



Schools Involving Parents in Early Postsecondary Planning

ACT POLICY REPORT

GEORGE L. WIMBERLY
RICHARD J. NOETH

SCHOOLS INVOLVING PARENTS IN EARLY POSTSECONDARY PLANNING

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Florida State University

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National Conference
of State Legislatures

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Secondary School Principals

Molly J. Tovar
Chief Operating Officer
American Indian Graduate Center

Office of Policy Research Staff

Richard J. Noeth
Director

Veronica A. Lotkowski
Senior Research Associate

Diane L. Schnelker
Senior Research Associate

George L. Wimberly
Research Associate

Braden J.P. Rood
Administrative Assistant

PREFACE

The stated mission of the ACT Office of Policy Research is to inform policy makers and the general public on important issues in education by providing timely information that can directly enhance knowledge, dialogue, and decision making. The current ACT Policy Research Agenda focuses on six specific areas:

- Developing the Applicant Pool
- Increasing Diversity in College
- Remedial Education in College
- Retention in College
- Education and Workforce Transitions
- The High School Experience

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This study, *Schools Involving Parents in Early Postsecondary Planning*, reflects ACT's interest in analyzing the critical issues affecting the preparation of the postsecondary applicant pool and the high school experience. It offers recommendations that policy makers, educators, and others can use to enhance the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

We are indebted to the many students, parents, and staff at the schools who contributed to this study. Their generous support and cooperation made this report possible.

Many individuals outside of ACT provided assistance reviewing draft manuscripts. They include Erin McNamara Horvat (Temple University), Shanda Ivory (National Association for College Admission Counseling), and Louise McClain (Granite Hills High School). The ACT Policy Research Advisory Panel provided both recommendations about the formulation of the study and reviews of draft manuscripts.

ACT staff members Patricia Farrant, Carolyn Kostelecky, Veronica Lotkowski, Julie Noble, Wayne Patience, Nancy Petersen, Steve Robbins, Richard Sawyer, Cyndie Schmeiser, and Diane Schnelker reviewed drafts of the manuscript. Kathleen Lynch, Braden Rood, Jacqueline Snider, and Andrew Welch provided assistance in manuscript preparation and bibliographic review. Gregory Carrier and Michael Rasmusson provided the graphic design, and Sherry Sackfield was the editorial manager for the report.

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George L. Wimberly
Richard J. Noeth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents who are involved in their child’s education can be a strong and positive influence on the student’s academic achievement and postsecondary plans. However, unless parents have the information and knowledge they need, it is difficult for them to help their children explore, plan, and make the successful transition from high school to college. Studies show that parents, particularly those who did not attend college, often do not have the necessary tools, information, and resources to assist their children with college planning.¹

The purpose of this policy report is to help schools engage parents in educational and postsecondary planning by focusing on major points in the process when this can effectively happen. It describes programs, practices, and initiatives that schools use to effectively deliver educational planning information to parents, including ways that schools involve parents in their children’s planning and decision making at key transition points:

- Academic preparation—including program and course selection
- Understanding and using assessment information
- Formulating postsecondary plans
- Learning about and obtaining financial aid for college

Schools are making efforts to reverse the trend of declining parent involvement in the middle and high school years by engaging parents in postsecondary planning activities. They now include parents in course selection, interpretation of test information, college admissions discussions, college visits, and financial aid planning. Parents who have educational planning knowledge and timely information can increase their students’ school success, facilitate their college planning, and increase the likelihood that their children will attend college.²

Two ACT studies examined a variety of influences on educational and postsecondary planning. In the first, we explored how parents influenced students’ planning activities across grades 8-10.³ Students from 15 schools in six major districts were surveyed and included in focus groups to examine the impact of various influences on their future planning. The second ACT study examined students’ postsecondary planning activities at the end of high school.⁴ African American and Hispanic college-bound seniors completed a postsecondary planning survey and participated in focus group discussions. These students were from 23 urban high schools in five large school districts.

¹Institute for Higher Education Policy. (2001). *Getting through college: Voices of low-income and minority students in New England*. Washington, DC: Author.

²McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

³Wimberly, G. L., & Noeth, R. J. (in press). *Postsecondary planning influences for middle and early high school students*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.

⁴Noeth, R. J., & Wimberly, G. L. (2002). *Creating seamless educational transitions for urban African American and Hispanic students*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.

In the first study, nearly all eighth and ninth grade students stated that their mother was very helpful (67%) or a little help (26%) with their future education exploration. Slightly fewer said that their father was very helpful (55%) or was a little help (32%) as they began to explore education, training, and work that they might pursue after high school. Virtually all (92%) tenth grade students reported that their mother had been very helpful (63%) or a little help (29%) with their future planning; 79% indicated that their father was very helpful (45%) or was a little help (34%).

African American and Hispanic high school seniors also indicated a strong parental influence on their college planning activities. The students in this study perceived their mothers as being a strong influence (84% were somewhat or very helpful) on their college planning process. More students reported their mothers as being very helpful in their college planning decisions than any other person or college planning factor. Fathers also had a strong influence (62% were somewhat or very helpful) on students' college plans.

While survey results supported the strong influence parents had on future planning, focus group results indicated that parents often lacked the tools and resources necessary to help students through the postsecondary planning process. The primary contributions of parents were their motivation, good intentions, and encouragement. Although highly motivated and well-intentioned, parents were not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children.



We incorporated two information resources to examine specific areas of parent involvement in the educational and postsecondary planning process. One represents a model program developed by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The other is based on a recent ACT field study that explored how two urban high schools developed parent partnerships and provided information to parents to enhance their students' future planning.⁵

⁵Wimberly, G. L. (2003). *Report to the ACT Assessment Planning Committee: How urban schools facilitate college planning*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling's Parents and Counselors Together (PACT) program involves a series of workshops and modules designed to provide information to a broad range of parents and students, including low-income, minority, and at-risk populations. It encourages counselors, teachers, and administrators to implement programs that:

- Help parents and students become aware of middle school courses essential for pursuing a challenging course of study in high school
- Provide information about high school courses required for college admissions
- Explain college costs
- Discuss the importance of personal growth and self-awareness in establishing education and career goals
- Explain college admission requirements
- Raise awareness of the decision making process that leads to postsecondary options

There are a number of areas and opportunities for schools to involve parents in their children's postsecondary planning. We have selected four areas that we believe represent major building blocks in this process. These four areas are often confusing to parents, but also allow the involvement of an array of school staff as collaborators. These areas are academic preparation, assessment information, college planning, and financial aid.

Academic Preparation. The PACT program describes how schools can help parents investigate the types of programs of study offered, review course schedules, and participate in course selection. Educators discuss the academic options in middle school that prepare students to take challenging high school courses. Parents are given lists of middle school courses and information about how they connect with high school courses. Schools stress that although courses may be arranged to meet graduation requirements, this may not guarantee entry into specific postsecondary programs. Schools encourage parents to engage in actions that can help their students succeed. Schools show parents various techniques to monitor academic progress by maintaining an academic portfolio that contains examples of their students' work over time. This allows parents to see where and how academic progress is being made.



ACT documented several ways that schools communicate to parents about the connections across course selection, achievement, college choices, and future academic success. Parents of eighth graders preview high school courses to select during open house gatherings and meetings with high school counselors. Beginning in eighth grade, counselors meet individually with students and parents to discuss academic goals, select next year's courses, and review typical college admissions requirements such as academic preparation, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement.

Assessment Information. NACAC suggests that schools inform students and parents of the tests required or recommended for college admissions (e.g., ACT Assessment®). Students can become familiar with test format and content matter covered by these assessments by using test preparation software and practice tests available from the test publisher. Encouragement from parents can help students to work hard in their academic courses as test results reflect and confirm level of preparation. Schools also can directly advise parents about test registration deadlines, fees, dates, and test center locations.

Results of the ACT study show that schools use a variety of formats to explain assessment information to parents and students. The schools integrate test explanation into the course selection process, showing parents and students how test results align with classroom performance and what academic skills students need to develop through future courses. Counselors review assessment results with parents to guide course selection and placement to fit the students' academic preparation and achievement. Teachers and counselors explain assessment results to parents, emphasizing strengths as well as areas in need of improvement, and suggest strategies for parents to help increase their students' academic performance. Schools use the ACT Standards for Transition® to match students' EXPLORE®, PLAN®, and ACT Assessment scores with specific academic areas (English, mathematics, reading, and science). The Standards for Transition describe the types of skills and knowledge that students need to succeed and describe test score ranges that reflect the progression and complexity of skills needed in the areas measured by the assessment.

College Planning. NACAC suggests that schools systematically explain and reinforce the steps needed throughout the postsecondary planning process to parents. NACAC particularly suggests that schools present the full array of postsecondary options available, as well as the requirements typically needed to pursue various careers and complete graduate or professional degrees.

ACT's study found schools implementing courses, programs, and practices that focus on preparing students for college. These schools provide a college planning handbook for students and their parents. The handbook explains the necessary steps to apply to postsecondary institutions, reviews postsecondary options, provides tips for researching postsecondary programs, describes what parents and students should look for on a college visit, and gives a detailed timeline for applying to college.

Financial Aid. NACAC suggests that parents have a financial strategy to pay for college that includes being fully informed about college costs and the opportunities available to meet these costs. Schools can help parents develop a college finance plan by providing them with information early (e.g., middle school). They can also motivate parents and students to engage in financial planning that will help meet future college costs. Using the PACT model, schools can give parents a thorough overview of college costs and expenses, explaining that costs are both fixed (e.g., tuition, fees, room, board) and variable that may change depending on lifestyle, course of study, and personal needs (e.g., travel, books, personal supplies).

To help parents and students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), ACT study schools host several financial aid workshops in which counselors guide students and parents through each step of the form. Financial aid advisors from local colleges attend these workshops to provide information and discuss the financial aid process. Schools emphasize that parents and students must complete the FAFSA in a timely fashion to be considered for all types of financial aid. They also discuss deadlines for scholarships and other types of institutional aid. Representatives from local banks explain how the student loan process works and are available to address parents' questions or concerns. Through these financial aid workshops, schools help students and parents project educational debt, future salary, and options available for repaying loans or participating in programs to forgive student loans.

Clearly, parents can play an integral role in their children's postsecondary planning and schools can engage in practices and behaviors that facilitate parent involvement. Schools can provide students and parents with information and resources to guide their postsecondary planning and help them take advantage of educational opportunities. Through counselors, teachers, and administrators, schools can deliver collaborative programs that help students and parents make sound educational decisions. We offer one overall and four specific policy and program recommendations for ways that schools can engage parents in their children's educational and postsecondary planning activities.

Overall Recommendation

Districts should document and implement plans for involving parents in the postsecondary planning process—including systematic methods for informing them about the process and supporting their involvement at key stages of this process.

Specific Recommendations

- 1. Beginning in the middle school, parents should be included in the selection of their children's courses and program of study.*
- 2. Districts should establish comprehensive programs (including the development of assessment-literate counselors, teachers, and school administrators) to help parents understand assessment results and information.*
- 3. Districts should develop programs and initiatives to explain and reinforce the educational and postsecondary planning process to parents.*
- 4. Schools should help parents understand the various types of financial aid available for postsecondary education.*

I

INTRODUCTION

Planning for postsecondary education involves a combination of incremental steps that enable students to make successful transitions from high school to college. This multiyear process includes the college exploration and planning activities a student engages in to develop aspirations, acquire skills and knowledge, obtain information, and ultimately matriculate. Postsecondary planning activities can include, but are not limited to:

- Deciding to attend college
- Selecting high school courses to prepare for college
- Maintaining good grades
- Obtaining information about colleges and academic programs
- Visiting college campuses
- Exploring college major and career interests
- Preparing for and taking college admissions tests
- Completing college admission applications
- Applying for financial aid and scholarships
- Selecting a college to attend

The postsecondary planning process often begins with the decision to attend college. Over 80% of eighth graders expect to attend college and many anticipate earning advanced and professional degrees. These expectations are reflected in actions, as in 1999 almost two-thirds of all high school graduates enrolled in a college or university in the fall following high school graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a).

Many students have high educational aspirations (Akerhielm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998; Freeman, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998; O'Connor, 1997). Their parents, teachers, and others around them have worked to ensure that they would go to college. This is particularly true for students whose parents have attended college and can provide a head start in terms of course planning and obtaining college-related information (McDonough, 1997).

Many factors can influence students as they consider, develop, and pursue college plans. These influences often include individuals, institutions, programs, activities, and experiences that, either directly or indirectly, facilitate postsecondary planning. They may provide students with information about school and college success, expand awareness of college and career options, increase educational expectations, identify educational opportunities, and help students make the transition to college (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

Student academic success often depends on parent involvement (Catsambis, 1998; Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Muller & Kerbow, 1993). Parents are often a strong and positive influence on their children's postsecondary aspirations and plans (Hesel, 1998; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). They can play an integral part in many steps of the postsecondary planning process. Parents can instill educational and college-going values in their children, expose them to various careers that require postsecondary training, help them with course selection, accompany them on college visits, and assist them in completing college applications and financial aid forms.

However, parents may often lack the information and knowledge essential to best help their children explore, plan, and make the successful transition from high school to college. Many parents, particularly those who have not attended college, may not have the necessary tools, information, and resources to assist their children with college planning (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2001). For example, African American and Hispanic students who are the first in their families to consider college often do not receive timely college planning information, might not take the necessary courses, and may struggle with cultural conflicts between their new college-oriented world and the worlds of their friends, families, and communities (McDonough, 1997).

Part of the school's role is to provide postsecondary planning information, resources, and tools to assist students and their parents with educational and career plans. Parents who are unable to provide knowledgeable guidance to their children must rely primarily on the school to provide these resources. Schools, then, must assume a responsibility to help these parents at each stage of the high school-to-college transition process by providing timely and user-friendly information and guidance.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy report is to help schools engage parents in educational and postsecondary planning by focusing on major points in the process when this can effectively happen. It describes programs, practices, and initiatives that schools have used to effectively deliver educational planning information to parents, including ways that schools involve parents in their children's planning and decision making at key transition points:

- Academic preparation—including program and course selection
- Understanding and using assessment information
- Formulating postsecondary plans
- Learning about and obtaining financial aid for college

The report offers recommendations and strategies that school administrators, other educators, and policy makers can use to create programs and initiatives to help students and parents successfully plan for postsecondary education, enhance school experiences, and increase postsecondary participation.

This policy report draws on the results of several ACT studies. First, we review the early education and postsecondary planning of middle and high school students, exploring how their parents and schools helped them select high school courses, consider careers, and plan for further education. Second, we present findings from our study of college-bound African American and Hispanic high school seniors about how their parents influenced their postsecondary planning activities and college decisions.

Third, this report incorporates several postsecondary planning information resources, including the National Association for College Admission Counseling's Parent and Counselors Together Program and descriptions of a number of effective postsecondary planning practices at two urban high schools based upon a third ACT study.

2

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Nearly all parents expect their children to earn college degrees and enter rewarding careers. In fact, educational expectations have continued to increase over the last thirty years as the U.S. labor market has shifted from an industrial to a service, information, and technology-based economy requiring advanced skills and credentials.

By the 1990s, over 75% of parents expected their children to attend college, up from 50% in the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b). Having such high educational expectations is a first step parents take to help their children set postsecondary goals and continually make progress toward achieving these goals. Parents often begin encouraging children to attend college as early as elementary school, and their expectations are generally strengthened as students reach high school, regardless of students' academic performance, interests, or other expectations (Freeman, 1999; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Ogbu, 2003).



Parent involvement in the educational and postsecondary planning process contributes to students' academic success and educational decisions (Epstein et al, 1997; Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller, 1995; Muller & Kerbow, 1993). Parent involvement benefits students in many ways. These include improved grades and test scores, increased attendance and homework completion, reduced placements in special education, positive student behavior, increased high school graduation rates, and increased enrollment in postsecondary education (Freeman, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hesel, 1998; Hossler et al., 1999).

Students' college decisions are often based on what they perceive their parents want for them (Freeman, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hesel, 1997; Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage 1992; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Kane & Spizman, 1994). Minority and low-income parents often teach their children that a college education will help them avoid unemployment and the general problems associated with poverty. Nearly all African American parents expect their children to graduate from college, and African American students often want to go to college to improve social and economic status (Freeman, 1999; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2001). They often perceive a college education as essential to obtain a good job, develop a promising career, and become successful in life.

Hispanic parents also expect that a college education will expand their children's career and economic opportunities. Especially among immigrants, Hispanics often cite coming to the United States to gain employment and provide educational opportunities for their families (Gándara, 2001; Ginorio & Huston, 2001). However, some Hispanic cultural differences may unintentionally conflict with traditional school models. For example, although they value education some Hispanic parents value family above all and may sacrifice or postpone their children's education for the perceived benefit to the family.

There is often a discrepancy between parents' educational expectations for their children and their ability to make these expectations a reality (Ogbu, 2003; Wimberly, 2002). Particularly, parents who have not attended college may lack the necessary tools to assist their children with effective planning. They may have high expectations, but neither the information nor the knowledge about what their children need for college readiness, planning, and success. As a result, these parents are less likely to help their children select high school courses or discuss college (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). This is true even among families whose children are high achievers.

These parents are also less likely to obtain information about specific colleges, pursue opportunities for their children, or complete financial aid forms. Low-income and minority parents are much less likely familiar with the educational system, or have access to information and resources



(Gándara, 2001). When parents lack such information, they must rely on the school to educate their children as well as to provide the resources necessary for college exploration, planning, and decision making (Epps, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Across all racial and ethnic groups, parent involvement during the period between middle and high school is particularly important as students begin to develop skills and acquire information necessary for postsecondary enrollment and professional careers (Catsambis, 1998). However parent involvement activities, such as helping students with homework, attending school meetings, or volunteering at schools, decline as students reach high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a). Many parents believe that they are unable to offer their high school students knowledgeable assistance with homework, related school activities, or postsecondary planning.

Schools are making efforts to reverse the trend of declining parent involvement in the middle and high school years by engaging parents in postsecondary planning activities. They now include parents in course selection, interpretation of test information, college admissions discussions, college visits, and financial aid planning. Parents who have educational planning knowledge and timely information can increase their students' school success, facilitate their college planning, and increase the likelihood that their children will attend college (McDonough, 1997; College Board, 1999).

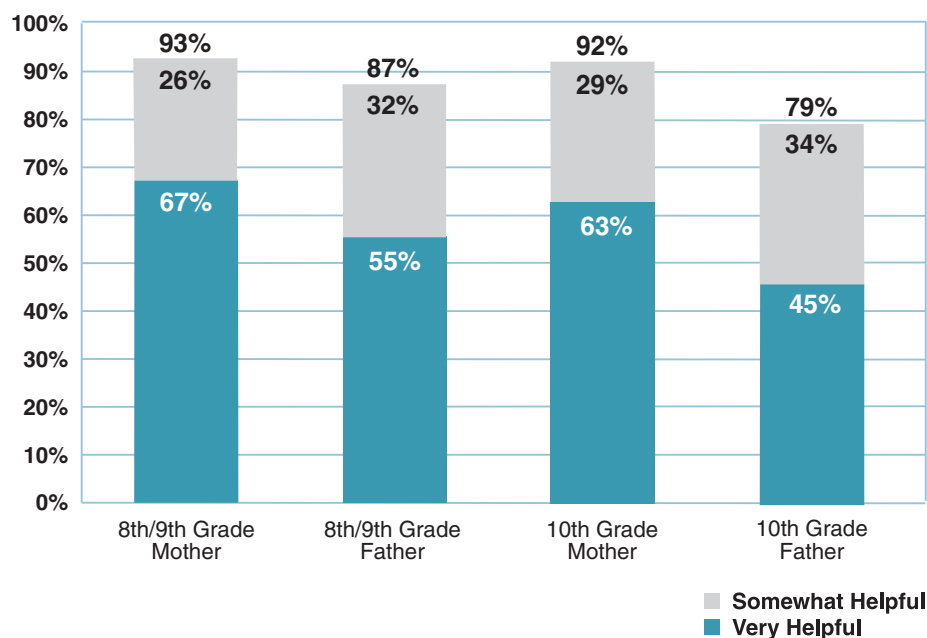
ACT Findings

Two ACT studies examined a variety of influences, including schools, on educational and postsecondary planning. In the first (Wimberly & Noeth, in press), we explored how parents influenced educational and postsecondary planning activities across grades 8-10. We included students from 15 schools in six major districts (Chicago; Charleston, West Virginia; Denver; Los Angeles; New Orleans; and Oklahoma City). We selected these districts and schools to represent a broad array of urban and suburban institutions enrolling students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. The schools offered a range of educational planning activities, including ACT's EXPLORE and/or PLAN programs.

During the 2001-2002 school year, eighth- and ninth-grade students (N=1766) and tenth graders (N=1176) were surveyed, and many of these students were also chosen to participate in focus group discussions about their educational planning. (Students were surveyed after they had chosen courses for the next school year.) We examined the influences on their educational and postsecondary planning decisions, focusing on course selection and other high school planning activities.

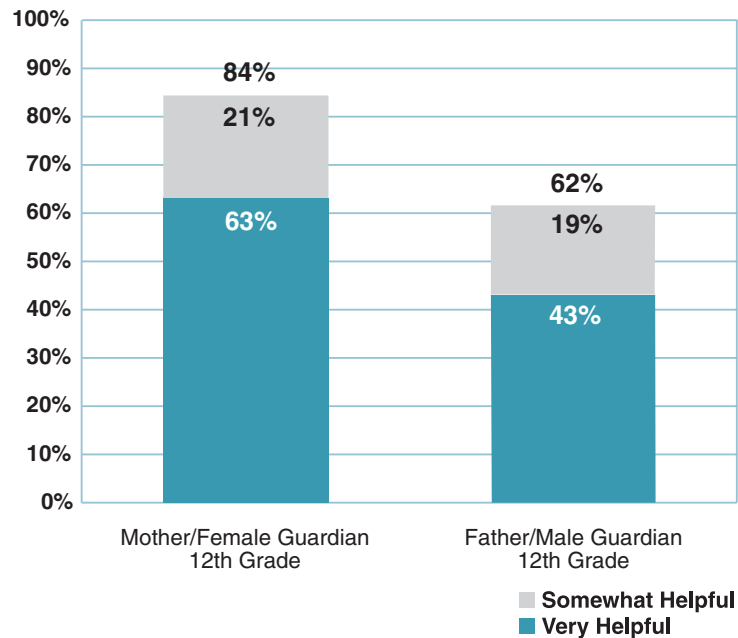
Figure 1 shows that nearly all eighth- and ninth-grade students stated that their mother or female guardian was very helpful (67%) or a little help (26%) with their future educational exploration. Slightly fewer said that their father or male guardian was very helpful (55%) or was a little help (32%) as they began to explore education, training, and work that they might pursue after high school. Virtually all (92%) tenth-grade students reported that their mother or female guardian had been very helpful (63%) or a little help (29%) with their future planning; 79% indicated that their father or male guardian was very helpful (45%) or was a little help (34%).

Figure 1: Parental Help with Future Plans



The second ACT study (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002) examined students' postsecondary planning activities at the end of high school. Nearly 300 African American and Hispanic college-bound high school seniors who had taken the ACT Assessment completed a postsecondary planning survey and participated in 90-minute focus group discussions. These students were from 23 urban high schools in five large school districts: Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Milwaukee, and New Orleans. The survey and focus groups took place during the final weeks of the senior year, just prior to graduation, a time when most would have completed their planning and made their postsecondary decisions.

Figure 2: Influence on Postsecondary Planning



African American and Hispanic high school seniors indicated a strong parental influence on their college planning activities. They perceived their mothers as being a strong influence (84% were somewhat or very helpful) on their college planning process (see Figure 2). More students reported their mothers as being very helpful in their college planning decisions than any other person or college planning factor. Fathers also had a strong influence (62% were somewhat or very helpful) on students' college plans, but not to the same extent as mothers.

While survey results supported the strong influence parents had on future planning, focus group results indicated that parents often lacked the tools and resources necessary to help students through the postsecondary planning process. The primary contributions of parents were their motivation, good intentions, and encouragement. Although highly motivated and well-intentioned, parents were not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children.

3

SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 sets the national philosophy and framework for educational policy and practice that increases school accountability, provides greater choices for parents and students, and gives states and local education venues more flexibility to implement programs that reach a wide array of students. One of its primary goals is that every child will have the opportunity for an education that provides high quality preparation for the future. This goal is a challenge of national importance, given the dynamic changes taking place within the American workforce, the need for high skills and an equally high ability to continue to learn, and the challenges we face as a nation within the global marketplace.

We believe a key element of this education policy framework should be the ability of schools to successfully foster educational transitions. One way to accomplish this is to create and sustain strong relationships with those who influence students' future plans and decisions—most importantly with their parents. Recent federal restructuring supports the belief in parental involvement with the formation of the Office of Innovation and Involvement (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

This restructuring reinforces earlier federal goals to increase parent involvement in their children's education. Authorized under the Goals 2000 Educate America Act is the establishment of numerous parent information and training centers across the country. These centers provide parents information about educational opportunities, options, programs, and services that are available at all levels to assist in their children's education. A special parent focus requires low-income and low-achieving schools that receive federal Title I funds to implement parent involvement activities as part of their efforts to serve their students.



The U.S. Department of Education sponsors the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education to encourage educational collaborations among parents, schools, businesses, community, and faith groups. The goals of the partnerships are to increase opportunities for families to be more involved in their children's education at home and at school and promote children's learning and achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2000a). To accomplish these goals, the Partnership encourages:

- Increased access to the resources, training, and information families need to help their children succeed in school
- Effective, regular two-way communication between families and schools
- Well-planned partnerships with a common vision
- Welcoming families—as full partners—in school activities and decision-making
- Access to a broad range of tools to better engage families in children's learning

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (1996; 2002) recommends that schools engage parents as partners in their students' education. Because students benefit from the reinforcement of education in the home, NASSP suggests that schools do all they can to bolster the inclination and ability of parents in this regard. But many parents need guidance on how to deal with some of the most fundamental influences outside the classroom that affect their children's learning.

NASSP further recommends that high schools provide a welcoming environment for parents and that teachers be trained to help parents accomplish reasonable tasks within this objective. Perhaps most importantly, structured outreach programs to parents should be a key ingredient in the recipe to create successful parent-school relationships. A principal element of this parent engagement is in the education and postsecondary planning of their children.

Clearly, if families are to work with schools as partners in the education of their children, schools must provide them with the opportunities and support they need to become involved (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). The U.S. Department of Education (Smith, 2000) offers solutions to potential barriers to family involvement in education:

- Schedule meetings, workshops, and conferences at times convenient for parents
- Provide information and training to parents and school staff
- Translate information into parents' native languages
- Restructure schools to support family involvement
- Provide child care
- Tap external support for partnerships from the local community, nonprofit organizations, businesses, government, and faith groups

Developing effective partnerships requires that school staff create an environment that welcomes parents and encourages them to raise questions, voice their ideas, and participate in decision making. Developing partnerships also requires school staff to provide parents with the information and training they need to become effectively involved and that they reach out to parents to participate in their children's education. Many school districts, including the New York City Department of Education, devote staff positions to enhance relationships between schools and parents. These liaisons provide parents with the information and training they need to become effectively involved and reach out to parents to participate in their children's education (Gootman, 2003).

Schools can develop strategies and plans to help parents become part of the school community. This can involve teachers, counselors, and administrators developing formal and informal parent collaborations. School personnel can work together to strategize about how to work with individual students and families and provide the information, resources, and attention these families need to feel that they are important and integrated members of the school community (Recruiting New Teachers, 2001).

The National PTA (2000) recommends that schools recognize diverse family structures, circumstances, responsibilities, or differences that might present barriers to parent participation. It may be necessary to develop varied parent involvement plans and programs. Low-income and minority families who are unfamiliar with educational planning may need specialized attention that considers socioeconomic and cultural differences in reaching their children. School personnel should anticipate cultural challenges or issues that may affect parental views on education and career planning. For example, in some cultures, girls are expected to raise families, not pursue postsecondary education. These parents may not see the importance of educational planning. Schools thus face the added challenge of respecting cultural traditions, while delivering important educational planning information.



The National PTA also suggests that schools work with parents through various local and national organizations whose goals are to assist parents in multiple ways and across different venues. Students, parents, teachers, and other school personnel can collaborate to set goals for children. The National PTA notes that children often need help from adults to aim high, set educational and career goals, and have confidence in themselves. Schools can encourage parents to help their children make plans for the future by:

- Talking with their children about what they want to do in the future and what skills they need to achieve their goals
- Helping their children see how their current learning is related to their future ambitions
- Helping their children make educational and postsecondary training plans and decisions
- Attending college and career expositions with their children

SPECIFIC AREAS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

This section incorporates two primary information resources to examine specific areas of parent involvement in the educational and postsecondary planning process. One represents a model program developed by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The other is based on a recent ACT field study that explored in detail how two urban high schools developed parent partnerships and provided information to parents to enhance their students' future planning.

Parents and Counselors Together. The National Association for College Admission Counseling developed Parents and Counselors Together (PACT), a model that schools can implement to engage and empower parents in the postsecondary planning process (NACAC, 1999). This model involves a series of parent workshops and modules designed to provide postsecondary planning information to a broad range of parents and students, including low-income, minority, and at-risk populations. It encourages counselors, teachers, and administrators to implement programs that:

- Help parents and students become aware of middle school courses essential for pursuing a challenging course of study in high school
- Provide information about high school courses required for college admissions
- Explain college costs
- Discuss the importance of personal growth and self-awareness in establishing education and career goals
- Explain college admission requirements
- Raise awareness of the decision making process that leads to postsecondary options

Many schools implement elements of PACT to inform and engage parents in the postsecondary planning process.

ACT Study. The yearlong ACT study involved two urban high schools that serve largely low-income minority students who are first generation college-bound (Wimberly, 2003). Our objective was to learn about the programs, services, and materials that these high schools provide to successfully support and facilitate parent involvement. These schools were selected because they are structured to prepare students for college and implement successful programs and activities that involve parents in postsecondary planning. Both schools have documented guidelines and steps within the school charter and mission statements to guide students and parents through the postsecondary planning process.

These schools are part of a large urban district that faces many challenges such as low graduation rates, low attendance rates, high dropout rates, student underachievement, and often inconsistent leadership. Despite these challenges both schools prepare and send most of their graduates to two- and four-year institutions. They provide students and parents with the resources, information, and support necessary to enable them to pursue postsecondary education, under environmental and structural conditions that can often limit students' educational options.

One of the high schools serves students of mixed achievement levels, yet over 80% of its graduates pursue postsecondary education in certificate programs and two- and four-year colleges and universities (Sheridan, 2003). Counselors, teachers, and school administrators work with students and their parents to develop postsecondary and career goals when students first begin high school. Many students and parents chose this school because of its reputation and history of sending students to college. The school is committed to providing students with a quality education and the necessary skills to maximize their choices and options upon graduation.



The other school in this study is a recently formed charter high school that is designed to prepare urban youth for postsecondary education. The school opened to ninth graders in 1998, adding a class each subsequent year, and producing its first graduates in 2002. Nearly all of the 2002 graduates began postsecondary education the following fall. This school grew out of the need to educate and prepare students for college in a depressed urban community. Most students struggle academically, with less than 20% of entering students reading at grade level. Faculty, counselors, social workers, and school administrators work closely with students and parents throughout high school, monitoring social development, academic progress, and postsecondary planning steps.

Most students in both schools are first-generation college-bound and some will be first-generation high school graduates. Although some parents have a high school diploma or have earned college degrees, few have followed a traditional educational path going from high school directly into college. Recognizing that educational planning and college attendance are new or unfamiliar concepts for students and their families, both schools' educational planning activities include a strong parent involvement component. These schools are dedicated and structured to help students make the transition from high school to postsecondary education. They provide the resources and tools to help students and their parents set educational goals, establish plans, and ultimately make postsecondary decisions.

ACT staff observed and participated in educational planning activities at these schools throughout the 2001-2002 school year, including frequent school visits and observations; structured meetings with administrators, counselors, parents, and students; and involvement in postsecondary planning programs. They participated in and observed numerous parent meetings, including observing counselors as they worked with students and their parents across varied educational and postsecondary planning activities.

There are a large number of areas and opportunities for schools to involve parents in their children's postsecondary planning. We have selected four areas that we believe represent major building blocks in this process. These four areas are often confusing to parents but also allow the involvement of an array of school staff as collaborators. These areas are academic preparation, assessment information, college planning, and financial aid.

Academic Preparation

Students' academic preparation for college is a progressive process that builds on their skills, knowledge, and experiences. Beginning in middle school, students select courses and programs of study, and make decisions that shape their futures. Colleges recommend that high school students take challenging and rigorous courses to develop the skills needed for postsecondary success. We know that students who have taken a core curriculum (four years of English and three years each of math, social sciences, and natural sciences) increase their achievement levels and are likely to pursue postsecondary education (Council of The Great City Schools & ACT, 2001). We also know that a key component of a school-parent partnership involves helping parents understand the various courses available to students, how these courses relate to postsecondary preparation and requirements, and how to help their students develop an academic plan for high school and beyond.

Parents can support and motivate students to complete rigorous high school courses and succeed in college (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). Schools can develop systematic programs over time to help guide parents and students in course selection. Schools can help parents and students see the importance and relevance of challenging courses and understand that the academic choices their children make in middle and high school will affect their postsecondary options.

The PACT program describes how schools, particularly counselors, can help parents investigate the types of programs of study offered, review course schedules, and participate in course selection. Educators discuss the academic options in middle school that prepare students to take challenging high school courses. Parents are given lists of middle school courses and information about how they connect with high school courses. Schools stress that although courses may be arranged to meet high school graduation requirements, this may not guarantee entry into specific careers or postsecondary training.

NACAC suggests that students study a foreign language, computer science, and the fine arts in addition to recommended core courses. Schools can emphasize to parents that these courses can help develop skills and interests that can guide students through college and foster life interests. For example, learning a foreign language can help them better understand grammar and vocabulary. As many students are thrust into a world of technology through Internet courses, writing papers, doing research, and communicating with professors and classmates using e-mail, computer courses will help students better apply technology to college study. Fine arts courses can help students develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the world around them. All of these courses can spark an interest in extracurricular activities that can enhance students' knowledge, self-esteem, and strengthen their relationships with peers and adults in the school (Wimberly, 2002).

Using the PACT model, schools also encourage parents to engage in actions at home and at school that can help their students succeed. Schools show parents various techniques to monitor academic progress by maintaining an academic portfolio that contains examples of students' work over time. This allows parents to see where and how academic progress is being made.

ACT documented several ways that schools communicate to parents about the connections across course selection, achievement, college choices, and future academic success. Parents of eighth graders preview high school courses to select during open house gatherings and meetings with high school counselors. Beginning in eighth grade, counselors meet individually with students and parents to discuss academic goals, select next year's courses, and review typical college admissions requirements such as academic preparation, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement.

In subsequent years, students and parents meet with counselors to review their course plans, discuss academic progress, and select courses for the following year. These meetings are held in addition to traditional parent-teacher conferences, giving counselors the opportunity to communicate and form relationships with parents. The schools hold these parent sessions before school, during the school day, and in the evenings to accommodate parents' schedules.



In the ACT study, the schools continually evaluate students' progress toward their educational goals with their parents. This allows parents, counselors, and students to come together to discuss educational and career goals and reinforces the necessary steps to attain these goals. Both schools show parents and students how grade point averages are calculated, stressing that grades, tests, and homework assignments contribute to final grades—throughout the duration of the high school experience.

Schools implement several programs to increase parental involvement in student achievement including class nights where parents attend each of their children's classes. During these sessions, teachers give parents an overview of class objectives, teach a sample lesson, and discuss course requirements such as homework, exams, and projects. School staff also meet with prospective students and parents, emphasizing the expectation of at least two hours of homework assignments and study.

While many parents were reluctant, or believed that they did not have the skills to help their children with assignments, teachers stress that parents can help students organize their work, complete daily homework assignments, and monitor their academic progress. One school established a website where teachers post daily homework assignments for students and parents to access. This website includes tips and strategies that parents can use to help their students with assignments and to help keep parents updated on class progress.

Assessment Information

Throughout their school years, most students take standardized achievement tests and complete career interest measures to assess academic performance and assist in postsecondary planning. (Assessment programs that provide integrated and cumulative information across academic years make it easier for school staff to explain results and implications to parents and students.) For example, many students take EXPLORE in eighth or ninth grade to help them structure their educational planning in high school; PLAN as sophomores to assess academic performance in English, mathematics, reading, and science; and the ACT Assessment as juniors or seniors as part of the college admissions process. These assessments show academic strengths and weaknesses, provide guidance for course selection and postsecondary planning, and suggest ways teachers can help students to improve academic performance.



NACAC suggests that schools inform students and parents of the tests required or recommended for college admissions (e.g., ACT Assessment). Students can become familiar with test format and content matter covered by these assessments by using test preparation software and practice tests available from the test publisher. Encouragement from parents can

help students to work hard in their academic courses as test results reflect and confirm level of preparation. Schools also can directly advise parents about test registration deadlines, fees, dates, and test center locations.

Because standardized assessments are an important source of information to help students and parents plan for the future, students should be motivated to do well so that the test results accurately represent their levels of achievement, interests, and preparation. The National Education Association (2003), for example, urges parents to encourage their children to always do their best on tests and suggests a number of ways to help them do so (e.g., provide a quiet place at home for homework assignments that reinforce what is learned at school).

Schools and parents can motivate students to perform well on standardized tests by encouraging them to begin thinking about their plans for postsecondary education early in high school. This includes having discussions about test content, how results are used, and the role(s) the assessments play in the postsecondary planning process. For example, many students erroneously believe that the only use of tests such as the ACT Assessment is to help determine whether or not they will be admitted to college. Yet, ACT Assessment results serve a variety of purposes that also include academic advising, career counseling, and course placement.

Assessment results have a wide range of uses for students, parents, high schools, and postsecondary institutions. Schools can work to help students and their parents effectively use assessment results as part of the educational and postsecondary planning process. ACT (2000a) suggests that schools use assessment results to:

- Help identify students' academic strengths and weaknesses
- Help develop students' postsecondary education expectations
- Help students plan for careers and postsecondary education
- Assist students and parents in identifying potential postsecondary institutions that meet their educational and career needs and goals
- Explore postsecondary institutions and program choices given the student's academic performance and interests
- Identify students' plans for involvement in extracurricular activities, part-time work, and other activities

Results of the ACT study show that schools use a variety of session formats to explain assessment information to parents and students. The schools integrate test explanation into the course selection process, showing parents and students how test results align with classroom performance and what academic skills students need to develop through future courses. Counselors review assessment results with parents to guide course selection and placement in the proper course-level to fit the students' academic preparation and achievement.

Teachers and counselors explain assessment results to parents, emphasizing strengths as well as areas in need of improvement, and suggest strategies for parents to help increase their students' academic performance. Schools use the ACT Standards for Transition (2000b) to match students' EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT Assessment scores with specific academic areas (English, mathematics, reading, and science). The Standards for Transition describe the types of skills and knowledge that students need to succeed and describe test score ranges that reflect the progression and complexity of skills needed in the areas measured by the assessment.

As counselors and teachers explain the Standards for Transition and assessment results to parents and students, the information then becomes a major component of students' postsecondary planning portfolios. Schools in the ACT study develop these portfolios to help parents better understand and track their students' educational and postsecondary planning information, progress, and decisions over time (similar to the PACT model).

Finally, the development of effective study skills can help students succeed in school, perform well on standardized tests, and prepare for postsecondary education. Schools can help parents develop an environment for their students that is consistent with good study habits. For example, ACT (2002) suggests that parents engage in a series of actions that can contribute to effective study habits. These include:

- Take an active role in the student's studies.
- Enforce a regular study time each day, making sure that the student spends time on homework, reading textbooks, reviewing notes and earlier assignments, and preparing for long-term projects.
- Provide a good study setting, with adequate light and desk or table with a chair. Even if a private room or area is not available in the home, other family members can be asked to respect study time as a time of quiet.
- Avoid phone calls, visitors, TV, or other noise during study time. Sometimes it is helpful to study with a classmate, but study time should not be used for socializing.

- Review homework, ask questions, get students to talk about what they are learning, and make them aware of the importance of learning.

College Planning

Parents can play a key role in their children's college planning, and schools can support and encourage parents in this role. Discussions of postsecondary plans and career options between parents and their children increase the likelihood that students will pursue postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Wimberly, 2002). These discussions should begin as early as middle school to help students develop and build a sound plan that will carry them through the completion of high school. Schools can provide parents with the information, skills, and resources to help their students take the necessary steps to plan for postsecondary education.

NACAC suggests that schools help parents see the importance of a college education and understand how they can make aspirations a reality. School personnel can help parents and students understand that:

- Going to college provides many academic, professional, and personal options
- Taking college courses improves reading, speaking, writing, and computing skills, and enhances critical thinking and problem solving
- Attending college enhances earning power
- Ensuring academic success (college entry) requires that students and parents start planning as early as sixth grade (middle school) and work hard to achieve these educational goals

NACAC recommends that counselors, teachers, principals, and other administrators assist parents in the following ways:

- Monitor achievement and progress in the classroom
- Provide information about high school study options and course offerings and assist in educational and career planning
- Teach successful study skills and motivate students to make the most of the school experience and to maintain an academic portfolio
- Encourage involvement in extracurricular activities
- Encourage parents to get to know counselors and teachers early on
- Identify postsecondary planning resources in the community

NACAC suggests that schools systematically explain and reinforce the steps needed throughout the postsecondary planning process to parents. NACAC particularly suggests that schools present the full array of postsecondary options available (e.g., certificate programs, two-year colleges and technical programs, four-year colleges), as well as the requirements typically needed to pursue various careers and complete graduate or professional degrees.

ACT's study found schools systematically implementing courses, programs, and practices that focus on preparing students for college. The school mission statements assert that all graduates will be prepared to pursue and excel in postsecondary education, and these are goals systematically communicated and

reinforced with parents. One counselor states, “We get parents thinking about college and they work with us trusting that we are going to make college happen.”

These high schools provide a college planning handbook for students and their parents which describes the counselor’s role in the process. The handbook explains the necessary steps to apply to postsecondary institutions, reviews various postsecondary options, provides tips for researching postsecondary programs, describes what parents and students should look for on a college campus visit, and gives a detailed timeline for applying to college. The schools often initiate the college application process during the winter of the junior year with a college night for students and parents. High school counseling staff, representatives from local colleges, and members of the local community provide parents with information regarding college admissions tests, campus visits, scholarships and financial aid, and the college admissions process. These programs often include showing parents how to search for college information via the Internet.



Low-income and minority parents and those who have not attended college may need individual guidance through this often new and unfamiliar territory. Some may have personal issues or face situations that could be barriers to their children’s educational goals. To address these issues, counselors in the ACT study meet individually with parents to review their expectations for their child, concerns they have about college, and any special circumstance affecting their child’s postsecondary planning. Schools particularly work to help parents and students plan for college in ways that are sensitive to the diverse social, economic, and cultural characteristics of their families.

Postsecondary planning often involves college visits and college fairs. A school in the ACT study sponsors a college campus visit for all students—assuring that each student visits at least one college. Many students participate in summer programs designed to expose them to college life. Recognizing that many parents did not attend college and knew little about college life, the school arranges weekend visits to local colleges, where parents could spend time in residence halls, eat in dining halls, and observe classes - to get an idea of what their children would experience. These college visits help reassure parents and students that college will give them valuable experiences and skills that will benefit their family over time.

Pre-collegiate and academic enrichment programs are available to many students in the ACT study. Students participate in programs such as Upward Bound, which provide college planning information, tutoring, and supplemental academic courses. These programs generally meet outside of school hours in the evening, on Saturdays, or during the summer. Counselors and teachers often persuade parents to allow their children to participate in these programs by informing them that these programs could help them earn scholarships for college. Many students concurrently enroll in courses at local colleges, which allow them to experience college classes and earn college credit.

NACAC suggests that schools clearly inform parents about key postsecondary planning deadlines. Parents and students need to know when they must apply to college, as well as when they are required to submit financial aid forms. To communicate these deadlines to students and parents, ACT study schools publish monthly parent newsletters, hold monthly college planning meetings for students and parents, and post deadline reminders throughout the school. During some postsecondary planning meetings, parents of current college students attend and share what the college admission process was like for them and their children, as well as the importance of meeting admissions and financial aid deadlines.

Financial Aid

For many parents, college costs may affect how they approach their children's postsecondary planning. College expenses are often a major financial burden for many families. Low-income families, particularly, may perceive college costs as being out of reach and may not apply for financial aid, closing the door on postsecondary education.

However, costs need not be a deterrent to obtaining a college education. Although the primary responsibility for paying for college rests on students and their families, there are many financial assistance programs and options to meet college costs. The majority of all students receive some form of financial aid such as grants, subsidized loans, scholarships, or other tuition assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

NACAC suggests that parents have a financial strategy to pay for college that includes being fully informed about college costs and the assistance opportunities available to meet these costs. Schools can help parents develop a college finance plan by providing them with information early (e.g., middle school). They can also motivate parents and students to engage in financial planning that will help meet future college costs. Using the PACT model, schools can give parents a thorough overview of college costs and expenses, explaining that costs are both fixed (e.g., tuition, fees, room, board) and variable, and that variable costs may change depending on lifestyle, course of study, and personal needs (e.g., travel, books, personal supplies).

Schools can help parents and students to use various college expense and financial aid calculators (e.g., ACT's online Financial Aid Need Estimator) to obtain accurate and helpful information. These programs can provide a valuable service to families by estimating the cost of attending various colleges and universities, what they would be expected to contribute to those costs, and the amount of financial aid they would need.

Applying for federal financial aid is often a new and unfamiliar process for families. Some parents may find financial aid forms and applications difficult to understand and complete. They may also find applying for financial aid intimidating. Further, rules about financial aid often change, so it is important that parents and students have accurate and current information about programs and policies as students approach high school graduation.

All federal and most state and institution financial aid programs require parents to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This form requires students and parents to provide personal financial information such as income, assets, and debts. The information from the FAFSA is used to determine the Expected Family Contribution, the amount of money that students and their families can reasonably be expected to contribute toward their education.

Some state financial aid programs and some colleges require students to complete additional financial aid forms. Families may require special attention to complete these forms, particularly those who are unfamiliar with the financial aid process and whose native language is something other than English (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2003). Often high school counselors and teachers as well as community organizations work directly with students and their parents to complete financial aid applications.

To help parents and students complete the FAFSA, ACT study schools host several financial aid workshops in which counselors guide students and parents through each step of the form. Financial aid advisors from local colleges attend these workshops to provide information and discuss the financial aid process. Schools emphasize that parents and students must complete the FAFSA in a timely fashion to be considered for all types of financial aid. They also discuss deadlines for scholarships and other types of institutional aid. Representatives from local banks explain how the student loan process works and are available to address parents' questions or concerns. Through these financial aid workshops, schools help students and parents project educational debt, future salary, and options available for repaying loans or participating in programs to forgive student loans.



Some schools may provide illustrative examples of what a financial aid package may entail and what expenses parents and students can expect as they plan for college (U.S. Department of Education, 2000b; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2003). In the ACT study, college students and their parents return to the high schools to describe their experiences with financial aid and offer suggestions on how to identify sources of financial aid, apply for assistance, and pay for college costs.

Schools in the ACT study also explain that while most student aid comes from federal and state programs, parents need to be aware of other sources of financial assistance. Specifically, institutions, community organizations, foundations, and corporate programs often offer scholarships, cooperative internships programs, and tuition reimbursement programs. The schools help parents and students apply for scholarships based on their grades and ACT Assessment scores. They explain that many states offer grants, scholarships, and other financial assistance for postsecondary education. The schools continually emphasize that successfully completing a strong college preparatory curriculum could potentially have financial benefits for students and their parents.

5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly parents can play an integral role in their children’s postsecondary planning and schools can engage in practices and behaviors that facilitate parent involvement. Schools can provide students and parents with information and resources to guide their postsecondary planning and help them take advantage of educational opportunities. Some schools have integrated parents into their students’ education planning in a variety of ways—focusing on academic preparation, assessment information, college planning, and financial aid. Through counselors, teachers, and administrators, schools can deliver collaborative programs that help students and parents make sound educational decisions. We offer one overall and four specific policy and program recommendations for ways that schools can engage parents in their children’s educational and postsecondary planning activities.

Overall Recommendation

Districts should document and implement plans for involving parents in the postsecondary planning process—including systematic methods for informing them about the process and supporting their involvement at key stages of this process.

In one of our earlier policy reports (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002), we spoke about the need for districts to have an Educational Transitions Strategic Plan that focuses on college exploration and postsecondary planning activities, programs, and outcomes that begin at least in middle school and continue throughout



high school. We made this recommendation because we perceived a need to thoughtfully integrate all of the key elements that facilitate successful postsecondary planning.

The findings of this study demonstrate that such a plan must include strategies for keeping parents informed about and involved in educational planning, beginning when their children are in middle school. The plan should include a detailed mission statement and a systematic set of programs, communication

vehicles, and timelines to support parent involvement. This plan should also indicate the dedicated staff assigned to enable this involvement, as well as the exact nature of their roles in this process.

Specific Recommendations

1. Beginning in the middle school, parents should be included in the selection of their children's courses and program of study.

Schools can help parents understand that middle and high school courses are connected to postsecondary opportunities. Parents need to know what courses their children should take and how they fit with their overall educational and career goals. This information, along with other data such as assessment results, can be included in the student's postsecondary planning portfolio.

Schools can help parents to encourage their children to take challenging and rigorous courses. Including parents in the course selection process gives schools the opportunity to inform them early about important educational planning issues, to build open communication channels and establish mutual trust, and to start the process of helping parents support their children's academic achievement and postsecondary planning.

2. Districts should establish comprehensive programs (including the development of assessment-literate counselors, teachers, and school administrators) to help parents understand assessment results and information.

Schools use standardized test results to assess levels of achievement, help students and parents learn more about academic strengths and weaknesses, and monitor students' progress over time. They can also help students to explore and narrow their career interests. Test results and related assessment information can play an important role in the educational planning process—starting in the middle school.

Schools should develop systematic ways of explaining assessment results to parents and integrate the results with other information. Strategies might include general information sessions about the purpose and benefits of the planned assessment(s). Individual sessions with students and parents should focus not only on the meaning of the test results in terms of achievement, but on the information these results provide for planning. To support such a comprehensive program of sharing of assessment information the educators involved in this process must be thoroughly trained and well supported.

3. Districts should develop programs and initiatives to explain and reinforce the educational and postsecondary planning process to parents.

Schools should provide parents with accurate and timely information designed to facilitate the transition from high school to postsecondary education. They must recognize that many parents do not know how to help their children plan for postsecondary education. They can implement, for example, the practices suggested in NACAC's Parents and Counselors Together Program (PACT) to involve parents at key stages in college planning process. These programs should be information based, must reinforce key messages about the steps in the college planning process, should be repeated throughout the school year, and should be held at times convenient to parents' schedules.

Schools should help parents at key information points in the postsecondary planning process, by providing information about:

- The importance of a postsecondary education
- The college admissions process
- Planning a middle school and high school course of study
- Exploring values, interests, and abilities
- Tests involved in early college planning and in the college admissions process
- The importance of involvement in school and community activities
- Potential careers and college majors
- Paying for college costs
- Visiting colleges
- Resources available in the school, on the Internet, and in the community for educational and postsecondary planning

Schools should be sensitive to differences in culture, language, and socioeconomic status when providing college-planning information. For example, many parents may feel uncomfortable and uncertain, and be unable or unwilling to take an interest in postsecondary planning if the process does not fit their own cultural and educational experiences.

4. Schools should help parents understand the various types of financial aid available for postsecondary education.

College costs should not be a barrier to postsecondary attendance. Schools must stress throughout the college planning process that there are many resources available to help pay college costs. Students and parents should be encouraged and helped to take full advantage of all financial aid options open to them.

Schools should provide information about scholarships, grants, loans, and other forms of financial aid. Teachers, counselors, and school administrators should be knowledgeable about financial aid opportunities, the financial aid process, and how students and parents can obtain financial aid. Financial aid information can be delivered through school-sponsored workshops that can include community agencies, college officials, and local banks to help parents and students understand and successfully complete the FAFSA and other required financial aid forms.

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