

Harrisburg School District Student Services:

Survey Report of 6th Grade Parents

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Overview

This report presents the findings from 256 telephone interviews conducted during the 2002-2003 academic year with parents of a 6th grade student in the Harrisburg School District. The survey was designed to identify parents' knowledge of and access to services provided by the District for its students and families. Students in the 6th grade were the focal group because many are in the process of their transition into early adolescence, which is characterized by both new opportunities for exploration and heightened risk for behavioral problems.

The Harrisburg School District has implemented various services and programs to improve student engagement and academic performance. Their services reflect comprehensive district-wide strategies for promoting student engagement and school connectedness. This strategy improves students' emotional well-being and learning outcomes through services such as: (1) student intervention teams; (2) parent educators and coordinators; and (3) school-based health centers. The identification and implementation of effective strategies to address issues hindering academic performance is part of an ongoing effort within the School District. This document describes the data collection process and findings related to the use and access of these services, followed by a discussion of their implications.

Method

Participants: Families of 6th grade students from 13 schools in the Harrisburg School District completed telephone surveys. Two-hundred-and-fifty-six parents or relatives who had a child in the 6th grade attending one of these schools in the District completed a 20-minute telephone survey administered January-February 2003. Parent participants' ages ranged from 20 to 70 years old with a mean age of 38. Most of the parents were biological parents (84%) or grandparents (12%). The remaining participants were other relatives, adoptive parents, or foster parents. Male and female students were almost equally represented.

Sample Design: All 585 6th grade students received letters at their respective schools to take home. The letters indicated the general purpose of the survey was to obtain information

about services being provided within the School District and that parents would receive \$10 for their voluntary participation. The letter was to be returned only if parents did not wish to be contacted. Phone numbers of families not returning refusal letters were submitted to the Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg Survey Center. The Survey Center contacted the families to conduct the telephone survey and entered responses in an SPSS file for descriptive analyses. Less than half (44%) of the eligible families participated.

Survey Content: The survey consisted of information on (1) parents' demographics and background, (2) district program, and (3) parental involvement in school-related activities. Demographic and background data include parents' education, marital status, income, employment status, and general information about role strain and social supports. We obtained information on family's knowledge, use, and satisfaction with specific programs offered by the School District for students as well as for the family. Although there are numerous programs available, the School District specifically requested parent information about the following key programs of interest:

- **EXPLORE:** Extended Program of Learning Opportunities and Recreational Experiences -- An after-school program for students in grade K-12 located in 14 community schools.
- Student Intervention Teams (SIT)
- Student Assistance Program (SAP)
- School-based Health Center: provides required health care for all school age children
- Family Involvement Day Service
- Parent Educators
- Homeless Program
- Parent University

Parents also provided information about their degree of involvement with their child's school, their child's academic progress, and topics recently discussed at home. They also addressed questions related to role strain (general stress associated with managing parenting and work roles) and available supports.

- Do you currently volunteer in your child's school?

- Do you feel your child’s school encourages parents’ involvement in the classroom?
- How often have you attended a parent meeting such as PTA this school year?
- How often have you attended school conferences with your child’s teacher this year?
- How often have you visited the school for special events like sport activities or plays?
- How often do you know how your child is doing in school?

Findings

Response Rate & Demographics: From the total 585 eligible families, there were 22 refusals and 19 homes not surveyed due to language barriers. There were approximately 111 phone numbers provided that initially was out of service. 72 of these had new phone numbers that were attempted later. The following findings are based on 256 surveys.

Based on the demographic data seen in Table 1, one-third of the families with 6th grade students did not complete high school while nearly half of the parents did. An additional 21% received further education beyond high school. 76% of the parents are single (divorced, widowed, or never married) and 10% are separated, suggesting enormous parenting demands and economic stress.

Table 1. Parents’ Education and Marital Demographic Information

Education	
< 12 years	31%
High School diploma	48%
Post high school, no degree	15%
A post high school degree	6%
Marital Status	
Married or living with someone	24%
Single (not currently married)	76%
Divorced/Widowed [21%]	
Never married [55%]	
Separated	10%

Although the majority of parents are employed, they earn less than \$30,000 annually (Table 2). Economic conditions for some families are sufficiently unstable for them to anticipate applying for public assistance in the near future.

Table 2. Parents' Income & Employment Information

<i>Annual Income (includes earned wages and public assistance)</i>	
< \$30,000	63%
\$30,000 - \$40,000	7%
\$40,001 - \$50,000	6%
> \$50,000	5%
Refused/didn't know	21%
<i>Public Assistance:</i> Households expecting to apply for public assistance within next 6 months.	15%
Employed Participants*	69%
<i>Hours worked/week</i>	
36 hours or less	25%
37 – 40 hours	59%
> 40 hours	16%
<i>Work Satisfaction</i>	
Dissatisfied	15%
Satisfied	78%
* <i>The reported percentages are based on the number of participants working. It does not include the entire sample.</i>	

Economic and personal pressures create emotional strains that can often be minimized with adequate support. While parents reported a high amount of pressure, many also reported having access to substantial support (Table 3). While available social support is strong, about one-fourth of the parents surveyed feel that support is not available for unexpected instrumental needs and two-thirds report lacking financial support when needed. Even given the available social support, almost 26% indicate they never have time for themselves (Figure 1) and 35% need more hours in the day to fulfill the daily demands in their lives (Figure 2).

Table 3. Parents' Report of Available Support

	Almost true/ Always true	Occasionally true	Hardly ever true
Social support	78.8	8.4	12.8
Instrumental support:			
<i>Help in home with small repairs</i>	60.8	14.0	24.4
<i>Transportation assistance</i>	54.4	21.0	24.0
Financial support	21.2	14.4	62.8

Figure 1. You never seem to have time for yourself (in percentage of time).

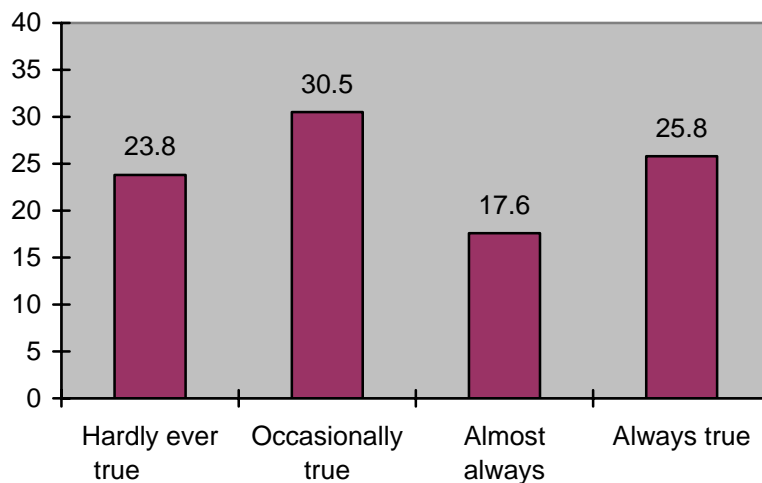
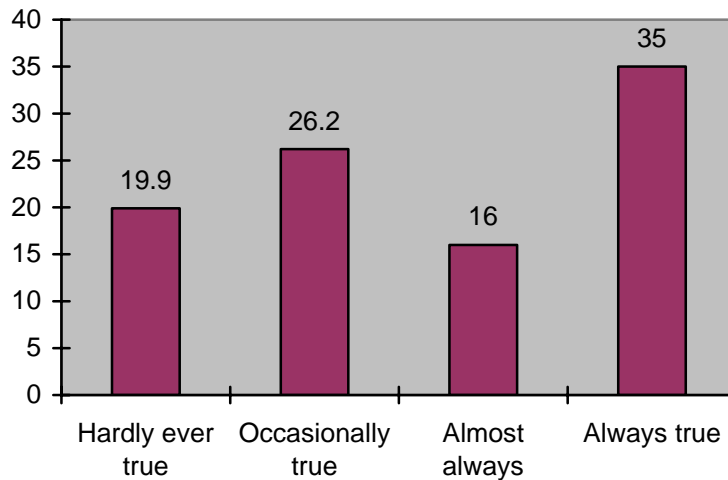


Figure 2. You need more hours in the day to do all the things expected of you (in percentage of time).



Survey Findings: The following data represents all parents that completed the survey, regardless of their program knowledge. Program awareness, use and satisfaction, are highlighted based on details presented in Table 4, followed by parents' suggestions.

Program Awareness

- EXPLORE and School-based health centers are the programs of greatest awareness at 72% and 48% followed by Family Involvement Day Service (44%).
- The Student Intervention Teams (SIT), Student Assistance Programs (SAP) and the Homeless Program target specific students and families. This may account for the small percentage of parents aware of the programs (28%, 27%, and 16%, respectively).
- Slightly less than one-third of parents are aware of the Parent Educators, despite their presence as full-time staff resources for parents in all schools.
- The least know program reported is the Parent University (12%).

Program Use and Satisfaction

- The program used most often is EXPLORE, but less than half of the parents that are aware of the program are using it.
- While only 19% of parents reported using the Student Assistance Program (SAP), the vast majority of these were satisfied with the program (85%).

- A similar pattern is reported for the Health Center, with 19% using the facility and 88% of them being satisfied.
- The highest satisfaction rating of all the programs is with the Family Involvement Day Service (92%). While less than one-fourth of the parents aware of the service used it, it clearly is the best rated program provided by the School District.
- Fewer parents utilize the Parent Educators than those that use EXPLORE, yet the rated level of satisfaction is the same for both (72%).
- The Parent University received the highest dissatisfaction report of the programs assessed. (The Homeless Program also had a high dissatisfaction rate, but figures are not reported due to the limited number of parents that utilized the service. Parents responding to the satisfaction of this service were potentially identifiable therefore jeopardizing their anonymity).

Table 4. Awareness and Use of School-Based Programs

<i>Student Focused Programs</i>	*Aware of Program (%)	Used Program (%)	**Degree of Satisfaction	
			Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Explore	72	42	72	23
Student Intervention Teams (SIT)	28	10	57	29
Student Assistance Program (SAP)	27	19	85	8
School-based Health Center	48	19	88	12

<i>Family Focused Programs</i>	*Aware of Program (%)	Used Program (%)	Degree of Satisfaction	
			Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Family Involvement Day Service	44	22	92	8
Parent Educators	28	10	72	28
Homeless Program	16	5	***	***
Parent University	12	17	20	80

* Based on all 256 parents

** Figures represent only those parents who have used the program; due to missing responses, not all percentages total 100.

*** Due to the few parents that used this program, satisfaction is not reported in order to maintain their confidentiality.

Parental suggestions for Services: Suggestions by parents were extensive but were generally offered as ways of improving the students' academic experience, mental or physical health, and family concerns. Although providing varied suggestions, a number of parents indicated that the School District is "doing a good job; better than before." Some of the suggestions reflect expansions or organizational considerations for current programs, while others represent concerns parents perceived as receiving inadequate attention. Parents had an opportunity to provide up to six suggestions. Those listed here appeared frequently. The suggestions are categorized into three broad areas that focus on the needs of students, facilitating parental involvement, and administrative considerations for enhancing school policies and activities.

Meeting Student Needs

- Offer extended after-school activities that:
 - Are accessible for all students and in all the schools
 - Provide field trips
 - Provide early academic remediation in math and reading
 - Offer transportation home
 - Provide structured homework assistance
 - Provide structured tutoring (in collaboration with teachers)
- General youth activities should provide or include:
 - Expanded math and science academy
 - Computer classes in all schools
 - Teach organizational skills
 - More services for challenged students
 - A homework hotline
 - Advanced learning programs for high achievers (and for elementary students)
 - Bring back the ALPS program
 - Provide DSL for students
 - Better reading programs
 - More sports programs
 - Musicals for children
- Youth counseling supports
 - Self-esteem classes for girls

- Counseling for students coping with personal problems (i.e., post-traumatic stress) and family problems (i.e., substance abuse)
- Coping with other students
- Provide help with basics needs such as clothing (or initiate a policy for uniforms) and eye glasses

Facilitating Parental Involvement

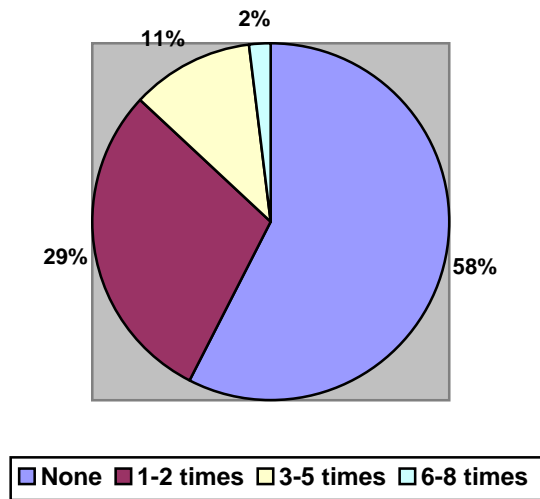
- Parent Services
 - Better communication system between school and parents; Such as a homework hotline and updated online information about programs and services
 - More parenting classes and workshops
 - Have more family involvement nights
 - Orientation for new families moving to the District
 - Assist families in purchasing computers
 - Offer school choices
 - An open-door policy for parents
 - A liaison between the school and parents
 - A food bank
 - Food for PTA meetings

Administrative Considerations

- Administrative and Teacher Services
 - Provide consistent follow-through when offering assistance
 - Work more efficiently with social services
 - Provide better supervision of students when in school; enhanced security
 - Initiate better classroom management strategies; interventions for dealing with disruptive students
 - Make classrooms smaller
 - Offer in-school detention
 - Greater cultural awareness of teachers
 - Need additional teachers and substitutes
 - More adult help in EXPLORE
 - Provide better staff assistance to support teachers

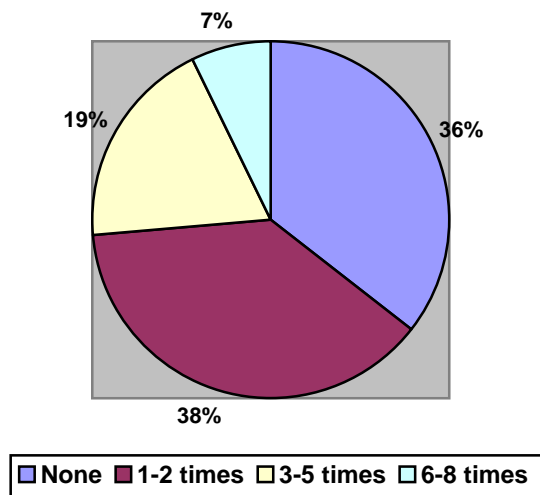
Given the many suggestions made, parents seem informed of various student needs related to school engagement and success but less knowledgeable of some services already existing to address them. They also appear to lack access to updated information regarding activities. Figures 3 and 4 reflect parents' patterns of participation in school meetings.

Figure 3. Percentage of parents attending a Parent's Meeting at school



The majority of parents did not attend any school-wide meetings designated for parents (Figure 3). This pattern is almost identical when parents reported the number of special events (i.e., musicals or plays) they attended during the school year (59.4%, 29.7%, 6.3%, 2.7%, respectively).

Figure 4. Percentage of parents attending parent-teacher conferences



There are generally 2-3 scheduled teacher conferences per year. Parents typically will attend 1-2 conferences a year scheduled after a marking or grading period. Therefore, the 38% attending 1-2 conferences is not unusual. Although 36% reported that they had not attended *any* parent-teacher conference, 85% of parents reported later in the survey that they almost always know how their child is doing in school. This group represents parents that may have little direct contact with their child’s teacher, but rely on information or reports provided to them through their child. Parents attending 6-8 conferences exceed the number of conferences generally scheduled by teachers for all students. This increased contact with teachers potentially reflects one of two groups: Parent-initiated or teacher-initiated conferences. In both cases, there is generally sufficient evidence to suggest additional support is needed for a student regarding academic performance or conduct. The additional conferences are an effort to ensure that greater monitoring and consistent expectations are provided.

From Table 5, it is evident that the majority of parents discuss various topics with their children, including education-related, leisure-related, and family-focused topics. More than 70% of parents had discussed school-related topics (i.e., grades, homework) and family expectations (i.e., rules) with their child within the 24 hours prior to the survey. School and family topics are the primary focus of most discussions, suggesting that parents are concerned about their child’s school experiences and that socialization around responsibilities are also important. Although the survey did not address the length of the conversations (which may have been relatively brief), they nevertheless reflect the relevant topics for these households.

Table 5. Topics discussed with your child in the past 24 hours.

<i>School/Education Topics</i>		<i>Leisure/Health Topics</i>		<i>Family Topics</i>	
The School Day	92%	Entertainment	70%	Household Chores	89%
Homework	90%	Peer Relationships	68%	Rules	88%
Grades	74%	Nutrition	65%	Family Relationships	79%
Current Events	64%	Sports	56%	Your (parent’s) Job	45%
Relationship w/teachers	57%	Alcohol/Drug Use	44%	Household Finances	31%

While the majority of families feel their involvement in their child’s school-related experiences are important, it is generally not reflected in their direct involvement with the school. When asked if their involvement in their child’s class is encouraged, 51% reported this to be true, while 29% indicated “No” and 15% reported it to be infrequent (Table 6). When asked about encouraged involvement with non-academic activities, the percentage of parents indicating Yes dropped to 46% and those indicating “No” increased to 39%.

Table 6. Parental Involvement in School Activities

Parental Involvement	Yes	No	Somewhat
Do you feel that your child's school encourages parents' involvement in the classroom?	51%	29%	15%
Do you feel that your child's school encourages parents' involvement in non-academic activities?	46%	39%	9%
Do you currently volunteer in your child's school?	35%	65%	---

Volunteering parents comprised 35% of those surveyed. Reasons for *not* volunteering are varied (based on 166 parents indicating they did not volunteer):

- 58% have work schedule conflicts or heavy work demands
- 8% are homebound due to a personal or a dependent’s health disability
- 6% are available for service, but were unaware of the need or were never asked
- 5% take care of young children at home
- Less than 4% of the non-volunteering participants indicated the following additional reasons:
 - Administrative conflicts
 - Limited time (unrelated to work demands or dependent care)
 - Language barriers
 - New to the school or district
 - Limited transportation

Overall, parents' knowledge of services appears mixed, but is most prevalent for services available for a wider array of students. They are therefore underutilizing the available services. The degree of school engagement is limited and although many of the parents have work responsibilities that interfere with direct frequent involvement, many are willing and available to assist their child's school.

Implications

Given the importance of the early adolescent years, parenting and parent-youth relationships have powerful effects on the choices that early adolescents make. Parental involvement is an important component of a child's schooling. Factors that help explain the role of families in student's achievement and behavior include family resources such as income, in addition to parent-child relationships, and parent involvement in school-related activities.¹ Parental efficacy has also been found to predict parental involvement and monitoring (both of which predicts academic and social-emotional adjustment of adolescents).^{2,3} This is probably most evident in parents' strong positive response to Family Involvement Day Service. Given this link, an important goal of programs for parents of adolescents might be to utilize this service as one approach to strengthening parental efficacy and ultimately, engagement with the school.

Five forms of parental involvement are identified as helping adolescent students succeed: monitoring academic and social life, evaluating the information obtained about the adolescent, helping with schoolwork, creating positive peer networks, and participating directly in the school.⁴ Parents who discuss academic issues with their children, have high educational aspirations, and are involved in schooling, have adolescents with high academic motivation at 6th grade. This motivation is reflected in the student's beliefs about his or her potential and has subsequently been associated with better grades at 9th grade.⁵

The School District is addressing many of these issues related to enhancing school engagement. Non-specialized services (those available to all students) are generally the most well known. However, specialized services (those targeting specific problems) that sufficiently address the child's (and family's) needs are generally well received -- when utilized. Feedback from parents, however, would suggest the need to consider the following possible services as strategies for enhancing parent involvement and meeting student needs:

- Consider strategies for expanding and strengthening EXPLORE and the Family Involvement Day Service. It is clear that these are both reasonably well known and well received. They are assets to the District but could benefit from additional enhancements.
- Provide additional strategies for informing parents about upcoming events and available services. Parents are most likely to provide updated contact information to teachers, or a parent from the class, if they believe the primary use is to keep them informed.
- A homework hotline (in English and Spanish) – keeps parents informed of classroom expectations and minimizes progress report “surprises.”
- A service that would allow high school students to tutor and mentor younger students; this type program has proved quite successful in keeping high school students engaged in academics while also mentoring and strengthening subject material for younger students.
- Computer classes during school for students and integrate into family nights in addition to providing occasional parent workshops.

Endnotes

¹ Zill, N. (1996). Family change and student achievement: What we have learned, what it means for schools. In A. Booth & J.F. Dunn (Eds.), Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes? (pp. 139-174). Hillsdale, NJ, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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