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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN INNER-CITY SCHOOLS
The Project FAST Extended Family Approach to Success

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This article examines the parent involvement practices and philosophies of an urban education model that has been integral in developing collaborative relationships between parents and schools. This model sought to enhance student performance by redefining school as the extended family for urban students and parents. A 4-year study concluded that when parents were involved with this process, student achievement and parental commitment to education far surpassed that of students and parents who remained in the more traditional school setting.

Urban educators across the country continually try to devise strategies that will get parents into their schools. The motivation behind this endeavor is clear—improved student achievement. More than 30 years ago, research evidence confirming the benefits of parental involvement in children's education began to appear (e.g., Bloom, 1964; Coleman, 1966). Since then, researchers have continued to document evidence that strengthens the value of parent involvement in the education process. Henderson (1981) reported 35 studies showing that various types of parental involvement had positive results, including measurable gains in pupils' performance. In a 1987 follow-up, Henderson described 18 additional studies with similar findings.

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Of the many problems that plague urban schools, an apparent inability to reap the benefits of parent participation is among the most critical. Although studies demonstrate that parent involvement activities in low-income settings are more effective in helping students achieve better academic results than are the matched controls, the gains are often not sufficient to bring the achievement scores of children with involved parents up to the national average (Cochran, 1987; Swap, 1990).

Many educators fell victim to the commonly held belief that counting heads as parents walk through the school doors would be enough to claim success. Parent involvement in these schools has meant little more than classroom visits, bringing refreshments to class parties, or selling items during a school fundraising event. Although the intentions were properly placed, those activities fell short of producing meaningful outcomes or of realistically assessing parents' interest in their children's education.

A plethora of evidence from low-income settings suggests that to increase achievement scores enough to reach the national average, comprehensive, profound, and more radical programs of school reform and parent partnership are required. Don Davies (1988) initiated the Schools Reaching Out (SRO) program to explore the connection between students' success and parent and community involvement in schools in low-income urban settings. Davies's research concluded that what was required to break the achievement barrier in low-income urban schools was a paradigm shift that had two essential and interlocked components: a belief in success for all children in school and a belief that parent involvement is necessary for achieving that success.

Although the SRO program does not claim absolute success in all cases, in instances in which success has been achieved, the traditional relationships between parents and educators were changed in several ways. Specifically, in comparison to past practices, parents and educators worked together more often for a greater variety of purposes and under more nurturing conditions. In these schools, activities included dinners, breakfast meetings, workshops led by teachers, discussion seminars, and school-community planning councils. The activities began the process of building relationships

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based on firsthand information and trust. Even when parents could not be involved at school on a daily basis, they were connected to the school and had important roles to play in their children's achievements.

A further review of literature confirmed that few urban schools have succeeded in bringing the achievement of urban students up to national average. Two models that have documented success, however, are the School Development Program (or Comer Model) and the Accelerated Schools Program. The School Development Program, developed by James Comer, a psychiatrist at the Yale Child Study Institute, was initiated in two pilot schools in New Haven in the 1970s (Comer 1980, 1988). The Accelerated Schools Program was developed by Henry Levin (1987) from Stanford and initiated in two schools beginning in 1987. In each case in which models were faithfully replicated, gains in reading and mathematics were reported at or above the national average. Some of the commonalities of the programs and the importance of parent involvement on improved student achievement are summarized below:

1. Both models identify parent involvement as a major component of reform and include parents in every aspect of the school program (e.g., as volunteers, decision makers, learners, partners in home-school learning).
2. Both models have developed new structures for decision making in schools that include parents. In Comer schools, the School Planning and Management team meets regularly to identify targets for school improvement and to link staff development and evaluation plans to those targets. In Accelerated Schools, the steering committee involves the community in setting priorities in conjunction with their mission, and three or four task forces work during a year term to implement those priorities.
3. Both models require a comprehensive approach to school reform in which all groups work in a collaborative manner and resources, programs, and staff development serve the identified goals.
4. Both models seek to transform the culture of the school. In Comer schools, the transformation focuses on the importance of relationships for children and adults. Comer believes that children's learning is based in part on bonding and identification with significant

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adults and that continuity in goals and values between home and school is very important, particularly for children at risk for educational failure. Development of program adaptations to serve children's needs is coordinated through the Students Staff Services team, which brings together all relevant personnel (administrators, teachers, parents, specialists, psychologists) to address concerns of individuals and groups in the school. The creation of a nurturing and supportive environment for adults is an essential component of the model.

AN OVERVIEW OF PROJECT FAST AND THE PILOT DISTRICT

Between Fall 1993 and Fall 1996, the public schools of East Cleveland, Ohio, and Cleveland State University piloted Project FAST (Families Are Students and Teachers) in five kindergarten classrooms. East Cleveland, Ohio, is a 99% African American community in which 69% of the students come from single-parent households and 49% are members of families living at or below the poverty line.

Many students come from homes affected by urban problems such as drug abuse, neglect, alcoholism, and domestic violence. This severely economically depressed community has been described in school district self-studies as an exaggerated microcosm of urban America's worst problems. In this environment, the traditional definitions of family, parents, home, and school have been altered, and the relationships among parents, the school, and children often do not induce educational or developmental achievement among students.

The Project FAST initiative was an attempt to improve student achievement through enhanced school/family relationships. Through this model, school became redefined as the extended family for students and their parents. This new paradigm was established by creating long-term collaborative relationships, activities, and projects between school and home and by placing emphasis on productivity.

Project FAST is a multifaceted model of school improvement that relies on parent involvement, multiyear class assignments

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(kindergarten through second grade), effective teaching, summer enrichment, and team implementation. Each component has been vital to the success of the program and to positive achievement results, which will be discussed in detail later. However, this article is intended only to provide specific information on the extended family concept and philosophies and on parent involvement practices that have helped to empower urban parents to become instrumental in their children's educations.

Our belief in the importance of establishing long-term and meaningful relationships between the home and school necessitated the multiyear class assignments and summer enrichment for students. Both of these program components allowed teachers and parents to have continuous year-round contact for 3 years. The relationships were further enhanced throughout this 3-year period by the establishment of parent workshops, which were held on a monthly basis. The goal of these workshops was to teach parents to reinforce instruction at home, to help parents develop a home environment that facilitates achievement—including the development of children's self-concept—and to have discussions concerning basic parenting skills.

Although Project FAST is still a young model and we continually work to improve on each component, the early results are impressive. Student outcomes at this point show considerable achievement (reading, language, mathematics) differences between students who are participants and those who are not. In the next sections, a complete description of the extended family concept and parent involvement philosophies and practices will be provided. These will be followed by a discussion on limitations of the study, presentation of achievement results, and final thoughts.

ORGANIZE FOR LONG-TERM PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Many FAST students are confronted with unstable, disruptive, and chaotic environments away from school; their places of residence and interactions with adult caretakers are often intermittent

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and short-term. For these students, the traditional school organization mirrors that insecure environment by thrusting students into different classrooms with unfamiliar teachers and classmates each year.

Relationships and commitment to ideas are based on trust. Trust is developed as people have time to know each other, to work together, and to see the benefits of their efforts come to fruition. One primary reason for the successful parent involvement in Project FAST is the organizational structure that allows parents to work with the same teachers for consecutive years.

Epstein (1995) summarized the theory, framework, and guidelines of successful school/family/community partnerships. One of the key components of successful models was the development of a 3-year plan that outlined specific steps toward progress and specific activities that promoted family involvement. In FAST, the 3-year plan first centered on creating an educational environment that offered students and parents a sense of structure and consistency.

In FAST, students entering kindergarten remain with each other and the same teacher through the end of second grade. This 3-year plan includes student participation in annual summer enrichment camps with their teachers. Through this cycle, a comprehensive framework for the extended family is developed. Parents know who their children will work with for the next 3 years. This long-term relationship permits parents to collaborate with the teacher on methods of promoting achievement and interest in school.

Meisels and Shonkoff (1990) concluded that the learning process is enhanced when parents and students can count on seeing the same teachers over time, versus the common clinic model in which services are made available from whomever is on call. FAST personnel have found that these 3-year relationships promote ongoing parent interactions with the school personnel, stability of educational environment, and continuity of learning experiences. Each of these has been shown to be conducive to effective learning.

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THE EXTENDED FAMILY CONCEPT AND ACADEMIC BENEFITS

In most American classrooms, the first month of school is spent learning new names, personalities, relationships, and ways to teach and motivate new students. When students in FAST are reunited with their teacher after a short summer break, they immediately get back to work. As one teacher who has completed 3 years with the same class states, "I always begin teaching on the first day of school." Students return to a classroom where they are well aware of the teacher's expectations, and the teacher begins with an informed view of each child's abilities and personality and some knowledge of the child's home family circumstances. The following are some of the key benefits accrued from the extended family concept.

- Teachers begin the year with insightful information about each student that has been acquired by working with parents; for example, housing situations, medical/emotional needs, and economic and family concerns, all of which may have a profound impact on student success in the classroom.
- Students and parents begin the year with a knowledge of teacher expectations. For the students, that includes knowledge such as expected quality of work and acceptable behavior; for the parents, that includes classroom and home support techniques, which will be described in detail in the next section.
- Teachers gain almost an extra month of teaching time. Getting-to-know-you time becomes unnecessary during the 2nd year. Whereas the 1st month of school in other classrooms is spent learning new names, personalities, and ways to motivate students, instruction in the Project FAST classroom begins on the 1st day.
- The duration of this program is accommodating to the great variability in individual learner characteristics. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) estimate that children entering the first grade may differ by as much as 4 years in various characteristics essential to learning. Moreover, because students remain with the same teacher, they can attain subject mastery at their own rates.
- This structure obviates the necessity for the teacher to make premature and often counterproductive pass-fail decisions. In this model, there is no grade-level failure. Grade retention and failure decisions between kindergarten and third grade are not only premature, they in

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fact operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy in the further schooling of children. Slavin and Madden (1989) contend that grade retention in the early primary grades is a major predictor of who will ultimately drop out or otherwise become school failures.

- Students are engaged in year-round instructional activities through summer enrichment camp. During summer, skills are reinforced, and students become more fully engaged in projects and out-of-classroom learning activities.

SHOW PARENTS HOW A SMALL AMOUNT OF TIME CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Many urban parents have learned to be skeptical of public education. Their skepticism may be the result of some of their own negative experiences or of a sense of unfulfilled promises and unrealistic expectations of them as parents. A great deal of our success in helping parents play meaningful roles in the education of their children was based on several ideas: Gaining their commitment may take time, it would have to be at no additional financial cost, and their activities would need to be continuous and relevant.

Although most of the FAST families are demographically similar, parents face different circumstances that affect how well they believe they can make contributions to their children's education. Issues such as employment, transportation, and access to child care, for example, all affect the frequency that and conditions under which parents believe that they can realistically spend time in school.

One key idea from the extended family concept is that parent involvement is a process, not an event. This concept permeates the model and recognizes that parent involvement occurs on various levels, at various times, and that parents' most critical support does not necessarily occur at the school. Many parents would like to visit schools more regularly, but personal circumstances do not allow this. The Project FAST model shows parents how 1½ to 2 hours per month in school allows them to spend unlimited productive hours with their children at home.

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MONTHLY PARENT WORKSHOPS

Monthly parent workshops are held during this 3-year cycle, except during the summer camp. Sessions are scheduled in the early evening at a time convenient for parents. We adhere to a strict time limit and always serve refreshments to show the parents that their efforts are appreciated. Project FAST teachers plan and conduct the workshop, emphasizing four areas: (a) knowledge and tools parents need to reinforce instruction, (b) creating a home environment that facilitates achievement, (c) the development of children's self-concept, and (d) discussions to enhance basic parenting skills. Each area of emphasis is briefly described here.

KNOWLEDGE AND TOOLS PARENTS NEED TO REINFORCE INSTRUCTION

Parents in FAST schools became willing participants and enjoyed assisting their children with learning activities when they knew what to do. Uncertainty and insecurity of subject matter and a dearth of educational materials in the home were found to be the primary deterrents to adults reinforcing school instruction at home. This section of the workshop helped parents develop confidence in providing instructional assistance in homework assignments. During the workshops, teachers

- talk to parents about subject and content areas that are being taught,
- talk to parents about the instructional goals for each subject,
- inform parents of the instructional expectations for the upcoming school month (this practice provides a framework for helping at home until the next parent meeting),
- demonstrate and have parents participate in learning activities that children will have in class,
- conduct make it/take it sessions so that parents will have materials to reinforce instruction,
- provide student homework assignments for 2 to 4 weeks in advance, and
- discuss and demonstrate how common household sights/goods and typical drives or walks through the community can be used to complete homework assignments or as teaching tools.

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CREATING A HOME ENVIRONMENT THAT FACILITATES ACHIEVEMENT

Creating a home environment that facilitates achievement has a phenomenal impact on student achievement and behavior at school. Research compiled by Lehr and Harris (1988) concludes that the environment of the home is twice as predictive of academic learning as family socioeconomic status. Children whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with the school perform better than children whose parents do not.

This section of the parent workshops focuses on helping parents discover ways of creating home environments that are conducive to student achievement. The following are ideas that all parents can implement regardless of their economic status:

- Establish daily homework time: Schedule a time each day for academic work.
- Each day, ask whether there is any homework. Simply asking communicates to children that homework is important.
- Provide a quiet place for study and encourage efforts. Be available to discuss children's work using information and materials from parent workshops.
- Enforce a reasonable and consistent bedtime: Achievement and interest in school is always much greater when children are well-rested and alert.
- Make sure children attend and are prepared for school.
- Be a reading role model: Children imitate what they see their parents doing. If parents read, children will want to read.
- Read together: Read to children and have them read to parents.
- Make regular visits to the library: Help children find books on their interests and discuss each book they read.
- Limit television viewing: Establish a reasonable amount of television time for children. Be influential in the children's selections of programs.
- Offer encouragement and praise: Cultivate a supportive home atmosphere while also setting and enforcing standards for school work.

EMPHASIZE A POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT

One of the most important things adults can do in the home to encourage academic and social development is to create an atmos-

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phere in which children can develop positive self-concepts. Children with positive self-concepts take pride in their accomplishments, make good decisions, demonstrate responsibility, and have high self-expectations. Some ways that parents in FAST workshops determined that they could help children see themselves positively are:

- Treat children with love, respect, and courtesy.
- Reward good behavior, efforts, and accomplishments.
- Seek opportunities to praise children.
- Create opportunities for children to assume responsibilities.
- Spend a lot of time together, sharing activities that parents and children both enjoy.
- Listen when children talk about feelings, concerns, and wishes.

BASIC PARENTING ASSISTANCE

Many parents provide their children with homes that are conducive to learning and development. However, in East Cleveland, a large percentage of parents rear their children alone, combating poverty, their own low educational status, and a community that harbors violence, drugs, and gang activity.

During the monthly workshops, one third of the time is devoted to discussions that focus parents' attention on their basic obligations of parenthood. Although parents' must operate within their own economic means, they are reminded that having a positive impact on student achievement most often requires time, not money.

FAST teachers have been increasingly viewed as the extended family, and parents have become more receptive to information/discussions about effective parenting. Teachers discuss with parents and, perhaps more important, parents begin to discuss with each other essential parenting practices. Building on research by Epstein (1987), the last part of each workshop focuses on basic parent obligations or meeting the child's needs for safety, security, nutrition, health care, and discipline. Each of these areas generates discussion and sharing of ideas and information related to common concerns and methods of overcoming the obstacles of living and rearing children in the inner city.

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ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS

In the absence of a carefully designed experiment in which program elements are systematically varied and students are randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, attributing student outcomes to specific elements of the FAST program is not possible. Instead, we compared mean performance of Project FAST students on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and TERRA NOVA with (a) the mean performance of same-grade students in the school and (b) the district-wide mean performance of same-grade students. Gross comparisons of this type leave open several rival interpretations of the results. We will address these in turn before discussing the achievement data.

VOLUNTEERISM, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, AND ENTERING DIFFERENCES

Participation in Project FAST did not depend on families volunteering to have their children in the program. Rather, the program was explained to the principal and teachers in each school, and individual teachers volunteered. Parents or guardians of students in these teachers' classrooms were then notified and given the option of either having their children remain in the experimental program or having them reassigned to regular classrooms. Additionally, parents maintain the option of removing their children at the end of each school year if they are unhappy with the program or with their child's teacher. To date, no parent or guardian has elected to have their child reassigned to a regular classroom. Thus, achievement results cannot be attributed to initial differences due to parental or guardian volunteerism.

It should also be noted that assignment of students to classrooms was (and is) essentially a random process in the participating schools. That is, principals did not attempt to match particular teachers with particular students or to consider any preexisting differences among students in assigning students to teachers who elected to participate in the program. In fact, classroom composition was decided before the decision was made by any teacher to participate. Consequently, although no data on readiness or enter-

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ing ability of students are available, we have no reason to believe that students in the Project FAST classrooms differed from other students in the participating schools. Finally, it should be noted that the usual school-to-school variation in median socioeconomic status that characterizes most metropolitan school districts does not pertain to East Cleveland. This district, the poorest in Ohio, is homogeneously depressed. In the most affluent school in the district, 70% of the students qualify for the free-lunch program.

PARENTAL ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN MONTHLY MEETINGS

Although records of individual parent or guardian attendance at the monthly meetings were not kept, attendance at the meetings was uniformly high (between 75% and 80%), and all parents or guardians attended at least some of the meetings. Moreover, project teachers were in constant contact with individual parents throughout the school year. The net result is that variation in parental involvement was minimal. It should also be reemphasized that Project FAST is a multicomponent, integrated innovation. Although the present article focuses on the parent-involvement component of the program, parent involvement per se is not the only critical element. Of at least equal importance is the summer enrichment program and the fact that students are assigned to the same teacher for the first 3 years of their schooling. Hampton, Mumford, and Bond (1997) have provided an in-depth description of the other elements of the program.

The East Cleveland School District used the CTBS to monitor student growth prior to the 1996-1997 school year. Since that time, the TERRA NOVA has been used. The results we report summarize the project students' performance on these tests compared to suitable control groups. However, Project FAST is not designed to affect scores on any particular measure of academic achievement, but is intended to affect students' overall academic growth, no matter how it is measured. We are confident that the students in this program would show similar superior achievement no matter what standardized instrument was used, including performance assessment.

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TABLE 1
CTBS Normal Curve Equivalents 1993-1996: Project FAST Classroom 1 Students Versus Building and District Groups

	N	M	SD	t	*Days Absent*
Reading					
FAST	28	73.10	12.16		8.3
Building	30	50.32	13.13	6.40***	9.0
District	618	48.61	12.94	9.59**	9.0
Mathematics					
FAST	28	77.27	19.48		
Building	30	40.20	25.67	6.06**	
District	618	53.43	23.49	5.28**	

NOTE: CTBS = Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Tables 1 through 5 summarize the comparative achievement and attendance data of participating students, nonparticipating students in the same school, and students in the district at large. The classrooms have been arbitrarily designated 1, 2a, 2b, 3, and 4. Classrooms 2a and 2b (from the same school) and 3 have completed only the first year, kindergarten, of the program. Classroom 1 has completed the entire 3 years, and Classroom 4 has completed 2 years.

It is apparent from the tables that, even after only a year of the program, the program's effects on student achievement are impressive. With the exception of Classroom 2b, the achievement of Project FAST students in reading, language arts, and mathematics is significantly above that of other students in the same school and of students in the district at large. The first author is working closely with the project teacher in Classroom 2b to isolate and resolve any problems that may be impeding student progress. We have every reason to believe that, at the end of the project, students in this classroom will also excel academically.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE

As with any educational innovation, the success of Project FAST depends in a fundamental way on the ability and dedication of those

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TABLE 2
TERRA NOVA Normal Curve Equivalents 1996-1997: Project FAST Classroom 2a Students Versus Building and District Groups

	N	M	SD	t	*Days Absent*
Reading					
FAST	24	84.4	15.8		11.7
Building	59	59.0	16.1	6.47***	9.4
District	566	59.0	18.2	6.72***	13.8
Language					
FAST	24	69.2	14.1		
Building	59	45.8	17.3	5.81***	
District	566	48.1	17.9	5.69**	
Mathematics					
FAST	24	64.5	14.4		
Building	59	39.8	13.0	7.51***	
District	566	48.7	15.9	4.78***	

**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 3
TERRA NOVA Normal Curve Equivalents 1996-1997: Project FAST Classroom 2b Students Versus Building and District Groups

	N	M	SD	t	*Days Absent*
Reading					
FAST	24	57.1	14.3		9.4
Building	59	59.0	16.1	–0.50	9.4
District	566	59.0	18.2	–.050	13.8
Language					
FAST	24	41.1	15.5		
Building	59	45.8	17.3	–1.14	
District	566	48.1	17.9	–0.53	
Mathematics					
FAST	24	44.8	8.8		
Building	59	39.8	13	–2.03*	
District	566	48.7	15.9	–2.03*	

*$p < .05$.

involved. We have been fortunate in attracting excellent teachers to the program. But there is no assurance that this will always be the case. Because Project FAST involves multiyear assignment of students to teachers, it is imperative that some screening of teachers

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TABLE 4
TERRA NOVA Normal Curve Equivalents 1996-1997: Project FAST Classroom 3 Students Versus Building and District Groups

	N	M	SD	t	*Days Absent*
Reading					
FAST	25	79.4	12.6		5.8
Building	81	67.0	11.1	4.68***	8.2
District	566	59.0	18.2	7.75***	13.8
Language					
FAST	25	59.6	18.5		
Building	81	43.9	17.5	3.83***	
District	566	48.0	17.9	3.10**	
Mathematics					
FAST	25	52.0	18.3		
Building	81	39.8	15.5	3.25**	
District	566	48.7	15.9	0.99	

**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 5
TERRA NOVA Normal Curve Equivalents 1995-1997: Project FAST Classroom 4 Students Versus Building and District Groups

	N	M	SD	t	*Days Absent*
Reading					
FAST	18	72.4	16.1		11.7
Building	99	46.4	17.2	5.90***	9.4
District	647	46.5	17.9	6.06***	12.8
Language					
FAST	18	65.8	14.0		
Building	99	55.3	16.2	2.59*	
District	647	50.7	16.8	3.77***	
Mathematics					
FAST	18	62.4	15.2		
Building	99	49.2	14.7	3.45***	
District	647	48.3	16.9	3.49***	

*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

take place. The many advantages of multiyear assignment can, in fact, become a distinct and aggravated impediment to student growth if the project teacher is incompetent.

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The issue of teacher ability suggests that an obvious rival interpretation of the results of this project is that the teachers involved are simply superior teachers, independent of Project FAST per se. This is no doubt true. But we believe that it cannot entirely explain the higher achievement of Project FAST students. For Classroom 1, we were able to locate final second-grade CTBS reading and mathematics scores for 26 former students of the Project FAST teacher. These were students who were taught by the Project FAST teacher in the second grade under normal grade organization. The mean CTBS reading (52.65) and mathematics (58.04) scores were significantly below the corresponding mean scores (73.10 and 77.27, respectively) of this teacher's Project FAST students at the end of the second grade. To be sure, more data on the achievement of Project FAST teachers' former students will have to be collected. But these preliminary results suggest that teacher ability alone is not sufficient to explain the success of Project FAST.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Project FAST model is only one of several innovations currently being implemented by East Cleveland City Schools. No single model or school improvement strategy is best for every student, teacher, or parent. It has become clear, however, that solutions to many of the challenges that students face require a concerted effort by educators, parents, and the larger community. The teachers, students, and parents who participated in Project FAST have demonstrated that when time and commitment are devoted to strengthening relationships between home and school, positive results occur. Even in this microcosm of urban America's most severe problems, measurable differences occur in schools that are organized to include the family.

Parent/family involvement has the greatest impact on student achievement when it is meaningful. Programs become meaningful to parents when they can see a direct benefit to their children, a commitment from teachers and administrators that parents are important, and evidence that what they as parents are doing makes a difference.

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