

Examining Parental Involvement in Rural, Urban, and Suburban Schools

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The benefits of parental involvement in the schools has been extensively documented in the research literature (Bermúdez, 1994; Epstein, 1987; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson, 1989). These include improved student achievement (Epstein, 1987; Klaus & Gray, 1968; Schaefer, 1972; Walberg, 1984) and overall school behavior (Levenstein, 1974; Weikart, 1973). In addition, parent-child relationships and home-school relations are also enhanced when parents become involved in their children's education (Bermúdez & Padrón, 1987, 1988; Henderson, 1989; Herman & Yeh, 1980; Met, 1987; Morgan, 1982)

Although the benefits of parental involvement are evident to educators, there is still a lack of knowledge as to how these may be shaped by the type of school setting. Urban, suburban, and rural school districts each have a unique set of characteristics and problems that may impact the degree of parental involvement.

McIntire, Marion, and Quaglia (1990) point out that rural communities are not just reduced versions of cities; they have unique characteristics and needs. In the rural community, social relationships are more personal and tightly knit and values tend to be more traditional. Further, smaller enrollments lead to closer personal relationships and greater attention to student needs. The purpose of the present study was to extend the current body of research by considering parental involvement measures across urban, suburban, and rural communities, using a national sample of eighth-grade students.

Method

Data Source

Data for this study were drawn from the eighth grade student cohort of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS:88; National Center for Education Statistics, 1990). NELS:88 drew on a two-stage, stratified national probability sample. About 24,599 eighth graders enrolled in 1,052 public and private schools across the

nation participated in the 1988 base-year survey, which examined the school-related experiences and accomplishments of these students. Questions related to parental involvement also were included in the survey. For the present study, about 18,000 students are included in the sample. Roughly, 44% of the students were from suburban schools, 31% from rural schools, and 25% from urban school settings. About 51% of the students were males and 49% females. Approximately 11% of the students were Hispanic, 12% were Black, and 77% were classified as White.

Variables

Parent involvement was assessed through 11 items measuring three categories of involvement (parent discussions, parental attendance at schools, and parental supervision at home). Three items were used to measure parent-student discussion of: (a) programs at school, (b) school activities, and (c) things studied in class. In addition, parent attendance at school was measured by four items: (a) attended a school meeting, (b) parent spoke to teacher/counselors, (c) parents visited classes, and (d) attended a school meeting. Finally, four items were used to measure parental supervision at home: (a) checked homework, (b) required chores done, (c) limited time watching television, and (d) limited students' going out with friends.

School setting was broken down by NELS:88 categories of urban (located in central cities), suburban (located in the area surrounding a central city within a country constituting the Metropolitan Statistical Area [MSA]), and rural (located in the areas outside the MSA).

Data Analysis

We examined each parental involvement item across the three school settings. A chi-square test was conducted to assess the statistical significance of the differences found.

Results

Our results are summarized in Table 1. In examining questions that related to type of parental discussions, students in suburban schools (42%) talked more frequently to

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Table 1
 Percentages by Type of Community

	Urban	Suburb	Rural	
<i>Discuss the Following School Activities with Parents</i>				
Programs at School*	16.2	13.5	14.1	not at all
	44.2	44.5	47.9	once or twice
	39.6	42.0	38.0	3 or more
School Activities	8.3%	8.3%	8.7%	not at all
	33.6	32.9	31.3	once or twice
	57.8	58.8	60.0	3 or more
Things Studied in Class	11.4%	10.6%	11.4%	not at all
	34.2	34.5	36.3	once or twice
	54.4	54.9	52.3	3 or more
<i>Parents and School Interaction</i>				
Attended a School Meeting*	62.3%	58.3%	50.8%	yes
	37.7	41.7	49.2	no
Parent Spoke to Teacher*	71.1%	66.8%	58.8%	yes
	28.9	33.2	41.2	no
Visited Your Classes*	35.5%	30.6%	25.9%	yes
	64.5	69.4	74.1	no
Attend a School Event*	60.6%	63.7%	69.2%	yes
	39.4	36.3	30.8	no
<i>Parental Involvement at Home</i>				
Check on your homework*	45.3%	42.8%	44.5%	often
	29.4	29.1	27.5	sometimes
	16.5	17.0	17.3	rarely
	8.8	11.1	10.7	never
Require chores done	65.8%	66.2%	67.8%	often
	23.7	23.5	23.1	sometimes
	8.1	7.7	7.0	rarely
	2.4	2.6	2.1	never
Limit time watching TV*	16.8%	15.2%	12.4%	often
	23.5	23.2	21.2	sometimes
	24.7	25.3	25.7	rarely
	35.0	36.2	40.7	never
Limit going with friends*	44.4%	41.6%	43.2%	often
	29.3	30.1	30.2	sometimes
	15.4	16.4	15.0	rarely
	10.9	11.9	11.6	never

Note. All figures are percentages.

* $p < .001$ for the χ^2 associated with this item.

their parents about programs at school as compared to students in urban (39.6%) and rural schools (38%).

There were also differences across settings in a number of questions that dealt with parent/school interactions. Urban and suburban students (62.3% and 58.3%, respectively) reported that their parents attended school meetings substantially more frequently than was reported by rural students (50.8%). In addition, urban (71.1%) and suburban (66.8%) parents were reported to interact more frequently with teachers than their rural counterparts (58.8%). And rural parents (25.9%) visited their children's classrooms less frequently than suburban (30.6%) or urban (35.5%) parents. However, rural parents more often attended school events (69%) than did suburban (63.7%) or urban (60.6%) parents.

In terms of parental involvement at home, more urban (45.3%) and rural (44.5%) parents checked their children's homework than suburban (42.8%) parents. Urban (16.8%) and suburban (15.2%) parents limited television watching more often than rural parents (12.4%). Finally, urban (44.4%) and rural (43.2%) parents limited their children's going out with friends more than suburban parents (41.6%).

Summary

Results from this study suggest that there is some degree of parental involvement in the schools across all three contexts studied. Suburban and urban parents talked more frequently about school programs with their children, attended school meetings with more regularity, and interacted with teachers more frequently than their rural counterparts. However, rural parents attended school events more often. These findings suggest that rural parents may not be kept as well informed about school programs or provided opportunities to be with teachers. But it appears that when there are regularly scheduled and advertised events, rural parents do attend. This finding dispels the notion, among some, that rural parents are disinterested in their children's education.

Both rural and urban parents checked their children's homework and limited their children's going out with friends more than their suburban counterparts did. The higher incidence of dual career families in the suburbs may explain this finding. Rural parents did not limit television watching as habitually as their urban or suburban parents, a fact that may be explained by the limited numbers of diversions available in a rural setting.

In summary, our data suggest that parental involvement does vary across community settings. Schools and agencies alike should develop strategies to increase community and parent involvement in rural schools (Lewis, 1992).

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