Setting the Stage for Family, School and Community Partnerships

In the spring, seeds dropped by Ohio's oak and maple trees begin to take root and sprout. Each seed's growth and potential depends on the soil, sun and other aspects of the environment. Just like sprouting seeds, the development of children and teens depends on their environment, but more specifically, their growth and learning is shaped through their closest relationships (Bronfenbrenner,1979).

Early in development, children are nurtured in the parent-child relationship, which is the child's first, lasting and most influential relationship. As they mature, children continue to learn through a growing number of relationships with others, including teachers, coaches, mentors and friends. These close relationships at home, in the classroom, at childcare centers, in after-school programs, on sports teams and in their neighborhoods have a significant effect on children's development.

As children grow from pre-school through graduation, the types of support and opportunities they need from their family, school and community change. At all ages and stages, parental involvement in learning is powerful. In the elementary years, families are more hands-on with learning: reading with their children, checking homework and visiting interesting places. As children mature, a family's support changes to providing encouragement, assisting with planning for the future, keeping an eye on behavior and having high expectations. There is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy for partnerships that support parental involvement in learning. In fact, family involvement should be an ongoing process that adapts to family needs and strengths, as well as the child's development.

The ability of each parent, teacher, grandparent, coach or counselor to teach and care for children and youth depends on the support they have from others.

Young plants grow best when they have the right combination of sun, water and nutrients. Similarly, children and teens grow and learn best when the people in their lives work together and support each other. The interconnections between different settings, like home and school, between teachers and parents are important for development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Support, trust and communication between home and school, and between parents or relatives are important to learning and development that occurs in the home, classroom or other settings. Too often, there is a tendency to focus on each setting separately, thinking that if teachers would just teach well, and parents would just parent well, children and teens will develop and learn well. Yet learning and development depend on the degree of connection and coordination across the child's relationships in different settings (Wiess, Kreider, Lopes, & Chatman, 2005). Each parent's, teacher's, grandparent's, coach's or counselor's ability to teach and care for children and teens depends on the support they have from others.

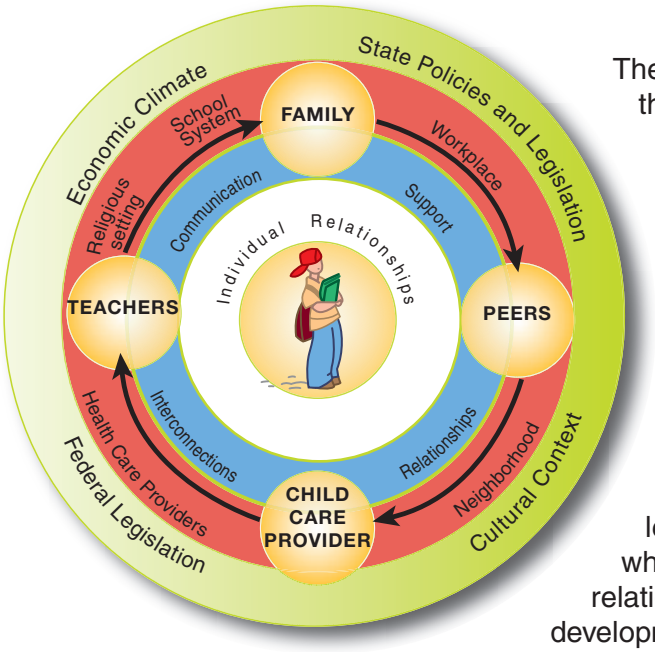
The ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) captures the importance of relationships to growth and learning. This model can be described most simply as nested structures, each inside the next like concentric circles, each larger and encompassing the one before it (see Figure 1). This child-centered and family-supporting approach builds and promotes the strengths that families already have. In addition, it assumes that families are strengthened and that development is enhanced through helping and partnership relationships: partners that include connection to the community.

Moving further out in the concentric circles, one enters the larger community systems: those of the parents' employers, school districts, civic government and health care organizations. Just as large-scale weather patterns, such as droughts and hurricanes affect plant growth, these larger systems contribute to the relationships, interconnections and individuals who support children and teens. For example, connections between home and school are supported when employers provide working parents with lunch-time speakers on parenting topics, such as helping with homework. They are further supported when school districts create partnerships with community agencies that can link families with needed services

Examples of local systems of support for learning and development:

- **School buildings partner with local health care providers to provide immunization clinics for families.**
- **Parents participate in school committees.**
- **County mental health agencies collaborate with schools to provide all students with information about handling stress.**
- **Schools invite community agencies, adult education programs and city recreation programs to use the building during after-school hours.**
- **Community members form a task force to find resources and strategies to address teen alcohol and drug use.**

Figure 1: Ecological Model of Family, School and Community Partnerships



The outer circle in the ecological model (Figure 1) represents the larger systems such as state and national policies and legislation, culture and economic climate that affect the teaching, support and care provided to children and teens (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008). At all levels, the relationships and connections between the people and systems that make up our communities and our state are important for providing children and teens with the support and opportunities they need to be successful in life (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008).

The ecological model of development explains how learning and development also are impacted by many levels of society. The heart of this model shows the child, who is supported and nurtured most successfully through relationships with those closest to him. The best learning and development can occur when families, schools and communities support each other and work together for the benefit of each child. The *Framework for School, Family and Community Partnerships* draws attention to not only the important roles of parents and teachers, but also the critical nature of supportive relationships between schools, families and communities.

The framework, which is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, is a tool for districts, schools and their partners. It sets forth guiding principles and implications for practice that are grounded in current research. Districts and schools can use this framework to understand the supportive roles and responsibilities for creating partnerships that promote the academic success and well-being of children and teens from a state level to individual families. In addition, as districts and schools work to create partnerships, this framework provides guidance and examples of best practices. Working independently, no parent, school district or state agency can provide the support and opportunities needed for all children and teens to succeed. By working together, at all levels and in new ways, Ohio can build the partnerships it needs to help all children have a bright future.

Example of macro systems of support learning and development:

- **Ohio Department of Education's Comprehensive System of Learning Supports Guidelines help schools and communities identify and address issues interfering with student learning.**
- **The State Board of Education approved the Model Family Engagement Policy to help districts create family engagement policies based on current research.**
- **The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* holds schools accountable to inform communities of the school's progress to meet the learning needs of all students. Schools are required to include parents in decision-making for school improvement.**

References

Bouffard, S. & Weiss, H. (2008). Thinking big: A new framework for family involvement policy, practice, and research. *The Evaluation Exchange*, XIV(1&2). 2-5.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1987). Family support: The quiet revolution. In S.L. Kaagan, D. R. Powell, B. Weissbourd, and E.F. Ziegler (Eds.), *America's family support programs*. *Perspectives and prospects* (pp. xi-xvii). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1990). Discovering what families do. In D. Blankenhorn, S. Bayme and J.B. Elshtain (Eds.), *Rebuilding the nest* (pp. 27-38). *Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America*.

Connard, C. & Novick, R. (1996). The ecology of the family: Background paper for a family-centered approach to education and social service delivery. Retrieved July 30, 2008, from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, http://www.nwrel.org/cfc/publicatoins/ecology2.html

Ohio Department of Education (2007). Comprehensive System of Learning Supports Guidelines. Retrieved September 24, 2008, from Ohio Department of Education, www.education.ohio.gov., search keywords: learning supports guidelines.

Weiss, H.B., Kreider, H., Lopez, M.E., & Chatman, C.M. (2005). Preparing educators to involve families: From theory to practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.