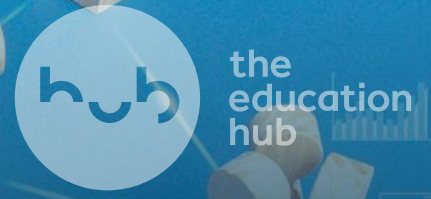


From family involvement to partnership



School resources

Family involvement and home-school partnerships have been correlated with a range of benefits for students, teachers, and whānau. This review summarises the research on both concepts and outlines the key differences.

What is family involvement?

Family or whānau involvement refers to the resources that families invest in their child's schooling. Many involvement activities are primarily focused on family support for the school: for example, whānau showing up for volunteer work, attending school functions or meetings, and assisting with field trips. Other activities, such as discussion of school reports with teachers, may involve one-way communication only, with parents largely playing a passive role.

Examples of family involvement include:

- Parent-teacher conferences
- Parents and whānau volunteering in classrooms and libraries, attending field trips, or coaching sports teams
- Parents and whānau supporting home-learning activities
- Parents and whānau participating in educational workshops organised by the school
- Parents and whānau attending events like school plays
- Parents and whānau joining Parent-Teacher Associations or other school committees

Why is family involvement important?

Research has found that family involvement correlates with improved student outcomes across different groups of students and families, across disciplines, across different approaches to working with families, and across student ages. Indeed, a comprehensive meta-analysis comparing a wide range of educational interventions found that whānau involvement had a larger effect on student academic achievement than most other interventions¹. Other longitudinal studies suggest whānau involvement is more strongly connected to achievement than the family's socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or family structure².

For students, benefits include:

- Improved academic achievement in the subject where they receive family support
- Higher homework completion rates and more effective learning through homework
- Better self-regulation and social skills, better behaviour and discipline
- Enhanced relationships with parents and whānau
- Increased feelings of competence, seeking challenging tasks and persisting with academic challenges
- High aspirations with regard to education, and a greater likelihood of enrolling in higher education.

For families and whānau, benefits include:

- Better access to educational resources
- Improved family literacy
- Increased interest in adult education and career development
- Self-growth and increased social capital in the community
- Increased awareness of their child's academic progress
- Greater confidence and satisfaction in parenting.

For teachers, the main benefits are improved communication and a more positive school climate.

What are home-school partnerships?

A sense of genuine partnership is crucial for effective family and whānau involvement. Partnerships combine input from the school with input from family members, giving both perspectives equal weight. They are mutually determined, co-equal relationships, which balance the traditional power dynamic between teachers and whānau. Teachers are still the experts on formal education, but parents and wider family members are the experts on the student. Each partner contributes their strengths to the relationship, and they share control. Support is reciprocal.

As a consequence of this equality, schools and whānau develop individualised ways to interact with each other, drawing on each partner's experiences and resources. They recognise their shared responsibility for students, collaborating to create common goals, exchange information, and enhance learning opportunities. They negotiate beliefs about the best way to support children's learning, rather than teachers imposing their beliefs upon families. Whānau self-define how they participate in their children's educational experiences.

Partnership activities focus on engaging, guiding, motivating, and energising each student to produce their own success. Teachers can influence the partnership by recognising and celebrating each child's individuality, welcoming all whānau, and helping whānau to understand their children as students.

Activities include:

- teachers finding opportunities for students and/or whānau to share knowledge and skills gained through home and family experiences
- teachers drawing on students' home experiences when designing learning activities
- schools providing resources such as books that particular groups of families have identified as important
- schools supporting whānau to engage with their children's learning.

Why are home-school partnerships important?

Due to the overlap between family involvement and home-school partnerships, some of the benefits shown in the research are the same for both. These include enhanced academic performance, improved communication, better access to resources for parents, and a more positive school climate. In addition, home-school partnerships build connections between home and school that promote better social outcomes. They can create a sense of community and belonging for everyone, as well as increased trust and mutual respect.

Further benefits of partnerships include, for students:

- More interest, motivation, and engagement in learning
- Receiving more tailored support
- Lower drop-out rates and better attendance
- Better mental health
- Better overall wellbeing as schools and whānau work together to support the social, emotional, and physical development of the child.

For parents:

- Increased agency to become leaders for justice and advocates for their children
- Intergenerational learning and unity.

For teachers:

- Feeling supported and appreciated
- Higher morale and self-efficacy
- Better understanding of the student's home environment, and access to information they need to support students
- Improved parent-teacher relationships
- Multicultural literacy
- Increased parental involvement in school activities and volunteering
- Enhanced problem-solving, and more effective solutions.

Barriers to family involvement and partnerships

Research in New Zealand shows that whānau are clearly interested in, and concerned about, their children's learning. Many want to learn about strategies to promote their children's progress. Parental education programmes as well as regular reports and conferences about students' achievement can help parents access this knowledge. However, family involvement and, in particular, uptake of education programmes is often low.

It is important not to assume that absent parents are uninterested in education and feedback sessions. Indeed, research shows that the large majority of parents want to be more involved, but may not be able to participate in the traditional options offered by schools. They may be absent from events because they have logistical difficulties in arranging transport or childcare. Parents from disadvantaged communities may work long hours and simply not have the time to come in. Parents who struggle with literacy and numeracy may lack confidence in their ability to support their children's learning. Recent immigrants may face language barriers. Parents from cultural minority groups may struggle with imbalanced power relations and cultural differences. Some parents may have anxiety about coming into school and meeting with teachers, fearing judgment for their perceived failings. This is a particular problem if the emphasis is on involvement instead of partnership. Others may have extra caring responsibilities and feel overwhelmed by the demands of looking after everyone, or they may have health issues that prevent them from leaving the house.

Other barriers to involvement and partnerships may arise from school policies. For example, traditional parent-teacher interviews may be hampered by mismatched expectations, mutual incomprehension, and defensive behaviours on both sides. Research shows that many parents expect to discuss their child's progress and difficulties, methods of teaching in school, and how the school can adjust. Teachers, on the other hand, may expect to identify ways parents can help at home, and how the student can adjust. These differences, if not addressed, can make parents feel powerless in the exchange, frustrated, or even distressed. They are then less likely to attend further interviews.

You can overcome barriers by making involvement activities easy and enjoyable, offering a wide range of options, increasing whānau self-efficacy, making the school climate more welcoming, and balancing power dynamics. See the other resources in this section for ideas on how to move from family involvement to partnership.

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