

Disempowering Families: An examination of school policy

By Michael McCabe

Abstract:

Quite often schools attempt to take on the unofficial role of the custodial parent, creating rules and regulations that infringe upon parents' roles. Schools also limit the degree to which families can be involved in their children's schooling. Some school-created literature that is available to parents takes on a tone of entitlement that some parents may not feel comfortable in challenging. As a result there is the potential to infringe upon family values and beliefs. This paper looks at three areas where schools have gone too far in their supposed role to educate children.

Introduction:

Somehow I can't help thinking that I am getting what I deserve. There should be no surprises here. However, I never truly considered the impact of the public school system until I was forced to view it from another angle- that of a parent. Having served my time as a teacher in schools, I fought hard against the indoctrination that the profession brings. I could last only four years before I forced myself to leave for greener pastures. The mundane daily tasks began to overwhelm me and I was becoming the teacher who, by late September, looked so forward to the summer months. The

expectations of ‘sameness’ became unbearable. I now find myself in the same mindset, this time as a parent whose children have chosen the formal education system.

I have recorded some of my observations as a parent of school-aged children. It is worthy of note that these are a few of the obvious ones I have made. Undoubtedly, there are many more school-directed instances that appear to infringe upon the potentials of families. These observations are not intended to be a slight on the people (teachers, principals, etc.) who perform their duties within the school, but rather indignation of the system in which they are forced to exist. By and large they are wonderful people who put their hearts in their jobs. Nor are these observations to be taken without context. Of course, the context is the crucial element here. I feel somewhat qualified to speak about schooling, having been a student, a teacher, a professor within a faculty of education and now, a parent. Some families, as we will see, may not be in a position to openly question the rules put forth by the school. Therefore, they follow them.

It appears that the system has created an environment where the professionals are so indoctrinated (or so busy) that their abilities to question schooling as it currently stands are near non-existent. Perhaps they believe there is no use in doing so because the system is so engrained in itself (political, if you will). Maybe teacher education programs have failed miserably to expose candidates to alternative structures, instead reinforcing the norms and perpetuating sameness. Regardless, in my mind, it is remarkable how similar all schools are and how non-innovative the system is. Equally remarkable is the tone of entitlement that school literature exposes.

For clarification, within this paper, when I refer to “schools”, I am referring to the institution and the apparently endless list of rules that inhibit the freedoms of students to

grow, learn and thrive. This extends to the limitations schools puts on families. Many rules also create a façade that can confuse and infringe upon the values of parents. I have chosen not to include the most public and controversial school-imposed infringement upon family-- homework. That is a discussion for another day.

There has been a plethora of literature to present the benefits of parental involvement in schools. Children who have parents involved in their schooling are more likely to succeed in school (Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan and Fenstermacher, 1997; Dauber and Epstein, 1989), have improved attendance, and become more engaged in the schooling experience (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). I refer to Swap (1993) for a definition through the identification of types of parental involvement:

Type 1: Parenting: Schools should assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills as well as supporting learning at home.

Type 2: Communication with School: Schools should communicate with families regarding student progress.

Type 3: Volunteering at School: Schools should provide recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers.

Type 4: Learning at Home: Schools should involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities.

Type 5: Decision-making with the School: Schools should include parents as participants in decisions, governance and advocacy activities.

Type 6: Collaborating with Community: schools should co-ordinate the work and resources of the community, business, colleges and universities.

Swap contends that collaborating tends to be relatively rare in schools. There also appears to be a gap in the role of schools to invite opportunities for families to have a genuine involvement in the daily activities within the school. It forces one to muse about

the untapped potential. Ricci (2008) states, sadly, it's obvious that what is meant by parents partnering with schools or having more of a say in their children's schooling is that parents are expected to follow school orders and to make sure that their children are being compliant. Clearly, schools and The Ministry do not want a true meaningful partnership where they and parents work to make the best learning environment for children. And even more foreign would be to give children a real and meaningful voice (p. 5).

Although almost all school boards have a component of their mission statement dedicated to parental involvement, one can very successfully argue that seldom does it go beyond the communication, volunteering and learning at home presented by Swap. It can further be argued that, to a large degree, the volunteering is done by a very dedicated few parents in each school- those who are comfortable in the setting and able to commit large blocks of time. As examples of edicts available for public consumption on school websites, Peel District School Board (PDSB) has as part of its mission statement "We promote open, honest two-way communication among students, staff, parents and the community. We listen and respond to needs so that everyone is included, recognized and valued." The Toronto District School Board (2008) purports that "Parents are children's first and life-long teachers. We value the partnership between home and school and recognize that parental involvement is the key to success in school. You can be involved by helping your child with homework, volunteering in our schools, or joining a school council." Contradictions between these schools' actions and those which may be espoused by many families become evident as one begins to look more closely at policy.

Of course, schools will tell you that they have taken many steps to include parents in the overall schooling experience. They have many parent volunteers come in to read with students, serve pizza lunches, and/or organize fundraisers for playground equipment, photocopy materials or cut out tracers for use in the classroom. They have parent/teacher conferences once or twice each year; some teachers may even call home every once in a while to update parents; teachers have web pages so you can remain current with the daily academic going-ons of the classroom. I propose that these initiatives are smokescreens to genuine parental involvement in schools and nothing more than parental involvement by convenience (the school's convenience). The former tasks (volunteering within the school) are those that have been downloaded to parents due to significant cuts in funding. There was a time not so long ago when people were paid to monitor lunch rooms and when trained teachers and teaching assistants worked one-on-one with students in efforts to assist with reading. Although parents are present in the school to perform a number of these tasks, whether they are "involved" in their children's formal school is open for debate. Again, I must emphasize that, in the face of financial cutbacks, the school personnel cannot be blamed for using volunteers- but let's not confuse it with genuine parental involvement.

What may well be ignored here is power structure that exists to exclude particular parents from the overall schooling process. Epstein (2001) reports that large numbers of parents are excluded from the most common communications with school and that one third of parents never attend parent-teacher interviews and almost two thirds never speak to the teacher by telephone. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) states that even when the rhetoric and policies of the school seem to support parental engagement and participation,

many parents feel as if they are trespassing when they cross the threshold of the school, as if they are treading on territory where they don't belong (p.230). A number of characteristics can contribute to parents not becoming engaged: Language barriers, past experience with schools, rules upon entry to the school, misunderstanding of the roles of schools in children's lives and the timing of school and work schedules, to name a few. Schools must then work to break down these barriers. Instead, in a number of instances, more policy is created to further exclude genuine family participation.

The Halton District School Board (HDSB) has recently implemented the balanced school day consisting of 100 minutes of instruction, 50 minute lunch and recess, 100 minutes of instruction, 40 minute lunch and recess, 100 minutes of instruction. Many school boards are following suit. The guise of doing so is presented as increased opportunity for quality instruction (questionable), nutrition (questionable) and increased chance for physical activity (questionable) for the children. Regardless, the change can hardly be seen as revolutionary. The structures still exists. One of the effects of this change from the traditional school day of two recesses and a lunch is the decreased opportunity to have children travel home for lunch period. With the decreased time in which to practically prepare and eat meals and to provide time for travel to and from the school, there is a clear and negative impact upon the family dynamic. The time to "break bread together" is central to many cultures. It is a time of discussion, sharing of the events of the day, and, ultimately a time for closeness. With a move to reduced lunch time the school has infringed upon the values of many families.

On the HDSB website addressing concerns regarding the balanced day, one of the frequently asked questions (FAQ's) is "Can my child still come home for lunch?" The

response is “Schools will designate which of the breaks will be the “go-home” break for students living close to the school and wishing to go home.” Apart from the logistical reasons cited above, I found the question rather curious—considering that a parent is asking the school for permission to spend time with their children. The response from the school demonstrates the power imbalance better than if I had written it myself.

In viewing school newsletters online I found the following to be rather curious. Under a column on safety and transportation, one particular school dictated that students’ safety necessitates that all students take the school bus to and from school. Taken literally, this school is telling us that we do not have the option to walk, bike, or drive, our children to school. They will decide the best and safest way to get our children to school. Again, an infringement upon the lives of families and the time they spend together.

Let me do a brief recap. Among what schools will dictate are the following:

- How families are involved in their children’s schools.
- When children are permitted to leave the school to share daytime meals with their families.
- How children will arrive and depart from school.

In the meantime the vast majority of parents absorb the endless stream of rules created by schools, effecting little change in the direction of public education. Our role as parents is to promote growth and assuredness in our children. By virtue of the values we instill in them and the convenient schooling option available to us, I suspect our idle response is simply an extension of what we were taught in schools. Holt (1981) puts it best when

discussing schooling (please extend this to parenting and efforts to become more involved in children's schooling experience).

...But this is not at all the same thing as doing something, and in the case of school usually something stupid and boring, simply because someone else tells you you'll be punished if you don't. Whether children resist such demands or yield to them, it is bad for them. Struggling with inherent difficulties of a chosen or inescapable task builds character; merely submitting to superior force destroys it.

Ultimately, it is up to all of us to act and make the world a more democratic place. Let's work with our children towards this end and not accept the status quo.

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Biography

Mike McCabe teaches Mathematics Education and Health and Physical Education in the Faculty of Education of Nipissing University. In addition he teaches in the Aboriginal Teacher Certification Program. He received his Ph. D. from the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. His research includes developing programs and strategies to include parents in the formal education.