Moving From “Context Matters” to Engaged Partnerships With Families

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There has been much progress in the recognition that important contextual influences on a variety of student outcomes exist. However, a true application of systems-ecological theory to school-based practices has yet to occur. In this article, the importance of integrating systems-ecological thinking with educational practice is described and illustrated through engaged school-family partnerships, which operate at the level of the mesosystem. It is argued that school-family partnerships are needed to promote positive outcomes for all youth as well as for ameliorating disparities in educational outcomes. A plan of action is offered that includes moving past long-standing barriers and putting partnership principles into practice, highlights the importance of empirical support and ongoing research, and describes the promise of Response to Intervention reforms for creating engaged partnerships between educators and families.

Within academic fields of study related to youth and education, such as early childhood education, teacher education, and public health, among others, numerous scholarly studies, articles, and chapters have catalogued various school, family, community, or individual variables related to the educational, health, or social-emotional outcomes for youth. These reviews often further delineate influences according to a specific developmental period (e.g., early childhood, adolescence). Despite the theoretical work and empirical findings to date, we contend that applying systems-ecological theory to assessment, intervention, and consultation practices is the primary missing element for
understanding and improving student outcomes. The theory underscores the influence of immediate contexts in which individuals develop—homes, school, and communities—as well as the interactions among these contexts and individuals over time. Integral to advancing academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes for youth are school-based actions that engage with families and account for how the family-school interface. What we do together—the synergism—affects students’ developmental and learning outcomes.

There has been progress in the understanding and application of systems theory to educational practice. It is increasingly recognized that there are multiple influences on student outcomes, or in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) terms, that the microsystem for students, typically comprised of home or school, affects achievement and long-term educational outcomes, such as high school graduation and college attendance. For educators, this greater appreciation of context has typically manifested as interest in tapping or increasing family involvement to improve student achievement. Indeed, the influence of the family environment on students’ learning (e.g., home support for learning or direct academic socialization; Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1999; Buurkke, Whitehouse, & Christenson, 2009) is well documented and families are now considered vital to the success of many school reform models (Smrekar, Cohen-Vogel, & Lee, 2009). National initiatives and legislation, such as the National Education Goals (National Education Goals Panel, 1991) and the more recent No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2002) and reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), attempt to facilitate or ensure family rights for involvement or decision–making, which are also indicative of progress in the application of systems theory to education.

At this point, however, a true integration of systems theory with educational research or practice has not been accomplished on a large scale (Christenson & Reschly, 2009a; Downer & Myers, 2009; Gutkin, 2009; Reschly, Coolong-Chaffin, Christenson, & Gutkin, 2007). The field is far more advanced in our theoretical understanding than we are in translating theory to our educational practice. Drawing on the distinction made by Sameroff (1983), systems approaches recognize multiple ecological influences and argue that student behavior cannot be understood separate from these varied contextual influences. Sameroff described systems approaches as being synonymous with an interactionist perspective wherein one cannot examine the bits and pieces of separate behavior in isolation. For example, this perspective is illustrated by considering the importance of families’ influence on academic, behavioral, social, or emotional concerns of children. Others include understanding a student’s level of academic performance as a function of the type of curriculum to which a student was exposed, a teacher’s instructional practices, or a family interview regarding educational support and supervision.
In fact, many of the widely used family involvement activities are indicative of a systems approach, rather than true systems thinking, as these activities tend to be defined on the school’s terms and reflect the school’s, rather than shared, goals for students. Systems approaches account for all influences in the child’s ecology, but there tends to be a unidirectional emphasis. What is the effect of the school on the child? What is the effect of the home on the child?

In contrast, incorporation of systems theory with educational practice requires examination of the entire system. An individual cannot be separated, or decontextualized, from the contexts in which one is embedded. Furthermore, there is a set of principles that govern interactions among individuals and contexts that comprise a system (Christenson, Abern, & Weinberg, 1986). The principle of circular causality, for example, refers to the effect changes in one part of a system may have in other areas, such as when a change to family childcare arrangements after school may positively or negatively change a student’s preparation and homework completion, which in turn may affect grades and test performance in school. It is also the case that (a) the same outcome, such as dropout or passing a high-stakes assessment, may be achieved from different initial conditions (e.g., family configurations, reading or mathematics curricula), which reflects the principle of equifinality, and (b) individuals with similar initial conditions, such as siblings in the same family or neighborhood children who attend the same preschool, may experience different outcomes, a phenomenon referred to as multifinality. Perhaps the most important element that is missing in current practice is nonsummativity; or the recognition that the system itself is greater than the sum of its parts because of the relationships and interactions among individuals and contexts (Christenson et al., 1986). Put another way, incorporating systems theory into educational practice requires examination of the entire system—home, school, and the reciprocal interactions between home and school over time (Christenson et al., 1986; Downer & Meyers, 2009).

As we and others have noted elsewhere, there are numerous implications of systems theory for the broad field of education and school psychology in particular (Christenson & Anderson, 2002; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Gutkin, 2009; Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Reschly & Christenson, 2009; Reschly et al., 2007; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000; Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). One major implication relates to our conceptualization of student competence and difficulty. Rather than an internal characteristic or property of children, both competence and risk reside in and are distributed among systems or contexts in which youth are embedded (i.e., homes, schools, communities); supportive connections among these contexts over time occur whenever individuals (e.g., parents, teachers) or systems (e.g., schools, churches, families) have ongoing contact with each other that is organized around concern for the needs and progress of youth (Garbarino, 1982). Further, the relationships among people in these contexts (e.g., teachers and parents, par-
ents and children, teachers and students) are of utmost importance (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Hence, systems theory has implications for our assessment and intervention practices (Christenson & Anderson, 2002; Gutkin, 2009; Reschly et al., 2007; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000) as well as our efforts to engage families.

Partnerships among educators and families, which operate at the mesosystems level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), are one of the most compelling examples of systems theory in practice. There is empirical support that mesosystemic family-school interventions enhance student outcomes (Carlson & Christenson, 2005). Further, the fidelity, dosage, and intensity of family-school interventions are related as expected to student outcomes (Raikes et al., 2006); engaging with parents more frequently and for a longer duration results in greater benefits for children and families. School-family partnerships are key for enhancing outcomes for all youth and appear to be of particular importance to efforts aimed at ameliorating educational disparities (Rothstein, 2004). It is our contention that the time has come to move beyond family or school explanations of student performance to educational practice that accounts for the reciprocal effects of home and school over time and that underscores the importance of school-family partnerships for interventions and promoting the success of all youth.

SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

A partnership, by definition, involves joint ownership for risks and profits or playing on the same side (Webster’s Dictionary, 1990). The joint or shared nature of the partnership endeavor is crucial to understanding the creation of partnerships among educators and families. School-family partnerships require more than a systems approach. Rather, these partnerships are defined by shared goals, shared contributions, and shared accountability (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000), true systems thinking in practice. Partnerships require engaged relationships between families and educators, the primary socializing agents of youth as learners, focused on supporting students and families with the shared goal of optimizing educational outcomes for all youth (Christenson & Reschly, 2009a). A defining feature of engaged partnerships in practice is the degree to which the interface of the partners is salient. Hence, problem solving, two-way communication about children’s instructional needs, and shared decision making are necessary practices to establishing partnerships. An important goal of the partnership process for families and schools is establishing congruence across these main socializing agents in terms of expectations and messages about education and behavior (Reschly & Christenson, 2009).

Partnerships among educators and families are mutual but not necessarily equal or similar in roles, contributions, or responsibilities (Seely, 1985). It is incumbent upon educators to initiate and create conditions for construc-
tive collaboration and partnerships with families to occur (Christenson & Reschly, 2009a). In fact, school-initiated contacts with families are critical to establishing engaged relationships and school-family collaboration. Research indicates that families often wait for schools to initiate contact (Davies, 1991). Further, both theory and research have underscored the importance of school and teacher invitations for engendering more active family involvement and engagement in their students’ education (Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2009). The biggest challenges facing the field are no longer centered on *why* families are essential but rather *how* do we create engaged relationships and partnerships (process), and *what works* (empirically based interventions; Reschly & Christenson, 2009)?

Moving Forward: Disparities, Barriers, and Evidence-Based Interventions

We recently edited a volume on the topic of school-family partnerships for promoting student competence and were fortunate to have contributions from prominent scholars in a variety of fields (e.g., public health; educational policy; special education; developmental, school, clinical, and counseling psychology; Christenson & Reschly, 2009b). Several themes emerged, including the importance of partnerships for families and students from lower income and minority backgrounds, addressing barriers to transforming educational practices, and evidence-based school-family interventions.

*Partnerships and educational disparities.* In the United States, students attend school from approximately the age of 5 until 18, for 6½ hr a day, 180 days a year. The large differences in student knowledge, behavior, and skill are apparent the first time students cross our school doors. These gaps in achievement among various groups of students persist, or even grow, over years (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001, 2007; Barton & Coley, 2007; Chin & Phillips, 2005) and eventually are visible in educational outcomes such as high school dropout and college attendance (e.g., Alexander et al., 2007; Laird, Cataldi, KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2008). Achievement gaps and disparities have garnered a great deal of attention, including legislation (NCLB, 2002) that targeted these performance and outcome gaps between White and middle-class students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, minority racial-ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners. Interestingly, these are also the students and families who are often described as being “hard to reach” by educators and schools (Mapp & Hong, 2009).

Drawing from systems ecological theory, one may surmise that the quality of relationships and congruence in messages and expectations regarding behavior and education across the main socializing agents for youth, homes, and schools are important for all students (Reschly & Christenson, 2009). However, for students and families who are at higher risk for poor outcomes
(e.g., those living in poverty, students with disabilities), the mesosystem of home and school takes on greater importance as a factor that either exacerbates these risk conditions or ameliorates them by promoting additional learning opportunities aimed at enhancing positive outcomes for youth. Indeed, a number of scholars have noted the heightened importance of school-family partnerships for those “hard to reach” families (Weiss & Stephen, 2009), or in other words, those families and schools in higher risk, lower resource settings (Tolan, Sherrod, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003, as cited in Tolan & Woo, 2009).

An important consideration for the school-family partnership for students and families who experience greater risk is the opportunity to address how students use their time outside of the traditional school day—after school, evenings, on weekends, in the summer—which has an enormous impact on their performance in school and beyond. For example, a meta-analysis by Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996) found loss in reading skills over the summer among lower income students, whereas higher income students showed gains in skills during this time, a result that has been replicated in other studies (e.g., Alexander et al., 2001, 2007). When in school, all students have access to learning resources; for some students, however, there are fewer opportunities to learn outside of school. In a similar vein, Coleman (1987) noted that there is greater variation in family resources than school resources for children’s learning.

As mentioned previously, one of the goals of school-family partnerships is establishing congruence across home and school. For some youth, attaining congruence across home and school requires regular, but minimal, communication. For others, particularly those whose families are characterized as “hard to reach” (e.g., families with lower levels of education, experiencing poverty, or lacking experience with the U.S. schools), attaining congruence may be much more difficult. This difficulty may be thought of in terms of cultural capital (Rothstein, 2004). “Hard to reach” families may not have firsthand knowledge of the practices, experiences, and values that educators and schools hold, which translates to less access to information, lack of personal experience to draw upon to help their children be successful at school, and being less likely to communicate with educators (Rothstein, 2004). School-family partnerships that work to establish congruence across home and school are a means of increasing cultural and social capital for families and youth.

Many years ago, Gutkin and Conoley (1990) articulated a paradox for the profession of school psychology. Essentially, in order to improve outcomes for students, school psychologists must work effectively with adults (e.g., teachers, parents). A similar paradox is present in efforts to address disparities in educational outcomes. In order to improve outcomes for students and families, particularly those most at risk, interventionists including school psychologists, teachers, and others, must work and partner with families.
Much of students’ time outside our school doors is brokered by families. In addition, families are the link to students, schools, and communities.

**From here to there: Addressing barriers.** Invariably, any discussion of family involvement, home-school collaboration, or school-family partnerships includes barriers. Barriers exist at different levels of the system—within families or schools (microsystem), for the family-school relationship (mesosystem), as well as the exo- (e.g., available time and administrative arrangements within family or school workplaces) and macrosystemic levels (e.g., policies, legislation). Barriers have been categorized as being psychological or structural (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2008). For example, structural variables for families may be environmental (e.g., poverty) or economic, whereas feelings of inadequacy and linguistic or cultural differences are psychological barriers for families. Linguistic and cultural differences are also cited as barriers for educators, and limited time and lack of perspective taking are barriers for both families and educators (e.g., Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Esler et al., 2008; Weiss & Edwards, 1992), as is the absence of a system that supports ongoing communication (Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

Effective school-family partnership programs work to systematically remove barriers between families and educators by ensuring an ongoing process to identify and recommend constructive suggestions for improvement in the family-school interface rather than assigning blame. Fostering a mutual understanding of both family and educator constraints is essential to establishing an engaged school-family relationship and developing educators’ sensitivity and responsiveness to families’ needs. Educators must be sensitive to the status-oriented family issues such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and number of adults in the home (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Lareau, 1987). However, the psychological aspects, including parents’ role conceptions (e.g., Do parents understand the important role they play?), sense of self-efficacy related to involvement (e.g., Do parents believe their efforts are related to their children’s success? Do they believe they have the skills to help? Have we as educators found a viable role for individual parents?), attitudes toward education, and expectations for their children’s performance (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) should be our primary concern. Parents are able to dedicate resources to their children’s education provided the demands of their personal lives are reasonable and their sense of self-efficacy is adequate (Grolnick et al., 1997). Unfortunately these circumstances do not always represent the conditions in which some children are learning and developing. Therefore, the support provided by educators is critical for understanding and enhancing outcomes for specific student subgroups (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Of course, understanding what the barriers are for families and educators for establishing and maintaining partnerships is important for addressing said barriers. However, after a number of years and many lists and suggestions, educational practices still have not moved significantly past these barriers...
to meaningful connections and partnerships among families and educators to support student learning. Interestingly, this lack of progress has occurred during a time when federal legislation and policies have laid out increasingly broader roles for families in education (Weiss & Stephen, 2009), the knowledge base regarding the family influence on student learning and other outcomes is well established (e.g., Barton & Coley, 2007; Dearing & Tang, 2009; Hess & Holloway, 1984; Walberg, 1984), there is empirical support that family and school collaborative interventions result in improved student outcomes (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and there is great interest on the part of schools in working with families in order to raise student achievement (Reschly & Christenson, 2009).

Why, then, is there a disconnect between legislation, policy, attitudes and intentions, and actual practice? It may be the lack of sustained, coordinated efforts in legislation and policy or the lack of focus on capacity building, compliance, or technical assistance at the federal level (Weiss & Stephen, 2009). In addition, there is also a paucity of preservice and in-service teacher preparation in working with families as partners (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Jordan, Orzco, & Averett, 2001; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005); or, it may be that legislation and policy can create expectations and ensure rights but involvement and partnerships require relationships and trust, which cannot be legislated. In order to change practice, sustained and coordinated efforts are required to address barriers to school-family partnerships at all levels—from educators and families to legislation.

From here to there: Evidence-based interventions. Although there is still much research to be done, particularly in the areas of process (i.e., the “how”), terminology, and research design, it is clear that there is enough evidence, both theoretically and empirically, to support the conclusion that engaged educator-family relationships that are focused on supporting students are related to desired outcomes for youth. Furthermore, there are empirically supported school-family interventions for addressing student difficulties across developmental stages (Christenson & Reschly, 2009b). Programs such as the Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2009), the EcoFit Model (Stormshak, Dishion, & Falkenstein, 2009), and Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007) are evidence based and focus on the importance of collaboration and congruence across home and school for addressing students’ difficulties.

A COURSE OF ACTION

... It is also evident here and in other reports that much of the power in these partnerships and the myriad ways in which they can enrich child achievement and mental health, teacher performance and satisfaction, and parental functioning and support for schools remains unrealized, existing merely as great potential. (Tolan & Woo, 2009, p. 473)
Relationships and Actions

School-family partnerships are defined by a shared vision: enhancing outcomes for youth. These partnerships cannot be attained, however, without attention to school-family relationships and the actions or behaviors that create and sustain these partnerships. Relationships are critical to establishing and maintaining partnerships between families and educators. Indeed, most definitions of partnerships focus on relational components (Dunst & Trivette, 2009) and it has been argued that failure to establish positive relationships is a key obstruction to the creation of school-family partnerships (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Clarke and colleagues defined family-school relationships as “a child-centered connection between individuals in the home and school settings who share responsibility for supporting the growth and development of children” (Clarke, Sheridan, & Woods, 2009, p. 61).

Across studies, a number of characteristics or dimensions have been identified as important to healthy relationships and partnerships among families and educators (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). These dimensions may generally be grouped into three broad areas: equality, respect, and communication style (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). It is unclear whether all domains are equally important to establishing or maintaining partnerships or if a hierarchy exists among these dimensions (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). If the dimensions differ in importance, it is likely that Trust is a foundational element that makes the other dimensions or elements of partnerships possible.

Adams and Christenson (2000) applied Holmes and Rempel’s theory of the development of trust in interpersonal relationships to the family-school relationship. Trust between families and educators has been defined “as confidence that another person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship, to achieve positive outcomes for students” (p. 480). The development of trust requires time and is built on interactions. Three phases of trust may be applied to the family-school partnership: predictability, dependability, and faith. These phases reflect the different attitudes and beliefs that are held by educators and parents about the other in the partnership. For example, the first phase of trust is typified by families and educators responding to interactions in ways that are predictable (e.g., returning phone calls or signed paperwork). As interactions continue, predictability yields to a view that the other (family or school) is dependable and later to having faith, or confidence, in the other.

Trusting relationships are characterized by perspective taking, nonblaming interactions, and considerations of constraints faced by the partner. Interestingly, Adams and Christenson (2000) found a decrease in trust across school levels (i.e., from elementary to high school); that parents reported higher levels of trust of teachers than teachers of parents; and that the quality,
rather than frequency, of interactions between teachers and families was most predictive of their reported levels of trust. Other studies have found variations in teacher reports of trust of students and families as a function of income, with lower levels of trust for those from poor families (e.g., Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001), which has significant implications for school-family partnerships and addressing educational disparities.

Many of the identified characteristics of healthy relationships and partnerships are helpful for understanding and creating constructive, positive interactions among families and educators. Essential attitudes and beliefs for educators and families that are facilitative of healthy relationships, which are in turn essential to establishing and maintaining partnerships between schools and families, are specified by Clarke and colleagues (2009) and appear in Table 1.

It is also possible to distinguish essential attitudes and beliefs, or relationship dimensions, from behaviors or actions undertaken by educators and families. For example, Dunst and Trivette (2009) distinguished between relational and participatory practices, with the relational practices representing many of the partnership dimensions described in the previous paragraphs (e.g., empathy, respect), whereas participatory behaviors are helping practices, such as information sharing. Viewing relationship building as an intentional process, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) also distinguished between relational components and behaviors relative to school-family partnerships. Specifically, they proposed that the Approach (systems ecological

### TABLE 1 Principles Underlying Healthy Family-School Relationships

**Belief**: There is a shared belief that healthy relationships between families and schools are important.
- **Principle 1**: Families and educators share the same goals around promoting positive development and achievement in students.
- **Principle 2**: Both in- and out-of-school experiences are important to achieve the goal of education.
- **Principle 3**: Families and educators each have unique and important roles in educating and socializing children.
- **Principle 4**: Families are essential to a child’s learning and development.

**Commitment**: Families and schools are committed to establishing and maintaining a positive relationship throughout a child’s schooling.
- **Principle 5**: Family-school relationships are developed over time and need to be maintained throughout a child’s development and education.
- **Principle 6**: Maintaining the family-school relationship is a high priority for families and teachers.

**Continuity**: Consistency across systems and settings is important for a child’s adaptation.
- **Principle 7**: Establishing consistent goals and communicating common messages about the value of learning and education is helpful for and important to children.
- **Principle 8**: Demonstrating a number of practices that exemplify a strong family-school connection on a consistent basis supports consistent, long-term positive outcomes.

thinking), Attitudes (constructive, mutual support and understanding), and Atmosphere (welcoming, two-way communication) in school practice were prerequisites, setting the stage for positive school-family relationships and partnerships prior to the initiation of Actions. Actions should be focused on school and family socialization of students as learners through problem solving, enhancing teacher-family communication, decision making about shared expectations and learning goals, and providing supportive assistance to families in order to enhance home support for learning.

Putting Principles in Practice

Tolan and Woo (2009) outlined several principles for advancing educational practices with respect to school-family partnerships (see Table 2). For example, partnerships require engagement across home and school and shared responsibility and decision making; unidirectional communication, and one-way support (parents of the school) are not sufficient to enhance outcomes for youth. Another principle is paying proper attention to developmental stages. As children age and progress through levels of school, they have different needs; therefore, school-family support practices should vary accordingly. For younger students, partnerships may focus on school readiness, mastery of basic skills, effort, and motivation (Tolan & Woo, 2009). As students progress, school-family partnerships should focus on facilitating transitions and students’ growing desire for autonomy, graduation and career planning, abstention from risky health behaviors, and so on. As these principles are put into action, schools should strive to utilize evidence-based practices to the greatest extent possible, evaluate the effects of initiatives and interventions, and pay careful attention to context and match to student and family needs (Tolan & Woo, 2009).

### TABLE 2 Principles for School-Family Partnerships

- Recognize the inextricable link between a child’s school and home.
- Quality of linkages between schools and families is at least as important as frequency.
- Greater engagement of families improves student and school functioning.
- Mutual or shared goal development improves collaboration and benefits for parents, students, and school personnel.
- School-family partnerships are most beneficial when organized as sources of ongoing operational aid.
- Partnerships need to be developmentally sensitive and appropriate.
- Partnerships for specific issues may need different organization than those for general parental involvement.
- School-family partnerships are particularly valuable within high-risk, low-resources settings, such as inner-city communities.
- Recognize the ongoing multiple forms of strain on schools and families that can impede and undermine partnerships.

Response to Intervention: Linking Principles to Practice

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an educational reform that focuses on evidenced-based instruction and intervention and the use of students' progress-monitoring data to make decisions regarding the effectiveness and intensity of interventions. RTI may address many of the shortcomings of traditional assessment and intervention practices (Reschly et al., 2007). However, it is also a unique opportunity to meaningfully engage families around supporting student learning and promoting positive outcomes (Reschly, 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2009). In other words, RTI is a vehicle for translating the desire to work with families into practice in our schools.

RTI models are usually depicted in the form of a pyramid with different tiers, typically three or four. Each respective tier represents smaller numbers of students and more intensive data collection and intervention efforts. Further, RTI is based in problem-solving methodology and is preventative in nature, notably also essentials of school-family partnerships. The RTI model is also a useful heuristic for conceptualizing communication and collaboration among families and educators as well as differentiated levels of support. The first tier represents support for all students in terms of effective teaching and curricula, schoolwide discipline, and classroom management. It also represents conditions (attitudes, beliefs, actions) that promote healthy relationships and a system of communication between families and educators. Trust and relationships across families and schools are developed over time; thus, it is much more difficult to try to create these conditions after a student’s difficulties have become severe. When healthy school-family relationships and a system of communication are in place for all students, it provides the capital needed for families and schools to work together to address difficulties when they arise.

Conceptualized in this way, the prospect of engaging with families becomes less onerous for educators. Most teachers do not have the time to call every parent every night, or write daily home-school notes for each child, or attend weekly family-school meetings for each student. Rather, a system of communication and relationships are established with all families and more time-intensive activities, such as daily check-ins, home visits, parent education programs, or support groups, are necessary for the smaller numbers of students and families who require that level of support. Tiers 2 and 3 are centered on differentiated support for students and families and more frequent problem solving, communication, and collaboration across home and school.

CONCLUSION

It is time to finally move beyond the general understanding that context matters to integrating systems ecological theory in educational policies and
practices. In this era of accountability and largely unsuccessful efforts to address long-standing disparities in student achievement, we can no longer afford simple conceptualizations of student outcomes (e.g., effects of the home, effects of the school). One of the most compelling examples of systems theory in practice is at the level of the mesosystem—school and family partnerships. School-family partnerships are a viable goal for all students and are needed to optimize outcomes for youth. Establishing and maintaining a partnership requires principles (beliefs, commitment, continuity); healthy relationships; and specific actions, such as two-way communication, problem solving, and shared decision making. However, one key to putting principles into practice is recognizing that families and students require varying levels of time, effort, and support from educators on the way to healthy relationships and engaged partnerships. In short, connecting with some families will require greater effort from educators, but this effort is necessary to address long-standing disparities in achievement and outcomes. How students spend their time outside of school is critical to these disparities, and families supervise and broker time outside of school and are the connection between youth, schools, and communities. Hence, connecting with families around aspirations, needs, and shared goals for their children are not elective but necessary to improve outcomes for all youth.

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