



PARENTS AND TEACHERS: IN SYNC OR AT ODDS?

By Rafael Heller | Mar 28, 2022 | Editor's Note

For more than 150 years, American parents have had a complex, push-pull relationship with the people who educate their children. As the historian William Cutler (2000) explains, “Parents and teachers have often vied with each other for influence and authority” over what children should learn in which settings and under whose direction. At times, Cutler explains, “the American tradition of local control has placed teachers at the mercy of parents and taxpayers” to decide what content and skills should be taught in school. At other times, school system leaders have claimed the upper hand, insisting that parents should stay out of the classroom and leave their children’s education to the professionals. Yet, Cutler adds, as tense and unsettled as the home-school relationship has been, most Americans have always viewed parents and teachers as natural allies who *should* be able to forge trusting and respectful partnerships in which they cooperate to support children’s learning and development.

Where do things stand today? In the two decades since Cutler published his account, we’ve seen some promising signs of progress. As [Joyce Epstein](#) and [Barbara Boone](#) explain in this issue of *Kappan*, researchers have reached a consensus on the many ways in which students benefit from parent involvement in their schooling. Compelled by that research, every state in the country has formally committed to supporting strong school-family partnerships. Even more important, and thanks to new federal funding in this area, a number of states (Epstein and Boone focus on Ohio, in particular) have articulated specific guidelines to help school, district, and state leaders bring such partnerships to life.

Similarly, in this month’s interview, [Claudia Galindo](#) and [Mavis Sanders](#) describe the nationwide movement to create full-service community schools, an approach that is explicitly committed to building strong, reciprocal relationships among educators and families. Moreover, argue [Bethany Wilinski](#), [Alyssa Morley](#), and [Jamie Heng-Chieh Wu](#), the COVID-19 pandemic has had the perhaps surprising effect of prompting many teachers to communicate with parents in new and more productive ways.

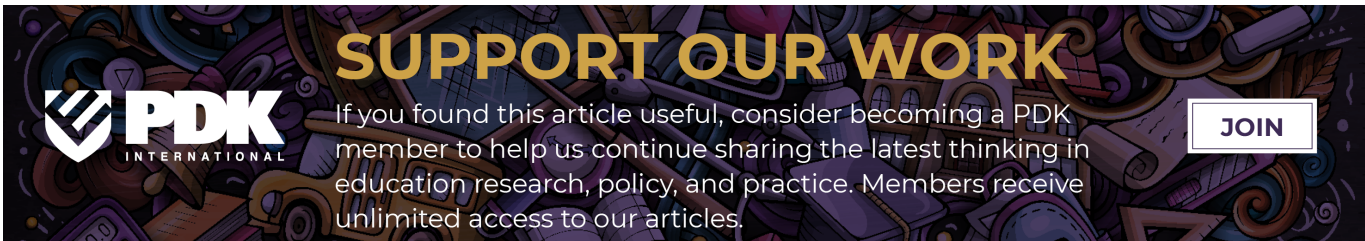
On the other hand, the long-standing tensions that Cutler describes look to be far from settled. In many parts of the country, public trust in governmental institutions — schools included — appears to have dipped to historic lows, epitomized by the current wave of parent-led efforts to cull books from school libraries and reading lists. And in such an environment, even a teacher’s well-intentioned effort to keep parents informed about the curriculum can trigger an angry backlash, as [Carolyn Stoughton](#), [Megan Lynch](#), and [May Lee](#) describe in these pages. Far from being willing to leave their children’s education to the professionals, many parents have become super-suspicious and hyper-vigilant, poised to challenge any lesson or assignment that seems to conflict even slightly with their values.

The home and the school have always been interdependent, notes Cutler, at the very end of his book. When it comes to educating America’s children, “Each has a separate, but related, task to perform that can be accomplished only in collaboration.” The challenge today, as ever, is for “parents and teachers [to] learn to meet halfway.”

Reference

Cutler, W.W. (2000). *Parents and schools: The 150-year struggle for control in American education*. University of Chicago Press.

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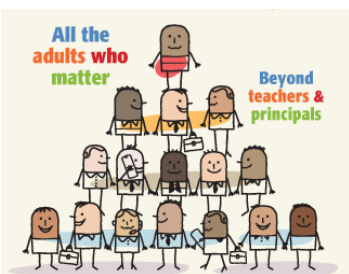
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