through implementation.

To date, the school under study continues to have limited parental involvement on a regular basis. Whether it is in response to a flyer requesting participation on mandated decision-making committees, serving as guest readers, or participating in workshops and programs planned by parent coordinators, significant numbers of parents are not attending. A recent open house during American Education Week yielded fewer than twenty parents from a student body of over five hundred.

It is within this context that the intern searches the literature in order to find out what researchers have uncovered regarding the lack of parent participation in schools, to discern what can be done to improve the situation. It is hoped that relevant information can be translated into a plan to provide opportunities for parents to have positive interactions with the school on behalf of their children.

Involving parents in schools has been identified as a key factor in the educational success their children. In an often perplexing society that is undergoing profound changes, the needs of children are often overlooked. Working parents struggle with limited time and resources, while others are caught in responding to very basic demands for survival. Despite the obstacles, it is clear that parents’ participation in their children’s learning is

important. Children whose parents are involved in their formal education have better grades, test scores, attitudes, behavior, and long-term academic achievement than those with disinterested mothers and fathers (Peterson, 1989). That a strong correlation exists between community involvement and school-wide achievement and that any kind of parent participation is helpful to student achievement is corroborated by several research projects. In a study of elementary and secondary schools, researchers from Roosevelt University in Chicago found that there was higher student achievement in schools that had parental support, high levels of communication between school and parents, and provisions for social services for families in need (Wheeler, 1992).

A common strand in all of the research reviewed is that everyone benefits from the home/school connection - first and foremost the students, then, the schools, the families, and the communities in which they live. Schools benefit from the varied insights that families offer into the variety of experiences and approaches to life. Families and communities benefit because as they become more aware of what is going on in the schools, they can encourage the children to strive for better attitudes about school and to raise their aspirations. In addition, this participation helps parents and the community to understand what the educational community expects of the children (Graziano et al 1997). "Supportive parental involvement increases the probability that students will succeed academically" (Coulombe, 1995). The word supportive is significant because, according to Coulombe (1995), if it is forced, there may be adverse responses.

In order to understand the concept of parent involvement, it is important to explore the context in which the children and their parents are found. In today's changing

society, the word “parent” has taken on a broader meaning than it has in the past. According to Patricia Wheeler, educational research and evaluation consultant in California, “Parent” is that older individual who takes a special interest and helps that teenager to develop and understand life values and to build self-confidence.” This older person can be members of the school staff, community members, senior citizens, a relative including older brothers and sisters and employers (1992). This inclusion of others in the role of parent as caregiver and supportive adult or both may occur when biological parents are unable to provide the necessary physical and emotional support for their children.

Duncan (1992) takes this idea further in pointing out how the diversity in today’s family structures has created an entirely new set of issues to confound an already difficult situation. The long- held assumptions about the meaning of “home,” “family,” and “parents” as being solid and well-defined has increasingly come in conflict with the meaning of “household,” “remarried family,” and “custodial parent”(Duncan, 1992). These new living styles can cause confusion for all parties involved: the child, the various parental figures, and the school. The child may not be certain of who the “real” parents are. The parents may not know what their role with the school should be, and the school personnel may be confused about who the child’s main support figures are (Duncan, 1992). As a result, the idea of parent involvement in school may be a difficult concept for these individuals to grasp as they struggle to develop a basic understanding of who they are within the context of their lifestyles. Nevertheless, whenever a significant adult is involved with or on behalf of a child in matters relevant to school, it may be considered parent involvement.

In the broadest sense, there are two kinds of parent involvement which are common. The first is called school-based. This kind of participation involves parents attending parent-teacher conferences and functions, and receiving and responding to written communication from the teacher. According to a 1982 survey, most teachers send notices home or talk to parents on the phone, in person, or on open school night (Ascher, 1988). The other kind of parent participation is called home-based. This type of involvement features parents interacting with their children to complete activities at home, or teachers visiting the home of a student. Because of the time factor, it is likely that teachers will involve parents in school-based activities more frequently than those that are home-based. Within this framework, Epstein (1995) has synthesized the results of numerous studies and has identified six types of caring involvement practices, their challenges and redefinitions of the underlying principles: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with community.

As school personnel attempt to get parents involved, they often become frustrated because they cannot always discern what parents are doing on behalf of the children. This revelation occurred during the Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project. The schools participating in the project employed numerous activities and strategies such as newsletters, social events, parenting classes and workshops in order to improve parent involvement as part of the requirement for receiving funds. Teachers complained that there was no significant improvement. Upon investigating this concern, researchers determined that there was no clear understanding of what parent involvement meant. If school personnel could not observe parents attending meetings and training or know that parents were helping with

homework, they felt that they were not getting high levels of parent involvement. These activities require high levels of commitment and participation on the part of parents. Consideration of this perspective resulted in an identification of four types of parents which fall along a continuum of involvement in support and participation (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). At one extreme are parents who are both *supportive* and *active*. These parents are caring and encouraging at home as well as active participants at school functions. Then there are parents who are *supportive* of their children, but are *inactive* at the school level. Next, there are parents who are *not supportive*, ignoring and/or abusing the child at home, while *active* in school functions, usually when food is involved. The child. Finally, at the farther extreme of the continuum are the parents who are both *not supportive* and *inactive*. These parents may be abusive, and never communicate with the school. They may have serious personal issues and generally put their needs before their children's (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). Understanding the types of parents broadens the perspective that school personnel have of the task of motivating parents to participate.

Much of the research indicates that parent involvement is greater during the primary and elementary years, although there is a need for continued parent participation during the middle school years (Davis, 1991; Lewis, 1986 in Jackson and Cooper, 1992). Initially, parents tend to limit their involvement in the schools of their adolescent children because, developmentally, adolescents are at a time in their lives when they are attempting to separate from their families and form closer relationships with their peers. As they move toward independence, they are greatly influenced by forces outside of their families. Secondly, as these changes take place, parents do not always know how to respond to the

change in the moods and other behaviors of their adolescent children. As situations become more problematic, it is no doubt easier to let the schools become more and more responsible for these children (Jackson & Cooper, 1992). However, since the choices they make and the values they form will effect their future, they need to be under the continued guidance of their parents and other older adults.

This is especially true for those students who have been labeled “at-risk.” These students are those who have already dropped out or are in danger of dropping out of school. They are likely to leave school lacking the social, academic, and vocational skills to reach their potential and to survive today and in the future (Davis & McCaul in Davis, 1991). Historically, minority and poor children have automatically been placed in this category. Nevertheless, according to Peterson (1989), “at-risk” is not limited to minority student, student in single-parent household, or student in poverty. Academic achievement may also be inhibited because of households with certain characteristics such as non-English speaking, drastically different cultural traditions, little parent-child interaction, or those which do not maintain a consistent family composition (Ascher, 1987).

. In addition to the effects that adolescent development has on parent involvement, there are other barriers and challenges to this endeavor. One of the major barriers is that some parents are fearful or unable to come to school for a variety of reasons. As a result, school staffs which may have attempted many times to reach out to parents may feel that it is useless and not be willing to expend money, time, and energy at what they feel is a lost cause. Staffs’ perceived lack of parent interest (Ascher, 1987) and school personnel’s advance decision that single and working parents cannot be relied on or approached

(Epstein as cited in Graziano et al. 1997) add to the dilemma. Further, the NJEA Review reports that the school's very structure may block parent involvement opportunities. Scheduled time for activities are often inconvenient for families. Sometimes the staff has limited time and resources. Written communication such as newsletters and notes may not be written in the family's functional language. The size of the school may be overwhelming, and it may be unclear to family members whom to contact for various concerns or problems. Sometimes, as a result of little training, educators see parent involvement as a threat to their position as professionals. This is often a result of limited training and or positive experiences with family participation (Graziano et al., 1997).

According to Finders and Lewis (1994), educators have made assumptions about why parents are involved which are vastly different reasons that parents identified. These are assumptions based on an "institutional perspective." First, it is often said that "Those who need to come, don't come." This attitude is based on a "deficit model" that assumes that parents should be involved so that the school staff can remediate them. This shows a lack of respect for the knowledge that parents potentially bring to the educational community. Although their knowledge may not be the same as that of the professionals, it might be valid and necessary information that may be useful. On the other hand, a corresponding assumption is that parents who are involved hold a common core of knowledge that is equal to the institution's. As a result, it is believed that they, unlike their counterparts, do not need to be educated on how to support the school's instructional program.

Parents from socially and culturally diverse backgrounds have often been



considered uninterested or uncaring when it comes to developing positive home-school relationships. However, what has been found is that their lack of involvement is based on legitimate, but unacknowledged reasons such as inability to communicate in the language of the institution, limited time and money, and cultural conflicts between the expectations of their community and the school (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

Although there are numerous problems which can impede the effective development of home/school connections, these barriers can be overcome when the educational community takes the initiative to seriously undertake the challenge (Peterson, 1998). Most other researchers concur. Parents will become involved when school personnel, under the leadership of the principal, make a consistent and organized effort to reach out to them. It is essential, however, that the institution take the parents where they are by first identifying their issues and needs (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). To accomplish this, the notion of parent involvement may need to be redefined to include parents' efforts to improve themselves, since in the long run, any positive growth on the part of the parent will benefit the children.

An example of how allowing parents to identify their needs and structuring programs around them is the Arizona At-Risk Program. They began to achieve success with their parent involvement endeavors when they responded to parents' need for English As a Second Language classes. The excitement that parents experienced as they began to read in Spanish and English was proof of the effectiveness of this strategy. The level of commitment, willingness and ability to be involved are most important.

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether establishing a line of

communication through a network of homeroom parents and providing more guidance and opportunities for them to meet with concerned staff would raise their consciousness and improve their involvement in school. This study will concentrate on school-based parent involvement. Since the focus of many of the studies was first to identify parents' needs and attitudes, the present study will do the same.

In order to encourage parent involvement, various methods of communication must be employed. While parents might not easily respond to invitations from school personnel, requests from other parents may be more readily accepted. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been developed:

It was hypothesized that parent involvement would improve as a result of the establishment of the Parent Network.

## CHAPTER 3

### Design of the Study

#### Description of the Research Design

The district in which this study was conducted has always encouraged parental involvement in its schools. Parent participation has always been high in the elementary schools, substantially lower in the middle schools, and extremely low in the high schools. In order to identify why there was a lack of parent involvement, the intern conducted surveys and discussions. Since the Parent Center was often a waiting room for visiting parents and the hub of parent activities in the school, the Community School Coordinators had an integral role in the level of parent participation. Therefore, the intern visited the Parent Center several times each week in order to provide support in the form of relevant information and technical assistance to the coordinators. In addition, a Parent Network was developed as a strategy to improve school to home communication and parent participation.

The Parent Network was a group of volunteer parents/guardians who expressed an interest in assisting in the improvement of the school. The goal of the Parent Network was three-fold: 1) to assist in broadening the communication to other parents and community members, rather than relying solely on children; 2) to assist with school activities, as needed; 3) to attend meetings to ensure the parent perspective in school-level decision-making, and to improve parental knowledge and understanding. To accomplish this,

parents were invited to participate on a school committee, attend school activities such as American Education Week, and workshops sponsored by the coordinators. Initially, a group of parent volunteers consented to accept this responsibility.

#### Description of the Development and Design of the Research Instruments

In an effort to identify the attitudes of parents toward the school, and the attitudes of teachers toward the involvement of parents, two separate questionnaires were developed by the intern. The parents' survey was composed of ten statements which required a Yes or No response, and was written in both English and Spanish to accommodate the languages of the predominant populations. The English and Spanish surveys were on one sheet, front and back. The questions were designed to assess parents' feelings about coming to the school, their perceptions about the attitudes of the school staff toward them, and how informed they feel about what is going on in their children's classes and in the school in general. In order to determine whether the statements would capture the essence of parents' concerns and feelings, staff members who lived in the community were asked to review them and give feedback regarding the need for additions or deletions. A biographical questionnaire was included in which the respondents were asked to indicate the number of children in their family, the number of children attending the school under study, grade-levels of the children, and whether they had ever participated in activities at their children's school. Since it was believed that the community/school coordinators at the school had a different perspective and could add insight to the issue at hand, the intern requested that they critically review the survey and make suggestions for improvement. This was done, and modifications were made before it

was distributed.

A Likert-like teacher questionnaire was designed by the intern to discern teachers' attitudes toward parent involvement in the school. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements designed to reflect teachers' feelings and beliefs about the benefit and value of parent involvement, their level of interest in having parents directly involved with them as helpers, and the kind of interactions which they initiated with parents. Two educators who were not affiliated with the school under study were asked to review the questionnaire and to offer constructive criticism. Their comments were taken under consideration in finalizing the form. Biographical information was collected on a cover sheet in order to identify teachers' years of experience, grade-levels and subjects taught.

In order to identify the activities to which parents were invited, a survey was developed. This form consisted of four questions. The first question was presented in a chart format which was designed to discern the name of the activity, the number of parents in attendance for the previous and current school years, and the method of notification. Other questions sought to determine the number of contacts that were usually made prior to the event, whether incentives were used, and recommendations for improving parent participation at the school.

#### Description of the Sample and Sampling Technique

The subjects in this study were 66 parents of students in grades 4-8. The parents resided in an urban area that is laden with crime. Twenty-six parents were Spanish-speaking while 40 were English-speaking. The parents had from one to five children in grades four to eight. The responses of all of the parents completing the form were used,

since they represented approximately 10% of the total parent population of the school.

The 55 teachers in this study ranged in age from 23 to 63, with a range of experience from one to thirty-two years. There was a mixed racial make-up of African-American, Caucasian, and Hispanic, males and females. Most of the teacher subjects, 95 percent, lived in suburban areas surrounding the city. All of the questionnaires that were distributed were returned. All responses were used.

#### Description of the Data Collection Approach

Initially, the parent survey was distributed via the student body. It was attached to a letter which was sent home to announce an open house and to request volunteers to become homeroom parents. On the bottom of the open house announcement, there was a tear-off response form for homeroom volunteers. This packet was given to homeroom teachers who were asked to encourage the students to take them home, have the survey anonymously completed by their parents, and return them to school. Homeroom teachers were asked to return the completed surveys to the Parent Center. In addition, on the day of distribution, the building principal read an announcement (written by the intern) which encouraged the students to take home the surveys and to return them and the tear-off portion of the letter regarding homeroom volunteers. Announcements were made for several days requesting the return of the questionnaires. Homeroom teachers were asked by school-wide announcements and personal contact with the intern to call parents of students who had not returned the surveys. About ten questionnaires were returned. Due to the poor response rate, the survey was reissued directly to parents who were in attendance at the first quarter report conferences. Teachers of the bilingual classes

personally distributed and explained the surveys to their students' parents. Other parents were approached by an instructional assistant who was helping the intern and asked to take a few minutes to respond to the survey. These parents completed and returned the surveys before leaving the school that day.

The teacher questionnaires were distributed during a staff meeting. The intern explained why and how they needed to be completed, and fielded questions of concern about anonymity. Teachers were given time to complete the questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected at the end of the meeting.

Community/school coordinators and other activity sponsors were asked to complete the activity survey. The surveys were distributed on a Friday and collected the next Monday. Also, parent sign-in sheets from school meetings and activities were collected and copied. The specific activities were listed and the number of parents involved was recorded. Five Parent Network volunteers were interviewed about their activities. Teachers who had a parent volunteer in their classrooms were also interviewed regarding the level of participation.

In addition, students and staff members were randomly interviewed in order to determine the causes of the breakdown in communication between home and school. Days after flyers were sent home by students, the intern visited homeroom classes and asked teachers if they had received responses from parents and if they had made personal calls to them. Students were asked whether they had delivered the notices, and if parents were going to attend specific events.

#### Description of the Data Analysis Plan

Results of the parent surveys and teacher questionnaires were analyzed and recorded. A chart of responses reported by percentages was developed.

In order to determine the impact that increased communication had on the involvement of parents, parent sign-in sheets from school meetings and Parent Center activities were reviewed. A composite chart of specific activities was developed and numbers of parents involved in school years 1996-97 and 1997-98 were recorded and compared. Verbal feedback from parents who attended meetings, and comments of staff members and students were recorded. In addition, the number of returned tear-off response sheets from invitational flyers was recorded.



## CHAPTER 4

### Presentation of the Research Findings

#### What Information Was Found?

The results of the parent attitudinal survey were interesting. The English and Spanish versions of the survey can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively. Parent responses concerning the climate of the school were high. An overwhelming 100% of the parents indicated that they feel comfortable coming to the school, and 93% feel that the school has a warm and friendly atmosphere. In addition, 97% of respondents said they feel important as parents when they come to this school. These attitudes are contrary to those generally reported in studies, such as Voltz (1994) which reported that parents of culturally diverse students are often distrustful of schools.

Regarding the affect that parent involvement has on student grades, 97% of those surveyed believe that it does. This is surprising since significantly low numbers of parents are actually involved in school activities.

Only 58% of parents responded positively that they had special skills that may be useful to the school. On the contrary, 30% answered, "No," 9% gave no response, while one wrote in "Maybe" and another "I work." Responses to this particular item were more divided than any of the others. The implication here is that parents may feel that they have little to offer; therefore, they might be limiting their involvement due to this low feeling of

efficacy. Nevertheless, there is a strong desire on the part of parents to learn how to help their children at home, based on the 88% positive response to this statement.

In the area of support received from staff, 94% of the parents indicated that school staff helps them when they have a problem, and 88% replied that teachers and other staff tell them how to help their children at home. Therefore, it seems that parents have positive feelings toward the school staff's responsiveness to their needs.

Overall, parental attitudes toward the school were positive. The fact that they feel comfortable in the school environment and recognized by school personnel, may be the reason that 93% of the parents surveyed indicated that they are willing to become more involved in the school. As a result, it appears that something other than parental attitudes toward the school is interfering with their participation.

Another set of data was collected from teachers. A Likert-like questionnaire developed by the intern was utilized in order to ascertain the attitudes of teachers toward parent participation in the school. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

Of the teachers responding, 96% agreed that parent involvement is important to the life of the school, while 93% said that they encourage parent visitation to their classes. This is surprising since studies indicate that often teachers feel threatened or reluctant to have parents in their classrooms. In addition, after this year's Open House, teachers complained that such classroom visitations by parents were disconcerting.

According to 83% of the respondents, parent involvement is everyone's responsibility. This is significant because in the past, teachers have generally relied on the

community school coordinators to encourage parents in this area.

The belief that most parents usually do not feel welcome to come to the school unless there is a problem yielded mixed responses. About 30% agreed, 30% disagreed, and about 30% were undecided.

A majority of the teachers, 91%, agreed that the school should find ways to get parent volunteers. Although 9% were undecided, there were none in disagreement with this idea. This is compatible with the finding that 94% of the teachers surveyed expressed the belief that parents have many skills and talents that may be helpful to the school.

Further, almost 75% of the teachers indicated they would appreciate having parental assistance at some point during the school day. About 23% were undecided, while a negligible number disagreed with this item.

The school has routinely sent home written communications to parents via classroom teachers to students. The teachers interviewed by the intern regarding the distribution of the letters or flyers that had been sent to them indicated that on several occasions they had not given the students the information in a timely fashion. Reasons for this included 1) the flyers were not delivered to their classrooms until the very end of the school day; 2) the flyers came after the event; 3) their homeroom students were in another classroom; 4) directions for distribution were unclear; and 5) they forgot. The interview responses of the randomly selected students were typical. Eight out of ten said they generally did not give their parents the information from the school because they arbitrarily decided that their parents either could not or would not attend.

Five Parent Network volunteers were interviewed. A copy of the interview

questions can be found in Appendix D. These individuals had originally volunteered to participate in the Parent Network, and were coming to the school to assist as needed. Of the five parents surveyed, two of them said they came to the school on a daily basis, one had visited five or six times during the year, one had visited at least 20 times, and one, a grandparent, came every Tuesday and any other time she was needed.

When asked the reasons for their visits, all responded that they had attended the parent/teacher conferences, Title I, Parent Network, Safe Corridors, and other meetings that required parental involvement. Four of the five had attended workshops in the Parent Center such as Work First or Self-Esteem. All five had attended programs such as the Open House or Crime Prevention. One of the parents had not been able to attend as many activities as she had wanted because of “babysitting problems.”

All of the parents indicated that they had heard about the activities through flyers which their children had brought home, phone calls from the classroom teacher, the community school coordinator, or the intern. When asked if they had called or had spoken to other parents in order to inform them of the activities, they all said they had, in keeping with the Parent Network agreement. However, three of them said that parents had promised to attend several functions, but never showed up. This was a source of confusion for them, and they had no explanation for the absences.

Four of the parents had served as parent volunteers in ways other than contacting parents to attend activities. One came each Tuesday to assist children in her granddaughter’s room with classwork. Another served as a cafeteria monitor and suspension room mentor. Also, one of the parents collected papers, and one came in to

help with special projects throughout the year at the request of the homeroom teacher.

Each parent was asked for suggestions to improve parent participation at the school. The recommendations were as follow:

- Have people distribute flyers outside of the school to parents who are dropping off or picking up their children.
- Tape flyers on all doors of the building, i.e. main office , classrooms, and main entrance.
- Continue to have parents, CSC's, and teachers call.
- Allow parents to drop into children's classrooms unannounced to see what is going on.
- Have homeroom teachers conduct monthly meetings with the parents.
- Have mother-daughter activities to help parents grow in self-esteem.
- Ask parents to supervise more activities.
- Provide transportation for parents.
- Do more follow-up calls.
- Keep doing the good job that is being done.

A retiring teacher with 32 years experience in the field has continually had success in getting parents involved in school activities during her tenure. During an interview, she indicated that she motivated her students to get their parents to participate in various activities by offering special gifts, giving extra credit, and a great deal of praise. In addition, she said the most important technique was to make personal calls or visits, and to let parents know that they are needed.

### What Did the Information Mean?

Data collected revealed that parents were very comfortable coming to the school; they also felt supported by the faculty. In addition, teachers felt strongly that parents were important to the life of the school. Although teachers felt strongly that parents had talents and skills that would be beneficial to the school, at least half of the parents seemed to be doubtful. This disparity in beliefs might be an indicator of the problem that is manifested in the lack of parental participation.

Overall indications of the Parent Network revealed that parents were willing to become involved when asked and given specific ways in which they could help the school. Further, parents had a wealth of ideas that may have been useful in increasing the number of parents through improved communication techniques. In addition, the in-house system of distribution appeared to be faulty and has had a damaging effect on home-school communication, especially in regard to the teacher to student strategy.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

The purpose of this study was to improve school to home communication as a result of the Parent Network. In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to determine the reasons for the breakdown in communications, identify parents' feelings and attitudes about the school, and to provide opportunities for parents to have positive experiences at the school. The intern hypothesized that parent involvement would improve as a result of the Parent Network.

It was found that there were barriers which contributed to the breakdown in school. First, the structure of the school's in-house distribution of parent flyers and letters sent teachers for students to take home was an issue. Teachers did not consistently receive flyers in time to give to the students. Second, students usually did not take flyers home because they felt their parents would not respond. Another problem was that although members of the Parent Network called others to inform them of activities, it remained unclear why those who said they would come to the school did not.

In addition, it was found that there were more parents attending some activities and more parent volunteers than any other year. Parent and teachers attitudes toward each other were generally positive. Although, a significant number of parents seemed to feel that they did not have skills that would be beneficial to the school, most teachers felt

that they did have skills that would be helpful.

### Conclusion

Whether the Parent Network had an effect on the improvement of parent involvement at the school is inconclusive. What has been demonstrated, however, is that the concept of having parents coming to the school to help by calling and encouraging others to attend school activities was a catalyst for staff to consider and utilize other techniques to encourage broader parent participation at this school. Where there had been no parent volunteers during the previous year, the current school year had over ten parents who participated either on committees, in classrooms or around the school in some way.

### Implications

Parents will come to the school when they are encouraged and have specific tasks to perform. As staff members see parents responding to the outreach, they are more inclined to nurture parental participation and increase the number of invitations that are extended. Further, a consistent, organized, and personalized approach to encouraging parent involvement may generate more participation in school activities.

### Intern Leadership Development

At the onset of the project, the intern anticipated growth in the development of leadership skills. This was accomplished in several areas. Initially, experience was gained in planning and conducting meetings. The intern held meetings to discuss the parent network with parents and to plan American Education Week activities. The intern learned that when parents come to meetings, they need an opportunity to share their feelings and



ideas, not just listen to school personnel telling them what should be done. They are a valuable resource for ideas.

Providing clear, written material to be disseminated to parents and staff was also essential. Letters were written to inform parents and staff of various activities. To accomplish this, consideration had to be given to writing in language that was easily understood by parents. At times, the intern assisted the community school coordinators with writing letters and flyers. This proved to be mutually beneficial to both parties, with the community school coordinators providing practical information to the intern, while the intern shared technical expertise. Working together in this way made for a more collegial relationship to develop.

In order to ensure that certain activities were advertised, the intern had to try a variety of strategies in order to motivate key people to begin and complete requested tasks. This was difficult to achieve because the individuals often had many other responsibilities, and making the intern's project a priority was a struggle. While the intern was persistent, patience and tact were necessary at all times. Sometimes it was frustrating to find that something that had been promised, had not been completed. The intern recognized that management of personnel to accommodate completion of certain tasks may require the exercise of authority. The intern did not have the authority to make a direct impact on particular individuals; therefore, responses were not always positive.

Another area of development for the intern was oral communication with parents and staff regarding parent involvement issues. Those times were most rewarding and encouraging. Face to face discussions afforded the intern an opportunity to develop a

more intimate relationship with parents and peers alike. The intern has developed an appreciation for the depth of feelings and concern that co-workers and parents have about a number of issues which have an impact on the children.

In addition, the intern's involvement with the current project necessitated working with others in the school and community who were attempting to get parents involved in some way. This required skill in coordinating and facilitating the efforts so that the activities would proceed in an organized fashion.

The project was designed to support district policy and state mandates. In its entirety, the project required the intern to apply human relations skills in effectively interacting with others. The intern learned that while the project was important, people are more important. Their issues need to be addressed in order to accomplish anything. People need to feel that those in leadership roles are respectful, sensitive, and supportive. They need to feel empowered to participate on a meaningful level. This applies to staff, students and parents.

#### Organizational Change

Parent involvement in schools can have a positive impact on school climate. As a result of the involvement of parent volunteers, school staff members are beginning to see the advantage of having their input and assistance. Parents have brought fresh ideas and another perspective to meetings, more adults to supervise and assist students, and an opportunity to build stronger relations between school and home.

#### Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for

future study to improve parent involvement:

The study should involve the establishment of a core committee of interested staff and parents before the end of the current school year. The objective of this committee should be to develop a written parent involvement plan and an umbrella parent organization with several committees that are responsible for the coordination of various parent participation activities in the school. The role of school personnel should be to guide and assist parents until they feel empowered to handle the responsibilities on their own. The attendance of parents at the various activities during the year should be compared to the attendance of the current year.

Further, there is a need to improve the Parent Network by developing a telephone chain to which parents consent to add their telephone numbers in order to facilitate communication. This way, parents will not be limited to coming to the school to make calls and emergency information can be disseminated more quickly. Inherent in the study would be a design to keep a record of the number of calls made, and the number of actual participants that result from this type of notification.

The study should include improvement of the in-house system of distribution of flyers to teachers for students to take home. For example, teachers should be informed in advance that they will be receiving flyers and that they should discuss the importance of the information with the students. Students should be given incentives for returning responses of intent from parents. Finally, consideration should be given to the ideas suggested by the parents during the interviews. These ideas may prove to be valuable in communicating with hard-to-reach parents.

It must be noted that it is essential for the committee's efforts to be communicated to everyone in the school community. The staff must be in the forefront of implementing the plan. Parents will be involved, but the entire school must take responsibility for the success of the outreach program.

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## Appendix A

Dear Parent/Guardians:

We would like you to become more involved in your child's school. Your feelings are very important to us, and in order to help you, we need to understand your concerns. Please answer the following questions and return tomorrow.

1. How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many of your children attend Pyne Poynt? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What are their grade levels? (Check the grades)

Gr.4\_\_\_\_ Gr.5\_\_\_\_ Gr.6\_\_\_\_ Gr.\_\_\_\_ Gr.8\_\_\_\_

4. Have you ever been active in your child's school? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
How?

Please read the statements below and tell us how you feel by putting a circle around YES or NO.

- |  |            |           |
|--|------------|-----------|
| 1. I feel comfortable coming to this school.                             | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 2. The school staff helps me when I have a problem.                      | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 3. I believe children get better grades when their parents are involved. | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 4. I have special skills that may be useful to the school.               | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 5. The teachers and staff tell me how I can help my child at home.       | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 6. I want to learn how to help my child at home.                         | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 7. This school has a warm, and friendly atmosphere.                      | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 8. I feel important as a parent/guardian when I visit this school.       | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 9. I always know what is going on in my child's class and in the school. | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 10. I am willing to become more involved in the school.                  | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b> |



## Appendix B

Apreciado Padre/Encargado:

Nos gustaría que se involucrara más con la escuela de su hijo/a. Sus sentimientos son bien importantes para nosotros. Para poder ayudarlo necesitamos entender lo que le preocupa. Por favor conteste las siguientes preguntas y devuélvalas a la escuela mañana.

1. ¿Cuántos niños tiene? \_\_\_\_\_
2. ¿Cuántos de sus niños asisten a Pyne Poynt? \_\_\_\_\_
3. ¿En que grado están? (Haga una marca de cotejo (✓) en el grado apropiado.)

|       |       |      |      |       |
|-------|-------|------|------|-------|
| Gr. 4 | Gr. 5 | Gr.6 | Gr.7 | Gr. 8 |
|-------|-------|------|------|-------|

4. ¿Ha estado usted activamente envuelto con la escuela de su hijo?    Sí      No  
 ¿Cómo? \_\_\_\_\_

**Favor de leer las siguientes aseveraciones y si está de acuerdo haga un círculo alrededor del SI y si no está de acuerdo haga un círculo alrededor del NO.**

- |   |           |           |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Me siento cómodo asistiendo a esta escuela.  | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 2. El personal de la escuela me ayuda cuando tengo un problema.                               | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 3. Yo creo que los niños obtienen mejores notas cuando sus padres se envuelven en la escuela. | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 4. Yo tengo destrezas especiales que se pueden utilizar en la escuela.                        | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 5. Los maestros y el personal de la escuela pueden decirme como ayudar a mi niño en la casa.  | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 6. Yo quiero aprender a como ayudar a mi niño en la casa.                                     | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 7. La escuela tiene una atmósfera cálida y amistosa .   | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 8. Me siento importante como padre/encargado cuando visito la escuela.                        | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 9. Yo siempre estoy al tanto de lo que está pasando en la clase de mi niño y en la escuela.   | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |
| 10. Yo estoy dispuesto a envolverme más en la escuela de mi niño.                             | <b>SI</b> | <b>NO</b> |

## Appendix C

**PYNE POYNT FAMILY SCHOOL  
1997-1998**

This questionnaire will provide Mrs. C. Jones with important information. Please complete and return.

**Directions:** Please circle appropriate responses.

SA=Strongly Agree A=Agree U=Undecided D=Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree

- |  |    |   |   |   |    |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. Parent involvement is important to the life of the school.                                    | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 2. I encourage my students' parents to visit my classes.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 3. Everyone in the school is responsible for involving parents in the school.                    | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 4. Parents have many skills and talents that may be helpful to the school.                       | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 5. I tell my students' parents how they can help their children with their assignments.          | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 6. I call parents only to inform them of misconduct.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 7. Most parents are not interested in coming to the school to help.                              | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 8. The school should find ways to get parent volunteers.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 9. Parents do not come to the school unless there is a problem because most do not feel welcome. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 10. I would like to have parents help me in some way during the school day.                      | SA | A | U | D | SD |

## Appendix D

**Internship - Parent Involvement  
Parent Interview Questions**

I am going to ask you some questions regarding your participation in this year's school activities. Please express how you feel. Your honest responses will provide valuable information.

1. Approximately how many times did you visit the school this year? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What activities did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_ Meetings \_\_\_\_\_ Workshops  
\_\_\_\_\_ Programs \_\_\_\_\_ Conferences

If you were unable to attend activities this year, what were the reasons?

3. How did you usually find out about the activities mentioned above?

\_\_\_\_\_ Flyer via child      Call from: \_\_\_\_\_ 1) CSC      \_\_\_\_\_ 2) Teacher  
\_\_\_\_\_ 3) Homeroom Parent      \_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify)

Did you call other parents to notify them of these activities? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

4. Have you helped in your child's homeroom or volunteered for other school activities? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

If so, how?

5. What suggestions do you have for improving parent participation at our school?

## Biographical Data

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Name                    | Carol W. Jones  |
| Date and Place of Birth | May 17, 1947<br>Harrisburg, Pennsylvania  |
| High School             | John Harris High School<br>Harrisburg, Pennsylvania   |
| Undergraduate Degree    | Bachelor of Science<br>Secondary Education<br>Lock Haven State College<br>Lock Haven, Pennsylvania      |
| Graduate Degree         | Master of Arts<br>School Administration<br>Rowan University<br>Glassboro, New Jersey                    |
| Present Occupation      | Camden City Board of Education<br>Camden, New Jersey<br>Pyne Poynt Family School<br>Teacher/Facilitator |