Chapter 1
Effective Parent Partnerships Between Schools and Diverse Families

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ABSTRACT
The demographics in the United States are steadily changing. There has been a constant increase in the diverse families in schools. Often, culturally diverse and high-poverty families face more and/or different barriers to home-school partnerships than typical families. With parent involvement being so crucial to school and child success, effective education programs would benefit from learning to create partnerships with all families in authentic and meaningful ways. This chapter gives educators an overview of the challenges and the suggested practices for creating effective partnerships with diverse families.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
• Why are some schools able to build successful home-school partnerships while others fail?
• What barriers make home and school partnerships challenging for diverse family populations?
• What practices suggested by the relevant literature propose to cultivate meaningful home and school partnerships, especially with diverse family populations?

Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, racism, and the injustice that exists in society. -Gloria Ladson Billings

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INTRODUCTION

A Tale of Two Schools

The Moore School (Pseudonym)

I began teaching first grade at The Moore School in September 1989. I was excited and enthusiastic, as this was my first full-time permanent teaching position. As a young teacher, I was optimistic and fully ready to take on the challenges that teaching in a high-poverty area entailed. Having grown up in poverty, this has always been my goal. The Moore School was a Title I school, (a school considered at risk due to a high percentage of children in poverty) that received additional funding, so resources were plenty. The make-up of the school was well over 95% African American. The school was equipped with resources, materials, and supplies (unlike my previous temporary placement that struggled with books, paper, and chalk). Here at The Moore School, the teachers were given ample supplies to begin the year. Early in the school year, it became evident that the school struggled with parent involvement. When back-to-school night rolled around, incentive programs were put in place, but overall the expectations were low and ultimately the involvement was low. There was no shortage of caring faculty and staff at the school. The faculty and staff did care about the students and the school; however, partnerships and parent involvement still suffered. On back-to-school night, teachers’ classrooms that boasted of more than eight parents were considered well attended, while the typical class size was over 30, and it was not uncommon for a teacher to have fewer than 5 total parents show up. Of course, there were some teachers who individually were able to be more successful with parents and families, but, overall, the school struggled to gain active participation. This issue was not just a back-to-school night issue. This issue spanned the school year and included poorly attended parent-teacher conferences, reoccurring conflicts with families and parents, and an overall feeling from the school faculty and staff that the parents just didn’t care. Much of the parental contact I noticed was due to some negative experience. There were often conflicts that played out during the course of the school year. At the core of some of the conflicts, the parents felt that they were not respected by some of the school personnel. For the 6 years that I taught first grade at The Moore School, home, school, and community partnerships remained problematic.

The Tasker School (Pseudonym)

After 6 years of teaching first grade at The Moore School, I took a position teaching Gifted Support at a neighboring school. The Tasker School was just six blocks from The Moore School. While there was a slight change in demographics, much was the same. The school was in the same high-poverty, high-crime neighborhood. The racial and ethnic demographics were only slightly different, with the majority of the children being African American, but the school had a slightly higher percentage Asian population than The Moore School. The school had a reputation of being a “good school” despite the challenges of the neighborhood. While I wouldn’t consider the school’s parent involvement and parent relationships excellent, it was evident that there was a vast difference in the relationships between the parents and the school here at The Tasker School than at The Moore School. The school hosted a parent center that was open daily for use by the parents. The parent center was equipped with computers, books, and other resources for parents’ use. Several times a year, the school hosted family night programs where parents and families could attend participate in planned academic-related events at the school on a Friday night.