

The Role of Family-School Partnerships in Increasing Science Literacy in Rural Communities

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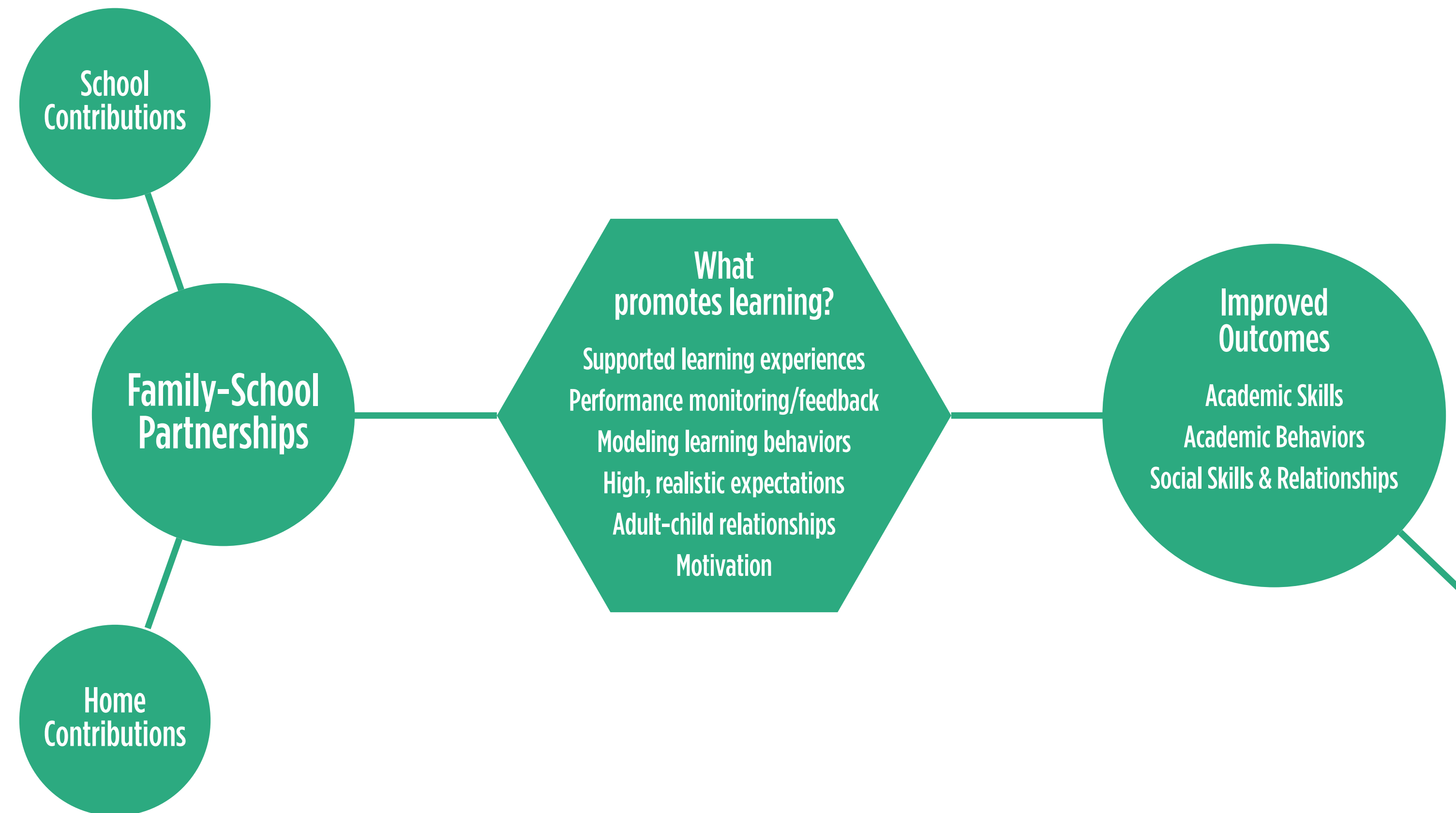
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Abstract

When parents and schools come together in true partnerships, outcomes for students are truly maximized. We present key points from the research literature about the importance of family-school partnerships influencing and enhancing student learning, and we share some practical strategies for how to establish and maintain partnerships between teachers and families that increase science literacy in rural communities. In addition, we describe a specific family-school partnership model for students needing additional supports to succeed. We also share preliminary findings from an ongoing research study on this model – Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC; Grant # R324A100115) – being conducted in rural communities through the National Center for Research on Rural Education (Grant # R305C090022).

Family-School Partnerships Promote & Strengthen Learning

Learning is supported by positive learning experiences; when performance is monitored and feedback is given; when constructive learning behaviors are modeled; when high but realistic expectations are set; with sufficient motivation; and through positive adult-child relationships. Each setting – home and school – contribute their own experiences for optimizing student's learning opportunities, but when there is an infused connection and partnership between teachers and parents, the outcomes are even stronger and more salient.



Family-School Partnerships Foster Learning Opportunities Outside of the School Day

Families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. Recent studies show that when families and schools work together, students demonstrate increased achievement and performance, long-term academic success and school completion. Moreover, parents demonstrate greater knowledge of school functioning. Seventy percent (70%) of children's waking hours are spent outside of school, providing much time for expanding learning opportunities in addition to formal educational experiences during the school day. In fact, federal policy recognizes the benefit of out-of-school time learning and mandates that schools engage in partnership with parents. However, there is often a lack of understanding for how to establish effective partnerships between home and school settings.

Family-School Partnerships Promote Success for Students Needing Additional Supports

Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008) is a family-school partnership model that has a well-established history of research support. CBC is a strength-based, cross-system problem-solving and decision-making model where parents, teachers and other caregivers or service providers work as partners and share responsibility for promoting positive and consistent outcomes related to a child's academic, behavioral and social-emotional development.

Goals & Characteristics of Family-School Partnerships

A hallmark of family-school partnerships is that, in every interaction between home and school, the student is at the center of those conversations. In these partnerships, families and schools come together for the common purpose of supporting a student's positive growth and development in their learning.

Primary Goals of Family-School Partnerships

- To improve experiences for children across environments for the purpose of improving student outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, science literacy)
- To increase a shared commitment between parents and schools for the child's education
- To strengthen home-school relationships among the adults in the child's life and improve adult-child relationships
- To address concerns for the child across home and school settings
- To increase cooperation and collaboration between settings and draw from the diverse expertise and resources offered in the home and school settings

Characteristics of the Relationships in Family-School Partnerships

- Student-centered
- Valued, balanced, cooperative and interdependent
- Based on mutual respect, trust and open communication
- Dynamic, developed and refined over time, and mutual between home and school
- Close collaboration between parents and schools, with clearly specified rights and responsibilities for the child's outcomes

Strategies for Promoting Family-School Partnerships in Science

Engage Parents as Partners to Expand STEM Learning Opportunities

When families and schools work together to support learning, the resulting linkages foster expanded learning opportunities. The key for educators is helping parents recognize and learn ways to take advantage of incidental, informal learning opportunities – at home and in the community.

Maintain Meaningful Cross-System Communication

Early in the school year, establish as part of the routine an easy method for frequent bi-directional communication between school and home.

Identify and Monitor Specific Goals

Educators and parents jointly determine goals for students at conferences or via other simple means. Monitor progress toward these goals; share progress made across home and school; and recognize, praise and encourage continued accomplishments.

Schedule Celebrations in Science

Schedule family-community-school nights for students to share with adults and other students what they have learned in science, including accomplishments that occur across home and school.

CBC Goals & Process

CBC brings families and schools together through a series of 3-4 structured, goal-oriented meetings on behalf of children's learning in order to promote positive outcomes for students through joint, mutual, cross-system planning across home and school. CBC promotes positive home-school relationships via partnerships and promotes parent engagement through meaningful participation. It also establishes daily, positive home-school communication. A trained CBC consultant facilitates goal-oriented meetings with a child's parent(s) and teacher(s) and uses semi-structured conjoint interviews to guide the meetings. The four CBC stages are: "Building on Strengths," in which the child's strengths and needs are identified; "Planning for Success," in which needs are analyzed and plans for the home and school setting are developed; "Plan Implementation," in which plans are implemented in the home and school setting; and "Checking and Reconnecting," in which plans are evaluated.

CBC in Rural Communities: A Research Study

Currently, a large-scale randomized controlled study is being conducted to evaluate the effects of CBC in rural communities. The CBC in Rural Communities project addresses challenges to partnerships in rural settings by:

- providing access to effective instructional and behavioral supports
- increasing meaningful interactions and communication between parents and teachers
- fostering shared responsibilities for parents and teachers who work as partners
- focusing on and enhancing strengths of all parties
- strengthening relationships through cooperative, goal-directed and solution-oriented services for students who are not as successful as they could be

Early findings are showing that family-school partnership barriers unique to rural settings (e.g., small communities, perceptions and attitudes based on generational histories) may be effectively addressed through the partnership-building strategies used by CBC consultants. In addition, frequent contact, constructive problem solving, mutual input toward solutions, individual roles and responsibilities, and home-school communication may be important to increase trust and alter negative attitudes.

Preliminary results indicate that CBC appears promising for students in rural schools whose behavioral challenges are interfering with learning. The effects of CBC appear to extend beyond student outcomes to the positive practices and beliefs of their teachers and parents. These effects are especially encouraging considering the need for effective services in rural areas for students with behavioral concerns.