



# Collaborative Schooling

HOW FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS WORK TOGETHER  
TO HELP KIDS REALIZE THEIR ACADEMIC POTENTIAL



by  
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# What Do We Mean by Collaborative Schooling?

Collaborative schooling is a shared educational experience for parents, teachers, and students. It begins with collective communication among all parties and continues with united action that leads to:

- **Better results for students.** Better academic outcomes, certainly, but also a better experience of school and a better sense of overall well being that comes from healthy social, emotional, and intellectual growth.
- **Better relationships between parents and educators.** Parents and educators working in a mutually beneficial partnership to serve the needs of the students in their care.
- **Sustainable growth for everyone.** Improved progress and greater satisfaction for all participants through the well-managed application of time, effort, and resources.

People—and not programs—are the heart of collaborative schooling. It is defined by a set of ideas and actions that support families and educators as they work together to help students succeed in school. Formal programs may arise from this foundation but are neither required nor necessary.

Whether pursued individually on an informal basis, or in larger and more formal communities, collaborative schooling efforts are based on the following principles:

- **A knowledge of and respect for the academic values of families and educators.** When we know where we want to go, we have a better chance of getting there. We also see the value of relying on others to help us on our journey. Discovering commonly held values is among the first and most critical steps toward the development of a thoughtful and well developed itinerary.
  
- **An understanding of what and how students are taught in school so they can receive more effective support outside of the classroom.** When parents understand the instruction their sons and daughters are receiving, they can help them more effectively at home. This ensures greater consistency in the academic support they receive in other non-school situations.
  
- **A shared language of school success that parents, students, and educators use to communicate about academic achievement.** What does it mean to be getting a “B-minus” in 7th grade Language Arts? What does it mean to be “proficient” on the 5th grade state math test? And what do all of these new academic standards look like in practice? The names and norms of student performance differ from year to year and from class to class. The official vocabulary of academic achievement changes as well, sometimes so rapidly that even some teachers have trouble keeping up. Parents, educators, and students need a common language that describes student strengths and accomplishments in plain English. Everyone also benefits from accessible information about near-term educational goals, the instruction students will receive to reach those goals, and specific support parents can provide at home.

- **A focus on participatory interaction among teachers, students, and parents as the engine of progress, the precursor of performance, and the key to the realization of student academic potential.** Whether students start out as high achievers, low achievers, or somewhere in between, they develop and maintain their full potential only through strong and consistent engagement in the learning process alongside educators and parents. Consistent and constructive participation by all parties in the educational process is the key to steady progress that produces great results.
- **A feeling of compassion for the challenges faced by parents, students, and educators—and gratitude for the effort made by all participants.** Learning is hard. Teaching is hard. And running a happy, healthy family is one of life’s greatest challenges. When we inevitably fall short, and when others we are counting on similarly miss the mark, the cultivation of compassion for ourselves and others is vital. In these times and others, we also benefit by celebrating what we have achieved, and expressing gratitude to those who have helped us achieve it. Our expression of compassion is a sincere acknowledgement of the challenges we and the courage we exhibit in facing them. Gratitude is a powerful reminder of the successes we experience along the way toward our goals.
- **An ownership mindset from which we draw the power of personal agency in the pursuit of positive change.** Education is complicated. It has many moving parts and most of them are people. When things don’t work out the way we want them to, we are tempted to blame others or to find fault with “the system.” However, blame rarely increases the likelihood that things will improve. Such actions often have the exact opposite effect, as this path inevitably leads us to the conclusion that we are victims of circumstances beyond our control and that there is little we can do to change things.

Collaborative schooling as we've defined it here is not an unfamiliar idea, a trendy newfangled concept, or even an idealistic theory. Many families and educators engage in successful partnerships like this all the time. But while collaborative learning isn't new, it also isn't the norm. And it seems to us that if it were, the teaching and learning lives of many people would improve significantly.

By encouraging collaboration between parents, students, and educators, our intent is to support a paradigm of formal schooling where partnership and cooperation are implied in the definition of education itself and that in time, the "collaborative" adjective becomes redundant as we come to define education axiomatically as the shared responsibility of all participants.

Collaborative schooling is not a complicated new program, nor is it expensive or time-consuming to implement. In fact, it is very much the reverse: simple, efficient, and practical. Because collaborative schooling rests on a partnership model, however, it does demand that everyone involved—students, parents, and teachers, of course, but also school and district administrators, school board members, taxpayers, faculty in colleges of education, and state and federal legislators, to name but a few of the main stakeholders—acknowledge and act on the important role they play in making the educational process work.

## **Collaborative Schooling: A New Paradigm of Education Reform**

Implicit in education reform is the idea that government programs, better funding, and higher standards are the keys to strengthening our schools. While these things are important, something else is important, too: the way families and schools work together to help kids realize their academic potential.

What if part of strengthening our schools involved strengthening collaboration between families, students, and educators? What if we flipped education around and drove reform less through controversial legislation and divisive dialog and more by supporting families and educators in defining and expressing their highest values for the academic success and overall well-being of the children they both care so much about?

Much research points to the primacy of family factors in academic outcomes. Opportunities for educational change exist in living rooms and classrooms alike—and results are amplified when people work together toward important goals through a shared vision of success.

However, as an unintended consequence of unprecedented educational change, many parents are confused by processes they don't understand, language they are unfamiliar with, and a new culture of schooling that sometimes leaves them with more concerns than confidence. Educators, too, often experience the same uncertainty as they attempt to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances. Parents and educators need each other now more than ever. And children need them working collaboratively on their behalf.

Driving reform through a collaborative paradigm of educational change has implications of national scope and generational consequence. As parents send stronger students into kindergarten, support them more effectively through high school, and guide them wisely toward lives of aspiration, schools will change for the better in response to the combined effort of individual families and family-centered schools working together toward meaningful results.

## A Collaborative Schooling Story

I had a wonderful experience about a decade ago with a group of parents at Picnic Point Elementary School in Mukilteo, WA, where I was doing some consulting work. For 90 minutes, I led a workshop on writing instruction for parents who were interested in learning about what their children were learning in school.

I started with a discussion of how the best writing instruction of today differed from the traditional writing instruction most of us received a generation earlier. Then, for the last hour or so, the parents and I wrote together using the same lessons and classroom format their children had been experiencing throughout the year.

Judging from the friendly smiles, frequent laughter, and positive comments, I felt, as did the school's principal, that the parents not only enjoyed themselves but found the experience valuable. The writing they did was pretty good, too, which I think confirmed for them that what their children were being taught was both powerful and practical.

As I was leaving, I was struck by how appreciative and excited the parents were, how pleased the principal was, and how everyone seemed to agree that this kind of collaboration between a school and its families did so much to foster student success.

I was also struck by how rarely something like this takes place.



I have offered to do family education workshops like this one many times. It's a service I have provided to my clients free of charge for over 15 years. But out of the hundreds of schools that have paid me to help them improve student achievement, less than a dozen have let me help them start a collaborative schooling program for free.

To my knowledge, I'm not the only person who isn't invited to help schools work more effectively with the families of their students. As I have traveled around the country, I have never found a true collaborative schooling program.

A few schools I have worked with offer "curriculum nights" or "parent engagement" workshops. But no school that I know of has made a sustained effort to help families better support the education of their children by introducing them to the details of daily classroom instruction and the rationale for its use.

I understand why most schools don't have collaborative schooling programs. It takes extra time and energy to do well—two things and most educators don't have. Many educators also struggle to describe to parents exactly what they and to articulate compelling reasons for why they do it.



It's normal to fear things we don't understand especially when it comes to our children. Much of this fear is rooted in misunderstanding. Many parents don't understand the way their children are taught. And many teachers don't understand how to explain this to parents and their students. The best way to improving understanding on all sides is a pro-active approach to school and family collaboration.

While it's easy to see why most schools don't develop these kinds of programs, there's no reason families couldn't ask for them—and no reason to think that at least some teachers wouldn't provide them. What I know of open house nights and report card conferences confirms for me that parents don't get nearly enough of the knowledge they need to help their kids succeed in school. At the same time, most teachers I have worked with wish that parents were more active in supporting the academic progress of their students.

Almost every school I've worked with has a PTA, PTO, or similar parent support organization. These organizations, which include teachers and administrators as well, are filled with intelligent, inquisitive, caring people who are sincerely interested in the well-being of their students, their schools, and their communities. Why don't these people request and facilitate programs that foster true collaborative schooling between families and educators?

Perhaps it is because no one has ever encouraged them to do so.

But what better way would there be than an effort focused on collaborative schooling to encourage constructive cooperation between families and educators? What other approach would be more effective at improving family satisfaction with their schools? And what educator wouldn't want kids to have better academic support at home?

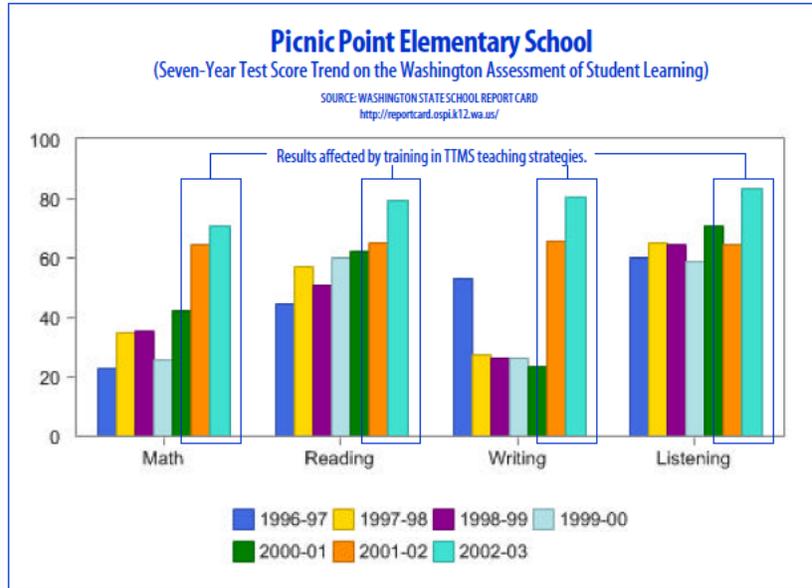
If I thought that answering these questions required anything more than common sense, I wouldn't be writing this book.

Families are a key piece of the educational puzzle. But as things exist today, most parents are forced into an awkward position as the frustrated spectators of their children's school experience. Giving them a chance to get into the game could turn passive critics into active supporters and potential adversaries into probable advocates.

Collaboration between families and schools isn't just good education policy, it's good education politics, too. If local levies, state funding, and the help of private business are important, why not cultivate this support by giving education consumers a better understanding of what they are paying for while at the same time supporting education providers in giving families a better understanding of why what they're paying for is so valuable?



So how did collaborative schooling work out at Picnic Point? See for yourself:



Hard work across two school years by teachers, administrators, students, and parents paid off in one of the largest achievement gains of any school in the state of Washington.

Notice, too, that the gains didn't accrue solely in writing. Even though our work together was confined to this single subject, and no training in other subjects was explored, students showed gains in all tested areas.

Part of this across-the board success can, I think, be explained by the fact that kids were asked to write in every subject. But I've never seen gains this dramatic over such a short period of time with so little outside assistance.



Picnic Point's success was so unusual that a reporter from the Mukilteo Beacon newspaper wrote an article about it. Most of the piece was devoted to the efforts of the administrators, teachers, and students. But the article ended like this:

*And the parents are happy, too. Karen Higman, whose daughter, Kate was in Ms. Feather's class, said she's seen remarkable improvements in her daughter's writing skills.*

*"And the kids who really struggled with writing in the past have gained confidence in themselves and their abilities," she said.*

*"Ms. Feather is the best teacher I've ever had," said Kate Higman. "I go back and visit her all the time this year."*

*Karen Higman credits the support of Picnic Point's administration, along with that of an active PTA.*

*"This year we are continuing our focus on writing," Principal Lora Wilson said. "Our PTA has budgeted money to help us pay for more training time. We are not going to let go of something we have seen to be so good for our kids."*

Some schools are nestled in such well-to-do communities that they don't have to worry about too many kids failing. Some families, too, are fortunate enough to be able to support the academic success of their children without help from their schools. And a very small number of truly amazing kids get by without much support from either their families *or* their schools.

But everything works better when everyone works together.

## What This Book is About

All families have strengths. So do all educators. Too many of us, however, tend to focus on what is going wrong rather than on what is going right. There are always some things going right. This is the foundation upon which we build to do our best work and to achieve the things that are most important to us.

There are few things in life more important to us than our children. And there are few things more important to our children than a good education. But educating children should not rest solely on our schools; nor should schools depend on families to figure out for themselves how to provide academic support to their kids at home.

When families and schools work together, parents feel more satisfied with the education their children receive, educators feel more supported by the parents of the students they teach, and children learn more effectively. Sounds simple, even obvious. But as life seems to get busier and more complicated with each passing year, it is often the simplest and most obvious things that elude us.

This book is about identifying the things that matter most, keeping them clearly in our sights and within our grasp.



More.

If you had to sum up contemporary life in one word, that word might be “more”. In school, teachers are being asked to do more, to bring more rigor and more professionalism to their work. We are also asking more of our children: more academic engagement during the school day, more homework after the school day is over, and more effort to achieve historic gains on high-stakes tests. Parents, in particular, feel the pressure of “more”. What parent doesn’t wish that he or she had more time, more resources, or even just more patience to bring to the challenges of daily life?

Asking more of people is not a bad idea as long as they have the means and materials to do more. But in schools today—for reasons of funding, structure, and often just tradition—doing more for kids isn't always possible. Families, therefore, matter more than ever, and family involvement through collaborative schooling is, to us, a necessary component in making up the difference between what schools do and what kids need.

Most schools, however, do not have collaborative schooling programs. So we invite parents to request these programs, to participate in their formation, and to support their schools in sustaining them.

This book is about inviting families and educators to create collaborative schooling efforts—formal programs or individual gestures, across entire schools or single classrooms.



Traditionally, schooling in our country has been deficit-based, focused primarily on the eradication of student problems. In this model, the application of student strengths is often over-shadowed by an emphasis on student weaknesses. As teachers are increasingly measured by student performance on standardized tests, many are finding that a similar deficit-based approach is being applied to them as well.

If the deficit-based nature of school is going to change, we think that focusing on strengths—familial, personal, and professional—and leveraging these assets through collaboration is the way to change it. We believe that collaborative relationships characterized by a strengths-based view of people as unique individuals with optimistic attitudes, growth mindsets, and aspirational goals is the most sensible and sustainable approach to satisfaction and success for everyone.

This book is about helping families identify and leverage their strengths to improve life at home and to help their children succeed in school.



Teamwork is just as much a contributor to family happiness as it is to school success. Families benefit greatly when members have a shared sense of purpose and direction, and each has a clearly defined role to play. Family members working together with a focus on strengths make an enormous contribution to the experience children have in school.

Family teamwork reinforces the idea that school success is a shared responsibility: students are responsible for learning, teachers are responsible for teaching, and parents are responsible for supporting the educational process. Through strengths-based collaborative interaction, students, teachers, and parents focus not on problems but on progress—and more progress is made as a result.

This book is about helping families work together as a team. It is also about extending that team to include those who educate their children.



However strengths-based and team-oriented a family may be, collaborative schooling is possible only when families understand their schools and when schools understand their families. The most common impediment to this understanding is misunderstanding.

The language of school is a foreign language to most parents, few of whom gain fluency despite having thirteen years per child to do so. Communication isn't much easier for teachers, many of whom find themselves caught up in *eduspeak*, the trendy academic vocabulary of the day, a lexicon that changes with each shift in the political reality of contemporary reform.

How, then, will strengths-based families communicate the strengths of their children to their teachers? And how will teachers communicate effectively with parents who have little chance of understanding the rapidly-changing language of education reform?

What everyone needs—teachers, parents, and especially students—is a common language that bridges this divide. This common language would enhance collaborative schooling by:

1. Enabling communication between parents, teachers, and students in ways that build trust and leverage the strengths of everyone involved.
2. Defining practices and processes parents, teachers, and students use to optimize educational experiences.
3. Creating a means by which parents, teachers, and students can develop together a culture of academic achievement that is meaningful, measurable, and respectful of the core values and life circumstances of all participants.

This book is about providing this essential bridge language so that families and educators can communicate more effectively for the purposes of meeting student needs.



Sometimes the simplest truths are the most easily forgotten. One simple truth that we hope to convey is this: Just as families benefit from a strengths-based approach, good teamwork, and a common language of academic success, educators benefit from the very same thing. Families and educators also share a common interest in supporting the academic achievement and overall well-being of the children in their care.

Because families and educators benefit from the same things and share the same goals, they are natural allies. And yet, many feel they are adversaries. Worse even than that, perhaps, is the all-too-common situation where a child is struggling, neither school nor family can meet the child's needs alone, but no constructive means of interaction exists to enable the collaborative schooling that could make all the difference in the world.

This book is about how families and educators make all the difference in the world.