

The Powerful 'Secret' to Effective Parent Involvement



Genuine Invitations

Q. What “secret” for getting parents actively engaged in their child’s education do you already know—but don’t think to use?

A. Let’s illustrate the “secret” by asking you to recall a scenario you have likely experienced many times.

John is at a sports event, grocery store, dinner party, restaurant, class reunion—or simply walking down the street—when Steve Brown, whom he hasn’t seen in quite a while, approaches him:

Steve: John Hansen, is that you?

John: Why, Steve Brown? I haven’t seen you in years.

What are you doing here? Oh, and this is my wife, Barbara.

Hi, Barbara. This is my wife, Susan. We’ve lived here in Springfield for about 10 years now and we’re just on our way to meet some friends for dinner. Do you live in the area now?

Yes, we’re just over in Kingstown now and haven’t been this way for a long time.

Well, it certainly is a small world, isn’t it? It’s *really* great to see you. I’m sorry, we’ve got to run now, but listen, do keep in touch! We’d love to get together—anytime!

Thanks, John. It’s great to see you guys, too. Let’s get together some weekend!

Absolutely, sounds good!

But imagine now that the story is not over ...

It's months later on a Saturday afternoon. John has been working in the yard all day. He's hot and about ready to shower, grab a snack and head into town for some errands.

Then he sees a car pull into the driveway. Two people carrying a watermelon get out and start walking toward the door. Susan opens the door and ... there on the doorstep are Steve and (what was her name?) Barbara! And they've come to "get together." Just like he mentioned months ago!

And he is *stunned*!

John did actually say, "We'd love to get together anytime!" but he didn't mean that he and Susan were ready for Steve and Barbara to stop by *at any time*!

Can you imagine something like that actually happening? It's a ridiculous scenario, isn't it?

But why is it so unlikely that Steve and Barbara would drop by to visit unannounced?

It is unlikely that they would stop by without warning because you were just exchanging pleasantries. They also would have known that's all you were doing.

When you invited them to "get together" you were being polite. That's all it was, a *polite invitation*, not a *genuine invitation*. And they wouldn't have missed that.

The 'secret' is to *genuinely invite parents to be actively engaged in their child's education.*

Issuing genuine invitations is the secret to getting parents to understand that you really do want and need them to get involved in their child's academic success. Parents need to know that you *really are* inviting them to be involved.

Yes, you are polite and smiling when you invite them, but often parents think you don't really mean it.

Think about the last back-to-school night when you told parents something very much like, "I want you to know that you're all welcome at East Valley School anytime. It's your school. You are always welcome here!"

But many parents *knew* from experience with you or other school staff that that wasn't always true. And teachers *hoped* that parents wouldn't come to their classrooms unannounced, because most of them are not prepared to have them simply drop by.



So, what does a genuine invitation sound like?

Let's rewind that "We'd love to get together" invitation that John Hansen gave his long-lost friend Steve Brown and see how a genuine invitation might sound:

John was just saying ...

Let me check my calendar. (*Checking ...*) Yes! We'll be home that weekend and we'd love to get together.

(*Steve and Barbara talking, smiling ...*) Wow, that sounds great! Let's plan on it—Saturday evening, June 3, at 5:00. Thanks so much! We'll look forward to it. Let's trade email and cell info so we can stay in touch.

Well, it certainly is a small world, isn't it, Steve? It's *really* great to see you. I'm sorry, we've got to run now, but we would love to get together and catch up on old times. How about next weekend, the beginning of June?

(*John and Susan talking ...*) Okay, then. How about coming over to our place for a cookout on Saturday, June 3? 5:00? We could catch up, have some of my trademark barbeque. We live just off Elm Street. Would that work?

(*Exchanging contact info ...*) Perfect, we'll see you Sunday, June 3! I'll pull out some of those old photos, too. Have a good evening! Goodbye!

How genuine invitations differ from simply polite invitations

Genuine invitations are:	Simply polite invitations are:
<p>1. Specific about the time, place, purpose and benefits: <i>“How about coming over to our place for a cookout on Saturday, June 3? 5:00? We could catch up, have some of my trademark barbeque. We live just off Elm Street. Would that work?”</i></p>	<p>General: <i>Come see us anytime! You’re all welcome at East Valley School anytime. It’s your school. You are always welcome here!</i></p>
<p>2. Personal and best delivered face-to-face: <i>John Hansen and his wife Susan are talking to Steve Brown and his wife Barbara.</i></p>	<p>Impersonal and delivered to a mass audience: <i>Large group announcements, impersonal notes, robo calls or newsletter articles stating, “Come to the next PTA meeting! Check the schedule for the date and time.”</i></p>
<p>3. Complete with personal follow-up details: <i>“Let’s trade email and cell info so we can stay in touch.”</i></p>	<p>Lacking personal follow-up details: <i>Usually consisting just of impersonal notes, robo calls or newsletter articles.</i></p>
<p>4. Reinforced by a warm, personal welcome: <i>“Come in! We have really been looking forward to this evening and the barbeque is ready to go!”</i></p>	<p>Marked by impersonal signs, questions and cryptic directions: <i>“Visitors report to the office. Violators will be prosecuted!” ... “Excuse me, why are you in the building?” ... “1st and 2nd grade parents go to the resource room. 3rd and 4th grade parents go to Mrs. Bean’s room.” ... “YOU MUST present all 506b forms to the proctor in the multi-purpose room before proceeding to the parent meeting!”</i></p>
<p>5. Include follow-up personal contact: <i>“Susan and I are so glad you could come tonight. We had a great time! We’re looking forward to doing this again!”</i></p>	<p>Usually include no follow-up contact whatsoever.</p>

Research proves the importance of *genuinely* inviting parents to become involved in their child's education

While the examples used so far have dealt with inviting people to meetings or events, the importance of issuing genuine invitations to parents goes far beyond activities at a school building. Research shows that the most effective way parents can assure their child's academic success is to be deeply involved in the child's education at home and in the community, as well as at school, from birth through high school graduation and beyond.

The best and most practical research on the topic has been conducted over a period of more than 20 years at Vanderbilt University, where researchers developed a working model of the parent involvement process. (See a graphic summary of the research, along with a step-by-step explanation starting on page 11 of this report.)

The model explains that for parents to become involved, they must feel that they have been genuinely invited to do so. They must feel they are receiving:

- **General invitations from the school** showing that staff members want, invite and welcome parents' involvement in their child's education. Parents need to feel welcome at school, be warmly greeted when they go there and feel that the staff values their involvement efforts. The more personal and genuine these invitations are, the more likely that parents will be involved.
- **Specific invitations from their child's teachers** to be involved, from genuine requests to help their child at home to an invitation to attend parent-teacher conferences.
- **Specific requests and invitations from their child to be involved.** It is important to help parents understand that, beyond having their child actually ask for help with homework, reading or a school project, even complaints from their child about school being hard or not wanting to go to school are, in fact, genuine invitations to get involved and "help me."



Invitations for parents to become involved in a wide variety of ways must be received directly and indirectly from school staff, from teachers and from children themselves. The more personal and genuine those invitations are, the better.

What are some practical ways our busy school staff members can issue genuine invitations to parents?

There are many ways that school staff can make sure each of the essential elements of a genuine invitation are addressed in invitations to parents. Once you get the hang of it, you'll find it is a lot easier than you think. And, once parents feel they are genuinely invited and truly welcomed by the school as partners in their children's education, you will begin to see parent engagement as you have never seen it before.



A checklist of practical ideas for issuing genuine invitations

1. Genuine invitations are specific about time, place, purpose and benefits:

- Be sure your invitation includes the specific purpose and benefits** of the meeting, event or other involvement opportunity. Parents are very busy. Many are working at one or more jobs outside the home. While they will do nearly anything to make sure their children succeed academically, school meetings and events often compete with family mealtimes, the need to get regular household chores done—or simply time to get a good night's sleep. Parents do not want to “waste” their time on an activity that does not provide significant benefits for them and their own child.

- The more specific and detailed the invitation, the more effective it will be.**

Weak: “You are invited to our latest series of Academic Nights for Parents on the third Tuesday of each month.”

Better: “You are invited to come to our Math Night for 5th and 6th grade students and their parents on Tuesday, October 23 from 6 to 8 pm in the multipurpose room.”

Best: “You are invited to come to our Math Night for 5th and 6th grade students and their parents. It will be held on Tuesday, October 23 from 6 to 8 pm in the multipurpose room. Martin’s teacher, Mr. Crosley, will review some important skills he is now teaching students, and he will show you some fun and simple ways to reinforce those skills at home. Childcare will be provided for preschool children and free pizza will be available for all!”

2. Genuine invitations are personal and usually best issued face-to-face:

It's the power of personal contact that makes the invitation genuine.
School invitations are sometimes detailed, making a written summary necessary, but personal delivery makes it most effective.

Personal invitation delivery options include:

- A face-to-face conversation.
- A personal note sent by U.S. Mail.
- A personally-addressed email (best sent to a single person without listing a large group of other addressees).
- A personal text message.
- Personally handing a parent a slip of paper summarizing the event, meeting or involvement request details.



Combined personal and paper invitations work well.
It is often hard to explain—and remember—all the details of an invitation given in a conversation, so it helps to have a supply of brief paper invitations summarizing the event to hand to all the parents you meet. You'll be amazed at how many parents you *can* reach personally every day.

... *but what if you simply cannot personally invite everyone?*

Personal invitations to Key Communicators enhance effectiveness.

Nearly every family at your school is part of a smaller network of other trusted friends and acquaintances with whom they discuss school affairs. Once you personally contact one person in a network, most others soon know about it. Some families are connected to several networks within a school.

There is a name for such well-connected, influential people in any school (or any other organization). They are called *Key Communicators*. Luckily, you can quickly identify them. Your invitations will be much more effective school-wide if you make sure you personally contact those key people, even as you also work to contact as many others as you can.

Here's a simple way to identify your school's Key Communicators:

1. List current and recent members of your school PTA or PTO board.
2. List all the parents you can think of who have had multiple children in your school for many years. You don't need to do a computer search; the list of parents who quickly come to mind is just fine.
3. List your biggest supporters (and your biggest opponents) in recent years that still have children in your school.
4. List all the barbers, bartenders and beauty shop operators that you can think of in your school attendance area.
5. List the parents with whom you can recall having had personal contact in the last two weeks.

Next steps ...

Once you have made your Key Communicator list, ask several well-connected school staff members to make their own lists of parents in the above categories and share it with you. Good staff candidates include the person who usually answers your school phone, your head custodian, your food service manager and some teachers who live in your school attendance area. Explain that you are working to make a list of Key Communicators who can help get the word out about important school events and meetings.

Once you have several lists of potential Key Communicators, look for the names listed multiple times. That's your priority personal contact list for every important invitation you want to issue. It takes very little time to identify the names. For most schools the list boils down to just 12 to 20 people. If others hear about the list and also want to be Key Communicators, welcome them aboard!



When you have made your list, personally contact each person to invite them to be a Key Communicator. Tell them that you will contact them when there are important meetings or events for people to attend or when there is other priority news—and invite them to contact you any time as well. Explain that, because they are well-connected in the school community, you will rely on them to spread the word to other families about important events and information. Most will be honored and delighted to serve, but if they don't want to do it, that's fine too.



3. Genuine invitations are complete with personal follow-up details:

- When you issue your invitation in person**, give parents your business card with your contact information to make it easy for them to request more information.
- If your invitation includes a written summary**, provide information on how to reach you. Often questions come up before the event and knowing how to contact you may determine whether or not a parent participates.
- If you do not have current contact information for the parents**, a good time to ask for it is when you are providing yours.

4. Genuine invitations are reinforced by a warm, personal welcome:

- Just as you provide a warm welcome to visitors at your home**, it is just as important to reinforce your invitation to parents with a sincere, enthusiastic welcome when they arrive for events at school.
- Welcome posters, easy-to-follow direction signs** from school building entrances, and signs or staff to show parents where to sit or pick up information as they arrive all help make parents feel genuinely welcomed.

5. Genuine invitations are marked by follow-up personal contact:

- A warm and personal “Thank you for coming!” as parents leave an event, or “Thank you for working with Carolyn on her project” is the best way to follow up, just as you would follow up with guests who came to your home.
- Asking parents for follow-up ideas or other feedback will also make parents feel good about having been involved, more likely to stay involved and more likely to participate again the next time they are invited.



Anything you can do to make invitations more genuine will help

Even if you cannot follow every single suggestion for issuing genuine invitations, the more of them you can incorporate, the more effective your results will be!

For every bit of extra effort you make to genuinely invite parent and family involvement, you are likely to see a payoff much greater than you expected in terms of better parent and family relationships, more personal fulfillment and satisfaction in your job, a feeling that you are truly making a difference—and in substantially enhanced student achievement.

Remember, genuine invitations don't all have to come from you!

As important as genuine invitations are, research says they don't all have to come from you. Experts have identified three essential sources of invitations to parents:

1. **Invitations from school leaders.** This creates an overall school atmosphere that makes parents feel welcome whenever they are in the building—and that their involvement in their child's education is very important.
2. **Specific invitations from teachers.**
3. **Specific invitations from the child.**

Anything you can do to make sure parents feel that they are genuinely invited to be involved in their child's academic success is sure to produce positive results.

Read what research says about invitations to parents

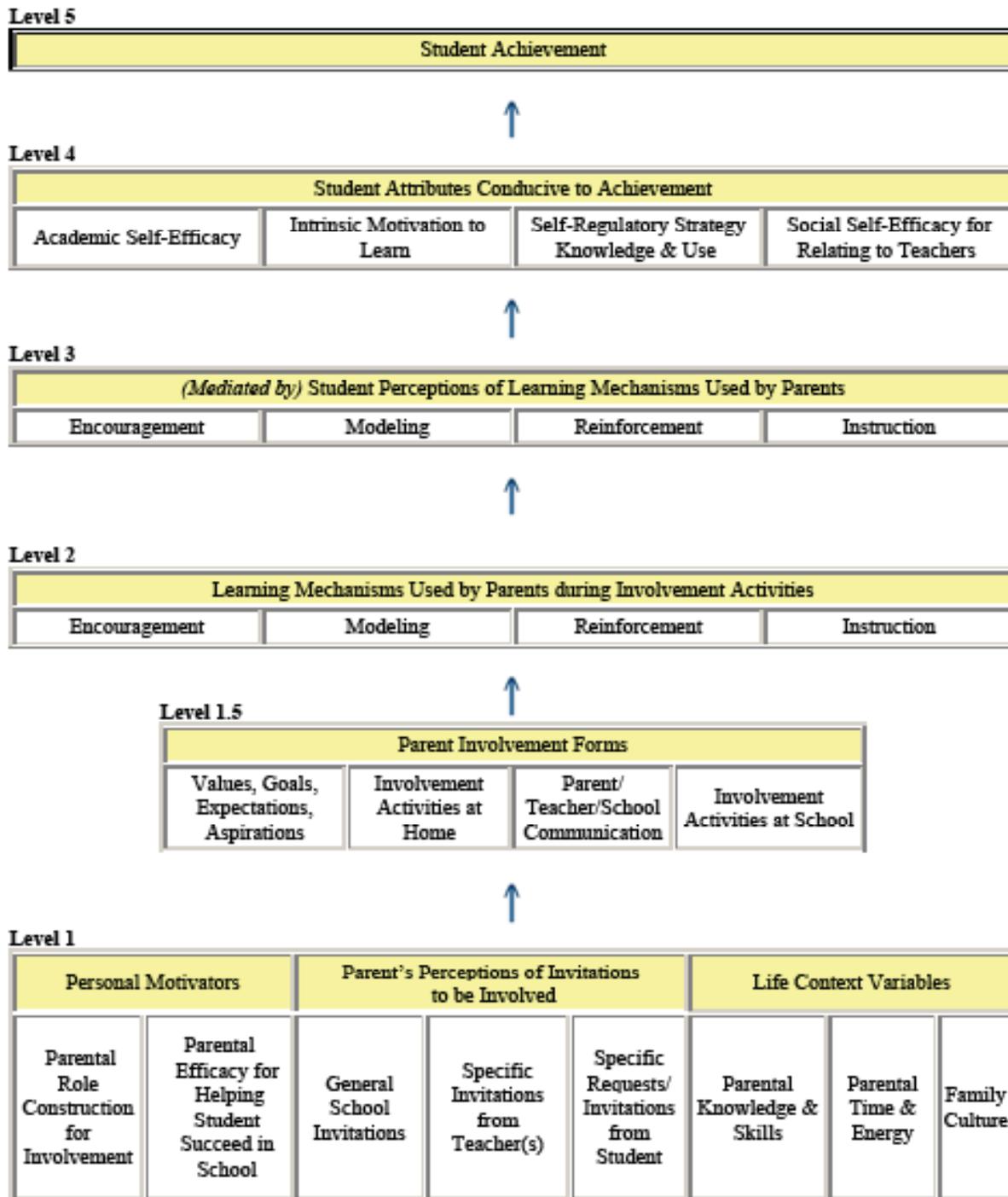
Over more than two decades, researchers at Vanderbilt University, led by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler, have been developing a working model of the parent involvement process. The model addresses these questions:

1. Why do (and don't) families become involved?
2. What do families do when they are involved?
3. How does family involvement make a positive difference in student outcomes?

Unlike so much other research, the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process can be summarized in graphic form on a single page. Read on to see the chart along with an explanation of each level of the model.



Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process



Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997, 2005, 2010.

Overview of the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process

The model is a representation of decades of research on family involvement. Structured in five levels, the model addresses **three essential questions**:

1. Why do (and don't) families become involved?
2. What do families do when they are involved?
3. How does family involvement make a positive difference in student outcomes?

This overview describes the model beginning with parents' motivations for involvement in their children's education (Level 1).

Personal Motivators		Parent's Perceptions of Invitations to be Involved			Life Context Variables			
Level 1	Parental Role Construction for Involvement	Parental Efficacy for Helping Student Succeed in School	General School Invitations	Specific Invitations from Teacher(s)	Specific Requests/Invitations from Student	Parental Knowledge & Skills	Parental Time & Energy	Family Culture

Level 1 of the model suggests that **three major factors** influence the variety and frequency of family involvement. These three factors are parents':

1. Personal motivators.
2. Perceptions of invitations to be involved.
3. Life context variables.

These factors at Level 1 interact to shape the forms and frequency of family involvement.

Personal Motivators

Central to the model is the idea that **parents' motivations for involvement are a function of the social systems** to which they belong. For instance, parents' role construction and sense of efficacy are influenced by their:

- Own family and academic experiences during their childhood.
- Current family systems.
- Recent experiences in the school systems that their children attend.

The **two personal motivators** identified in the model are **parental role construction** for involvement and **parents' sense of self-efficacy** for helping their children succeed in school.

1. **Role construction** is parents' beliefs about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children's schooling. In essence, it is their job description from their own viewpoint.
2. **Self-efficacy** for helping their children succeed in school refers to parents' beliefs about whether or not their involvement is likely to have a positive influence on their children's education. Just as student self-efficacy influences students' academically related behaviors, parents' sense of self-efficacy shapes what parents do.

Parents' perceptions of invitations to be involved

Contextual motivators of involvement take three forms:

1. **General invitations from the school.** Does the school feel welcoming? Do all school staff members (including front office staff, custodians, etc.) greet parents warmly?
2. **Specific teacher invitations,** such as teacher requests for supporting learning at home or attending a parent-teacher conference.
3. **Specific invitations from the child.** Invitations from the child can be explicit—"I need help," "I just don't understand this," "I hate school!" They can also be implied. The child might be struggling with homework or procrastinating to get a school project done.

Life context variables

- **Parents' understanding of their own skills and knowledge** influences their thinking about the kinds of involvement activities they take on. When students' or teachers' requests for involvement fit parents' beliefs about their skills and abilities, they are more likely to act; however, if parents believe their skills or knowledge are inadequate, they may be reluctant to take action.
- **Parents' perceptions of the time and energy** they have available for involvement influence their decisions about involvement. Parents may be constrained by long work hours, varied family obligations and the reality that opportunities to become involved in many educationally-related activities are scheduled for the school's convenience.
- **Family culture may play a significant role** in parents' ideas about the ways they can and should be involved in supporting their child's learning. For example, even when schools are inviting, families whose cultures have traditionally suggested that parents should play a limited role in students' formal schooling may stay "on the side lines." Conversely, families whose cultures expect regular and direct family engagement may offer considerably more active engagement than their students' schools expect.

Level 1.5

Parent Involvement Forms			
Values, Goals, Expectations, Aspirations	Involvement Activities at Home	Parent/Teacher/School Communication	Involvement Activities at School

Level 1.5 of the model defines several forms of involvement:

- One form of involvement incorporates parents' clear communication with their children about their **personal and family values, goals, expectations and aspirations for student learning**. The communication of these goals and expectations, in turn, shape students' beliefs and behaviors related to learning (see Level 4).
- The model also acknowledges that families support student learning through **involvement activities at home**. These often include such activities as talking about the school day, expressing interest in the student's learning, and monitoring and reviewing student work.
- Effective **family-school communication** influences students' academic progress. The value of effective communication is generally strongest when the communication is consistently characterized by mutual respect, careful listening, and school responsiveness to parents' questions, ideas, suggestions and concerns.
- Finally, the model includes **participation in school-based activities**. Educators sometimes assume that parents who are not at school are not involved. The breadth of involvement forms described in Levels 1.5 and 2 of the model are important reminders that involvement at school is not necessarily a good indicator of parents' actual breadth and level of involvement.

Level 2

Learning Mechanisms Used by Parents during Involvement Activities			
Encouragement	Modeling	Reinforcement	Instruction

Level 2 of the model argues that parents influence the student attributes necessary for school success (outlined in Level 4) via **four specific kinds of activities**. These "active ingredients" are: **encouragement, modeling, reinforcement and instruction**.

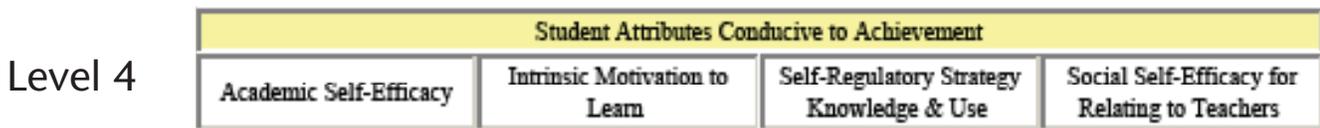
Level 3

<i>(Mediated by)</i> Student Perceptions of Learning Mechanisms Used by Parents			
Encouragement	Modeling	Reinforcement	Instruction

Level 3 asserts that these mechanisms remain inert unless students perceive their parents' actions. In this way, **student perceptions of their parents' use of the four mechanisms** is an essential channel whereby parents' beliefs and behaviors are translated into attributes that lead to academic success.

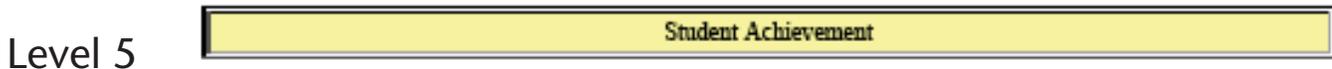
For example, when parents encourage their child to persist in academic work, and the child perceives this encouragement, parents contribute to the development of student academic self-efficacy or confidence in their child's ability to learn.

In another example, when parents attend meetings and events at school or ask their child about the school day, and the child is engaged in these activities, parents are modeling the importance of education.



This level of the model views students as the authors of their academic success. It describes a set of **four student beliefs and behaviors** associated with academic achievement:

1. One belief important to achievement is **academic self-efficacy**. Put simply, efficacy is the belief that "I can." When students believe that they are capable of learning, they are more likely to persist in the face of new and sometimes challenging academic work. If they do not hold this belief then they are less likely to persist.
2. Another important student attribute is **intrinsic motivation to learn**. Highly effective learners have a genuine interest in mastering the content and this curiosity sustains their engagement in learning both in and out of school.
3. A third attribute is **self-regulatory skills**. This means that students behave in ways that support their learning, including managing time well, setting goals and monitoring their progress.
4. The fourth attribute at this level of the model underscores the **social dimensions of school success**. Successful students know how to ask for help when they are confused and how to work cooperatively with others in the classroom. We know that these attributes are important to academic success.



Our ultimate goal is **student achievement**. The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model asserts that parent involvement, as described at each level of the process, influences and to some degree predicts student outcomes.

See also: The Family-School Partnership Lab, www.vanderbilt.edu/peabody/family-school/model.html.

Learn how you can apply the parent involvement model with parents and teachers at your school right now!

To read about two new, inexpensive and practical applications of the landmark Vanderbilt University parent involvement model research that you can apply right now in your own school, go to the Parent Institute website. See the links below:

1. The first program is *Realizing the American Dream Family Engagement Program: A Team Approach to Academic Success*. Thousands of parents have already graduated from this research-proven series of 10 two-hour classes offered at individual schools by local facilitators. The program is based on the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parent Involvement Process.

For complete details, go to: <http://www.parent-institute.com/rad>.

2. Second is the Parent Institute's new research-proven professional development program for teachers, also based on the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parent Involvement Process: *TIP: Teachers Involving Parents—A Professional Development Program to Enhance Parental Involvement for Student Success*.

For complete details, go to: <http://www.parent-institute.com/tip>.

