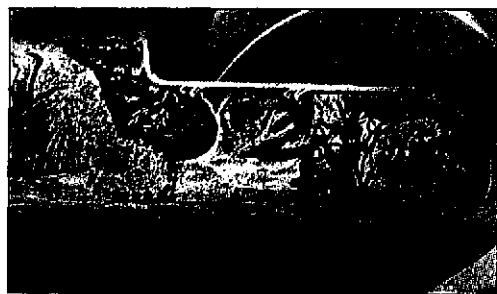


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WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL

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SUNDAY/DECEMBER 14, 1997

MADISON, WISCONSIN

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Who teaches best? ☐ Schools ☐ Families ☒ Both



Jacob Seaver, 8, works on writing sentences as part of his homework to prepare for upcoming tests. His mother, Carla Fox Seaver, helps with the work.

FAMILY TIES



Children do better in school when their parents are involved, research shows, but increasing that participation is no simple equation.

TODAY — Family ties: Strengths and weaknesses

MONDAY — Parents: Patterns of involvement

TUESDAY — Homework: Key to success

WEDNESDAY — Private schools: Involvement ideas shared

THURSDAY — Programs: Help and advice for parents

FRIDAY — Volunteers: What role should they play?

SUNDAY — Building bridges: Ideas for strengthening school-family ties

By Andy Hall
Wisconsin State Journal

Math didn't come easily for second-grader Jacob Seaver. He floundered while his classmates memorized math facts — 5 plus 5 equals 10, 6 plus 6 equals 12, and the like.

Jacob's mother came to the rescue. After conferring with the teacher, Carla Fox Seaver made color-coded flash cards to drill Jacob at home.

She knew how to shore up the classroom teacher's efforts at Thoreau Elementary because she is a teacher, too. But Seaver worries that many parents — at her school, and throughout the Madison School District — don't know what to do when their children need school help.

"It's not that those parents don't

care," Seaver said. "They're just not sure how to get involved."

Next to effective teaching, parent involvement may be the most important factor in students' academic success: Two decades of national research shows that children of involved parents tend to get better grades and miss fewer days than other students.

"There's a direct correlation," said Sennett Middle School teacher Joni Shahrani. "If you have your nose in your kid's face once in a while, they know what's going on: 'If Mom and Dad are interested in what I'm doing, I'm going to do better.'"

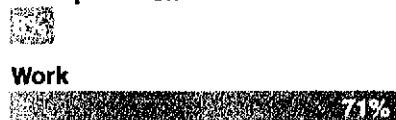
While there's little argument about the value of connecting families to school, tightening those ties will be a challenge, according to an extensive

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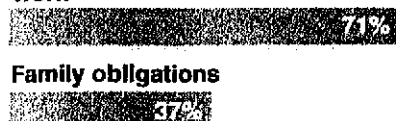
Barriers to involvement

Percentage of Madison parents who reported the following items create some or major problems in becoming more involved in their child's education:

Transportation



Work



Family obligations



Financial resources



SOURCE: Schools of Hope survey

WSJ

Work is biggest barrier to parent involvement

Survey finding challenges the Madison School District and employers to work together

By Andy Hall and Dee J. Hall
Wisconsin State Journal

When you ask Enrique Sardi how important it is for his only child, George, to get a good education, his answer is blunt: "Es todo." It's everything.

Sardi finished high school in his native Peru, and he's aiming higher for George. The family is saving for George to enroll in Madison Area Technical College in two years.

Despite his drive to see his child succeed, Sardi too often feels powerless. He works two jobs and doesn't speak English, making it nearly impossible for Sardi to help George, a sophomore at Madison West High School, with his classes.

Sardi said he wants more infor-



State Journal photo/CRAIG SCHREINER

Enrique Sardi, left, his only child, George, and his wife, Anamaria, spend much of their "family time" working together as custodians at UW Clinics. Finding time to get involved in George's schoolwork is especially hard for Enrique, who works two jobs.

Page 9A: Six points to a stronger family-school relationship

No '97 tax bills for Rockdale

Village operates debt-free

By Scott Milfred
Wisconsin State Journal

ROCKDALE — Whoever said that the only things for certain are death and taxes has never been to this tiny village in southeastern Dane County.

Sure, Rockdale residents pass away from time to time. Tombstones in the village cemetery probably outnumber the 236 living residents.

But it's also a fact that the Rockdale village government isn't levying any taxes for the second year in a row.

When property tax bills go out across the county this month, Rockdale residents will be the only ones seeing zeros as their charge for village services.

"We don't get many complaints," said Clerk-Treasurer Marilyn Gunderson, who has run unopposed since first being elected in 1981. "There

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Today: Clouds, sun. High 40. Winds: SW 5-10 mph. Tonight: Becoming clear. Low 26. Details/back page



Survey methods

The survey of parents, students, teachers and principals included representative samples of white, black, Hispanic, Southeast Asian and other Asian parents at all income levels — the first time such detailed insights have been obtained on racial and ethnic minorities in the Madison School District.

Versions of the survey first were distributed in writing to parents, students, teachers and principals. To increase response rates among parents, some were contacted by telephone, interviewed at community centers or interviewed in their homes. The parent version of the survey was translated into Spanish and Hmong.

The response rates (the percentage of people originally selected for the survey who did complete the survey) and total numbers of respondents are:

- Parents, at least 40 percent within each of the five racial and ethnic groups; 419 respondents.
- Students, 21 percent; 118 respondents.
- Teachers, 53 percent; 210 respondents.
- Principals, 50 percent; 24 respondents.

The data for every group except the students is considered statistically reliable. As a result of the low response rate, the student data is used only for general illustrative purposes.

The margins of error for the groups are: parents, plus or minus 7 percentage points; students, 15 percentage points; teachers, 10 percentage points. Technically, there is no margin of error for principals because all were included in the original sample; however, the data are subject to error based on the characteristics of those who responded, and those who did not.

The survey's margins of error have a 95 percent confidence level, meaning that if all members of the surveyed group could be interviewed the actual results should not vary more than the margins of error in either direction, 95 out of 100 times.

The survey data were analyzed by researcher Barbara Burrell from UW-Extension's Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, professor Paul Bredeson from the UW-Madison School of Education, research coordinator Kurt Kiefer from the school district and reporter Andy Hall from the Wisconsin State Journal.

A detailed technical report is being prepared for release early next year.

Survey respondents were promised that their identities and data would be kept confidential. However, many agreed to be interviewed by reporters and are quoted in Wisconsin State Journal and WISC-TV (Ch. 3) coverage.

About Schools of Hope

Schools of Hope began in 1995 as an experiment in civic journalism by the Wisconsin State Journal and WISC-TV (Ch. 3) to involve the public in assessing what's expected of Madison's schools, how well the schools are performing and what could be done in schools and the community to solve problems. It has grown into a community effort to raise the achievement levels of students, particularly blacks, Hispanics and Southeast Asians who, on average, lag behind other Asian and white peers.

In examining family involvement in education — the last of five major areas identified for study in 1995 — the news organizations and other public and private organizations pooled money and resources to conduct one of the most extensive U.S. surveys of family-school ties.

The survey, which cost about \$25,000, was funded by nine private and government organizations and received in-kind contributions exceeding \$100,000.

It was conducted by the UW-Extension's Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory.

Data from parents, students, teachers and principals, including the most comprehensive information to date on Madison's black, Hispanic, Southeast Asian and other Asian families, were analyzed by a unique coalition — the survey lab, the UW-Madison School of Education, the Madison School District and the Wisconsin State Journal.

In the early 1990s, the State Journal became an early experimenter in civic journalism, a growing attempt by U.S. news organizations to involve the public in discussing and solving community problems.



Carla Fox Seaver, working with second-grader Jacob Seaver, knows how to bolster his teacher's effort because she is a teacher, too. She worries that many parents don't know what to do when their children need school help.

FAMILY TIES

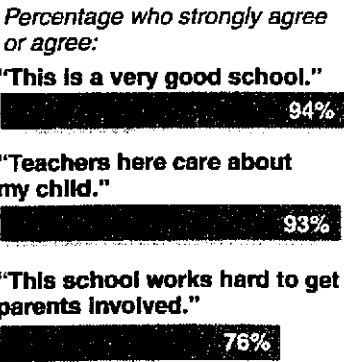
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Schools of Hope survey of Madison parents, teachers, principals and students.

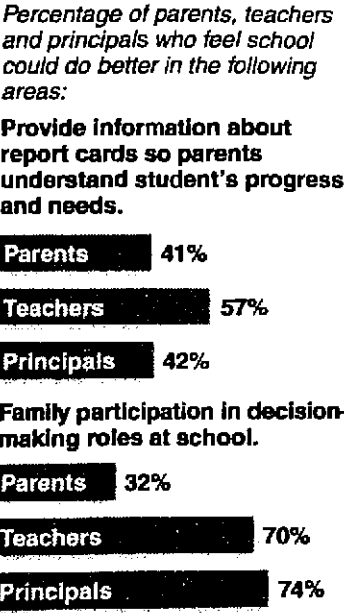
Among the challenges indicated by survey respondents:

- Parents say work obligations are the biggest barrier to getting more involved in education.
- Six in 10 Madison teachers, and nearly half of principals, believe most parents don't know how to help their children with schoolwork. Many parents also said they want more information from schools on how to help their children with schoolwork.
- Although parent involvement levels are high while children attend elementary school, they drop sharply as children head on to middle and high schools.
- But survey respondents also mapped possible directions toward tighter school-family ties. The Schools of Hope survey found widespread support for:
- Improving communications, such as report cards, between schools and families.
- Honing parents' skills in raising their children and getting them ready to learn.
- Increasing parents' effectiveness when helping their children with homework.
- Making teachers better skilled in involving families in education.

Parents give schools high marks overall...



...but there is still a desire for change



SOURCE: Schools of Hope survey WSJ

- Using homework to raise students' achievement levels and to draw parents more closely into their children's schooling.
- Using a broader range, and larger number, of volunteers to boost students' achievement levels.
- Changing workplace conditions that discourage many parents from being involved with their children's educations.

The Madison survey results "mean that the time is ripe for moving in some new and needed directions," said Joyce Epstein, a Johns Hopkins University sociologist whose national research was the model for the Schools of Hope survey.

In many respects, Madison families and schools enjoy a warm relationship. More than 90 percent of Madison parents agree that their children are in very good schools, that teachers care about their children and that parents feel welcome at school — findings that echo a 1995 Schools of Hope survey.

But the new survey also shows some troubling attitudes among survey respondents, highlighting areas where the community and its schools can make improvements. For example:

More effort needed

One in four parents said schools don't work hard to involve parents in their children's educations.

Madison parent Linda Glover-Pryor, for instance, said she became exasperated last year when her daughter, Jennifer, faltered in school after the family had moved to Madison from Chicago. Jennifer is graduating this month, six months late, after a nightmarish senior year of curfew and truancy problems.

"I'm a single parent, so I needed some reinforcement outside of the home, but I wasn't getting much help," said Glover-Pryor, who contends that, "teachers, in general, reach out to better students. . . . She was falling through that gap."

Homework skills faulted

Most teachers, and nearly half of the principals, indicated that most parents don't know how to help their children on schoolwork at home.

Many parents acknowledged they "need more information from the school to talk with my child about schoolwork." Fifty-four percent of parents of average and poor-achieving elementary students agreed with that statement, making them nearly twice as likely as parents of higher-achieving students to want help.

The disparities were even wider among parents of middle and high school students, with 85 percent of parents of low-achieving students wanting information, compared to 31 percent of parents of high achievers, in a comparison based upon students' grade-point averages.

Chu and Chao Thao said they'd appreciate more information on how to help their sixth-grader, Richard, on homework, especially reading and English. Still, he's doing well in school.

The Thaos, who came to the United States from Laos in 1979, say the best thing the schools could do would be to help them learn English. However, both parents work 50 to 60 hours a week on assembly lines at Oscar Mayer, so

Parent views vary by children's grades, ages

On many portions of the Schools of Hope survey, parents' views differed little, no matter how their children were faring in school. But listed below are examples of significantly differing views:

THE FINDINGS:						
■ Education connections stronger for elementary students than older peers.	■ Parents of high achievers most involved at home, school.	■ Teacher disapproval highest among parents of students earning 2 to 3.5 GPA.	■ Parents of low achievers want to be more involved in child's homework and overall education.			
		CHILD IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	CHILD IN MIDDLE OR HIGH SCHOOL			
		Grades	Grade point averages			
		OK, average, poor	Top, good	0 to 1.99	2 to 3.5	Over 3.5
FEELINGS ABOUT SCHOOL. (Percentage of parents who agree)						
The teachers here care about my child.		94%	100%	92%	80%	100%
I need more information from the school to talk with my child about schoolwork.		54%	29%	85%	52%	31%
I want to be more involved than I am now in my child's education.		79%	66%	99%	83%	52%
Most days I do not have enough time to talk with my child about school.		23%	11%	68%	31%	14%
The community supports this school.		91%	74%	97%	79%	99%
The teachers at this school listen to what I have to say.		86%	96%	93%	80%	99%
Teachers in this school assign too little homework.		25%	39%	42%	29%	9%
ACTIVITIES AT HOME. (Percentage of parents involved daily or weekly)						
Listen to my child read.		91%	97%	29%	49%	52%
Discuss grades on tests and schoolwork.		76%	89%	64%	78%	90%
Talk with my child about future plans.		23%	28%	39%	63%	26%
Attend a community event with my child.		15%	32%	27%	53%	20%
ACTIVITIES AT SCHOOL. (Percentage of parents involved a few or many times)						
Participate in PTA/PTO or other school committee.		13%	26%	2%	21%	20%
Attend parent-teacher conferences.		76%	71%	51%	49%	60%
Volunteer at school or in classroom.		20%	52%	25%	21%	14%
Give the school information about special circumstances at home.		54%	26%	44%	23%	13%
Talk with child's teachers at school.		85%	95%	37%	62%	72%
Definitions of achievement levels: For elementary students, data obtained from parents' responses to survey. For middle and high school students, cumulative grade-point averages provided by Madison School District.						

SOURCE: Schools of Hope family-school survey

WSJ graphic

they have little time free for classes.

Patricia Rodriguez, who said her daughter is coming home mostly with C's although she's capable of A's, believes East High School provides too little information about how students are faring.

In a recent meeting with a school counselor, Rodriguez said she made this offer: "I will even provide stationery and stamps to get this information on a weekly basis."

Rodriguez said that although she's busy with her job teaching computer skills, she'd attend workshops to learn the secrets of how to communicate with the school.

And she wants school officials to know that she holds her daughter, and herself, accountable. "I think part of the problem we have had is I haven't pursued the school enough," Rodriguez said. "Maybe I should take some credit or blame for that. I guess as parents, we've let it slide a little bit, and (my daughter) is the one who has suffered."

She remains confident that her daughter's grades will improve.

Time pressure cited

One in four parents of average and poor elementary students agreed that "most days I do not have enough time to talk with my child about school." That was double the share of parents of high achievers who agreed.

Again, the pattern was even more pronounced among parents of middle and high school students; two-thirds of parents of low achievers agreed, compared to 14 percent of parents of high achievers.

Kristin Haugen-Wente, a teacher at Muir Elementary, said many middle-income families are crunched because they take on too many outside activities such as soccer and karate lessons. That leaves education on the fringe — and the children, exhausted.

"In the seven years I've been teaching, I've seen a really alarming change," Haugen-Wente said. "Families are being pulled in a lot of directions. . . . I think ultimately it does have an effect on achievement."

She acknowledges, though, that many "low-income families simply don't have the time, and (have) too many daily life stresses" to become more involved with their children's educations. "These parents also feel intimidated by school many times, as do our ESL (English as a second language) families. Many other families are often just apathetic — until something goes wrong."

Teachers' roles

Teachers and principals presented contrasting views when asked whether teachers at their schools have time to involve parents in very useful ways. Half of

middle and high school teachers said they don't have time, but just 21 percent of elementary teachers and 13 percent of principals felt that way.

While 83 percent of principals and 69 percent of elementary teachers said involving families is a responsibility of teachers, just 49 percent of middle and high school teachers agreed.

The survey found relatively strong agreement with the statement, "Teachers need in-service education to implement effective parent involvement practices." Agreeing were 83 percent of principals, 46 percent of elementary teachers and 65 percent of middle and high school teachers.

Teachers who do find the time to involve parents say it pays off.

Haugen-Wente, the Muir teacher, said teachers there work hard to meet with every family before the school year starts. The Ready Set Goal conferences, which are encouraged but not required by the district, occur before any tensions have developed. That way, the conferences establish relationships that come in handy when problems do develop, she said.

While many elementary teachers regularly send newsletters to

Please see **FAMILY TIES**, Page 11A