


Chapter 6: Students and Their Families

Propositions

- ▶ **WHEN IT COMES TO A GOOD EDUCATION, FAMILY MAY MATTER MOST.**
- ▶ **A POSITIVE HOME ENVIRONMENT IS RELATED TO HIGH ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE.**
- ▶ **PARENTS ARE WELL ABLE TO DETERMINE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS AND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS.**
- ▶ **DESPITE LEGISLATIVE LIMITATIONS, PARENTS STILL EXERCISE CHOICE WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION.**

Highlights

- ▶ In 2000, there were approximately 53 million students enrolled in public and private schools at the elementary and secondary school levels in the United States.¹
- ▶ In 2000, of the students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, approximately 38 percent were minorities, nearly 17 percent black and 16 percent Hispanic.²
- ▶ Of America's school-age children, nearly one-fifth speak a language other than English at home; 7 in 10 of these speak Spanish.³
- ▶ More than 13 percent of students in public elementary and secondary schools have been diagnosed as having a disability. Six percent have been diagnosed with a learning disability, the largest designated category by far.⁴
- ▶ In 1960, 88 percent of children under 18 were living with 2 parents; in 1998, only 68 percent of children were living with 2 parents.⁵
- ▶ The median family income for 2-parent families is more than double that of families headed by a divorced single mother and more than 4 times as much as that of families in which the single mother never married.⁶
- ▶ In 1990, 21 percent of children under 18 were living in poverty; in 1999, 17 percent of children were living in poverty.⁷
- ▶ In 1998, 9 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared to 46 percent in single-parent families.⁸



According to the public, the number one “major problem” facing public schools is lack of parental involvement. It is ranked ahead of drugs, undisciplined students, overcrowded classrooms, violence and lack of school safety, inequality in school funding, and inadequate academic standards.⁹

Overview



Children are a valuable resource, and educating children—seeking to ensure the development of an informed citizenry, the transfer of a common culture, and the creation of a trained workforce—is one of society’s most important functions. In the 2000 school year, there were nearly 53 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary grades in the United States. Educating them costs more than \$420 billion—4.3 percent of the nation’s GDP. Education is an important and an expensive endeavor and it plays a significant role in the shaping of America’s future.

Throughout the 20th century, the size of the 5- to 18-year-old age group relative to the rest of the population has fluctuated. The postwar Baby Boom put enormous pressure on the education infrastructure, but it was followed by a massive decline in birth rates. This decline rebounded with the Baby Boom bounce, as the boomers started their own families. Not only were the sheer numbers changing, but as the 20th century came to a close, the effects of immigration and divergent birth rates among ethnic groups led to a changing face of the composite classroom. In 1977, for example, nearly 24 percent of K–12 students were nonwhite compared to 38 percent just 25 years later. Bilingual education and multiculturalism, footnotes to the educational process a mere 25 years ago, are now important elements of the everyday classroom.

Through all this change, education researchers agree that some things have remained constant: The family and the home environment have as much to do with children’s education as what is taught in the classroom. The formative years before

children start formal education remain vital to preparing children for school. Furthermore, research shows that parents and the home environment are instrumental throughout their children's formal education. This chapter explores the relationships between families, students, and the classroom.



PROPOSITION: WHEN IT COMES TO A GOOD EDUCATION, FAMILY MAY MATTER MOST.

For too long, suggestions for educational improvement have focused on prescribing and implementing remedies for falling educational achievement. Remedies have included increased spending, smaller class size, more testing, and new methodology and curricula; most exclude the parent. Research shows, however, that the family and student achievement are directly related—and that family matters most, not least.

Since the 1960s, popular assumptions and recommendations regarding achievement disparity have centered on total resources and their distribution. It was presumed, for example, that the achievement gap between whites and blacks stemmed more from resource allocation than from differences in abilities, black students attending schools with smaller budgets, fewer teachers, and fewer textbooks. In 1966, however, an Equality of Educational Opportunity Commission (EEOC) report disclosed evidence that even after controlling for differences in family backgrounds, differences in school resources accounted for next to none of the achievement disparities. In short, families mattered more and schools mattered less when it came to measuring the impact on student achievement.¹⁰

Furthermore, recent research indicates that the EEOC report, commonly known as the Coleman Report, underestimated the effect that family has on achievement. Report results confirmed the importance of schools' and parents' working together—schools and parents instead of schools versus parents—to enhance achievement. These results and further study led Caroline Hoxby to the following conclusion:

Indeed, the combined explanatory power of school input variables and neighborhood variables (such

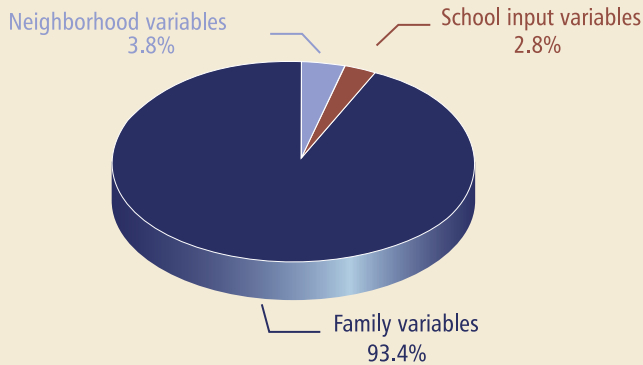
as the education, income, and racial composition of the local population) do not come close to matching that of family background variables.¹¹

Hoxby studied the 1996 National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), which tracked nearly 25,000 eighth-graders through their high school careers. She used regression analysis, a sophisticated statistical technique that ascribes differences in results, outcomes, or performance to a set of underlying factors—the explanatory variables. In her study, Hoxby used family, neighborhood, and school characteristics to describe differences in student performance in four subject areas: reading, mathematics, history, and science.¹²

Her statistical analysis revealed that family characteristics were 35 to 105 times more powerful in explaining student performance differences than school input variables were, and they were 12 to 24 times more important than neighborhood variables were in explaining variation in students' scores. (See figure 6.1.)¹³

The family characteristic variables in the analysis included individual family measures for parental education, family income, race and ethnicity, family size, and parents' involvement in their children's educational experience. The school input variables included class size, per pupil expenditures, teachers' average education and experience, various measures of teachers' salaries, and the number of books and computers per student. The neighborhood variables included income measures for the neighborhood, education level, and race and ethnicity (where the neighborhood is defined by school district and metropolitan area).¹⁴

**Figure 6.1: Contribution of Explanatory Variables for Math Score Variation
Twelfth-Graders, 1996**



Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?" in *A Primer on America's Schools*, ed. Terry M. Moe (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), pp. 89–123.

Technically, test scores are a predictive but not perfect measure of success; however, they often provide a glimpse of long-term outcomes, such as ultimate educational attainment, occupation, and income. The 1999 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), another survey that followed nearly 13,000 young Americans from their teens into their middle 30s, provides a picture of results beyond the classroom.¹⁵

- Various family components exerted 14 times greater impact on future income levels than school variables and 23 times greater impact than neighborhood variables.
- Comparing educational attainment, various family components exerted 19 times greater impact than school input variables and 24 times greater impact than neighborhood variables.

- In total, family variables accounted for 9 to 11 times as much variation in later outcomes as school inputs and neighborhood variables combined.¹⁶

In educational reform, families should not be removed from the equation. Clearly, they play a pivotal role in educational achievement and long-term success. The statistical analyses confirm what many grassroots organizations advocate: Families make the most significant difference in academic outcomes, achievement and otherwise. To ignore them would be negligent.

PROPOSITION: A POSITIVE HOME ENVIRONMENT IS RELATED TO HIGH ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE.

Recent data from Caroline Hoxby suggest that students whose parents take a more active role in their education have higher academic achievement. Parents, for example, who have made a personal investment in their child’s education—whether it be through choosing their place of residence based upon the quality of schools, moving their child from public to private school, or exercising some other form of choice—are more likely to supplement their child’s schooling at home. Parents may create a designated study area for their child and provide important resources and opportunities—books, calculators, computers, trips to libraries or museums. According to the 1996 NELS, when comparing children who score in the bottom quartile on reading and math tests to those who score in the top quartile, these complementary actions appear to make a difference. (See table 6.1.)¹⁷

Table 6.1: **Parental Involvement, Home Environment, and Student Achievement**

Activity	High achievers ^a	Low achievers ^b
Use libraries with their parents	79%	48%
Visit science museums with their parents	63	27
Come from homes with more than fifty books	96	76
Come from homes with an atlas	81	55
Come from homes with a calculator	98	89
Come from homes with a computer	60	27

Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, “If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?” in *A Primer on America’s Schools*, ed. Terry M. Moe (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), p. 116.

Notes: a. Students scoring in the top quartile when tested.


b. Students scoring in the bottom quartile when tested.

While the NELS was conducted, some families switched their children from public to private schools. These families, although a small number relative to the entire survey, provided laboratories for further study because many of the underlying characteristics remained constant. After switching to private schools, there were statistically significant changes in family behavior; for example, the families were more likely to own an atlas and more likely to have a specific place for their children to study. These data further solidify the connection between parental involvement and the home environment. After making conscious choices regarding their children's education, parents participated to an even greater degree.¹⁸

Moreover, in metropolitan areas where there is a choice between public school districts (where parents have made a large financial investment to live in a high-achieving school district, bearing higher housing costs, property taxes, or both), parents are more likely to make their home environment complement their child's school. In metropolitan areas with choice between districts, several learning enhancements stand out.

- 18 percent more families have a computer.
- 4 percent more have an atlas.
- 4 percent more have a calculator.
- 14 percent more parents use libraries with their children.
- 5 percent more visit science museums with their children.¹⁹

Data suggest that the home environment is more complementary to the educational process than parents perceive and that real involvement in their child's education increases performance. Both private schools and an expanded choice of schools provide the opportunity for parents to be more a part of their child's education. If higher test scores are an indication of better schooling, parents should be encouraged to explore as many venues for involvement as possible.



PROPOSITION: PARENTS ARE WELL ABLE TO DETERMINE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS AND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS.

Some question whether parents are informed enough to determine the best for their children when it comes to their education. Do parents know the difference between schools that provide a good education and those that do not? The answer appears to be yes. Results from the 1996 NELS demonstrate that parents can accurately estimate the value added to their children's education each year. (A longitudinal survey, the NELS surveyed the same approximately 20,000 families beginning in 1988.) Furthermore, there is a correlation between the value added and the effectiveness ratings parents give schools.²⁰

The NELS asked parents to rate the school their child attends based on three factors:

1. whether the school placed a high priority on learning
2. whether the parents were satisfied with their child's education
3. whether the teaching was good²¹

Parents' answers to the questions were consistent with the value added to achievement scores in the respective schools. Value-added comparisons gauge the relative progress students make over a given time period, versus solely comparing raw test scores. In other words, parents were able to differentiate between high-performing and low-performing schools. (See table 6.2.)²²

Table 6.2: **Parents’ Ratings of Schools**

Question	Parents’ response	School rank for value-added achievement	
		Highest quartile	Lowest quartile
School placed a high priority on learning	“Strongly agree(d)”	32%	19%
School placed a high priority on learning	“Disagree(d)” or “strongly disagree(d)”	10	25
“Very satisfied” with education	“Yes”	44	15

From the 1988 to 1996 period of the NELS, the achievement records from the schools changed, and some dramatic shifts in parents’ attitudes and opinions occurred in metropolitan areas where there was extensive choice. In cases where schools’ achievement performance improved from the lowest value-added quartile to the highest, parents’ opinion ratings of the schools reflected the improvement. For example, in responding to a question of whether the “teaching is good,” parents with students in low-performing schools generally “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.” At a later date, the same survey was taken; these same parents, with children in the same school (but now better performing), “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “teaching is good” when their schools’ achievement scores had moved to the top quartile.²³

A similar pattern was exhibited by parents when queried as to whether they were “satisfied with education.” When their children’s schools moved ahead in achievement rankings, the parents were “very satisfied” with the education their children were receiving, as opposed to “very dissatisfied” when their children were in low-performing schools.²⁴

The last few decades of education ideology have presumed that the education experts know what is best for children and that parents are not capable of determining what makes for a

good education. Recent data, however, tell a different story. Parents are capable of determining the difference between high-performing schools and low-performing schools, and they do. Perhaps education experts need to look back to the 1960s, when it was agreed that “Father knows best.”

PROPOSITION: DESPITE LEGISLATIVE LIMITATIONS, PARENTS STILL EXERCISE CHOICE WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR CHILDREN’S EDUCATION.

Many question the value and effectiveness of allowing families to choose the school their children will attend. For one thing, they argue that some parents are not interested in being involved in their children’s education at this level. Moreover, some say that parents are not informed enough to make good decisions. Parents might be tempted to choose a school for “the wrong reasons.” Evidence, however, shows that parents are interested in participating in choosing the school their children attend. In fact, the majority, 69 percent, of parents make intentional decisions regarding the school their child attends. (See table 6.3.)²⁵

Table 6.3: **School Choice**
1996

Parents’ decision	Percentage
Sent children to private school	15%
Sent children to magnet school or other public school of choice	17
Sent children to assigned public school but chose residence partially based on neighborhood	37
Sent children to assigned public school	31

Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, “If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?” in *A Primer on America’s Schools*, ed. Terry M. Moe (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), pp. 103–104.

Note: National Household Education Survey.

Housing purchases, for example, provide evidence that parents do make conscious choices when it comes to the school their child attends. Residential location is a primary means by which families pay more for better educational opportunities. If

only a few were willing to pay to locate near a school with higher achievement, then a systematic increase in housing prices in relationship to school quality would not exist; however, recent data provide strong evidence of the relationship between parental choice, housing prices, and educational outcomes. For example, a 1999 study in Massachusetts compared similar houses in the same neighborhood and school district, with the same property tax rates, and the same fire, police, and recreation services, but different schools. The study reported that housing prices were 2.5 percent higher when school test scores were 5 percent higher.²⁶

School finance equalization programs, programs that “equalize” expenditures between districts by establishing what districts spend despite what local taxpayers are willing to pay, support the relationship between housing prices and school quality, as well. According to recent survey results, when equalization programs were implemented, housing prices fell, revealing that families do value the ability to choose and pay for school resources. Moreover, data show that when school finance equalization programs were implemented, local foundations were often created to pay for school inputs no longer available but desired by local families.²⁷

While families play an important role in education, it is clear that they are sometimes limited in their ability to exert the desired effect on their children’s education when faced with income constraints or other impediments, such as houses that are too expensive or few choices in given areas. Parents²⁸ surveyed in the 1996 NHES, for example, participated in school choice at varying levels, based upon race, income, and education levels.²⁹ For example, black and Hispanic families, after controlling for income, are more likely than white families to exercise choice by selecting a public or private school but less likely to exercise choice via their residence. Furthermore, when comparing white parents with income levels between \$35,000 and \$40,000, 63 percent of parents with a baccalaureate degree make intentional choices regarding the school their child

attends, while only 55 percent of parents who have only a high school degree do so. (See table 6.4.)³⁰

Table 6.4: School Choice by Family Income Level 1996

Parents' decision	Family income	
	\$10,000– 15,000	\$75,000 or more
Private school	5.3%	28.8%
School choice within public school system	21.4	10.4
Chose residence partially based on neighborhood school quality	26.6	42.2

Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?" in *A Primer on America's Schools*, ed. Terry M. Moe (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), p. 107.

Studying the enrollment of teachers' children provides interesting insight. Public and private school teachers nationwide are slightly more likely than the general public to choose private schools (17.1 percent to 13.1 percent). However, in select cities of America, the difference is quite remarkable: Public school teachers are two to three times more likely than the general public to use private schools.³¹

- In Washington, D.C., 25.7 percent of the children of the city's public school teachers who make less than \$35,000 attend private school.
- In Boston, 24.4 percent of the children of the city's public school teachers attend private school.
- In New York, 21.4 percent of the children of the city's public school teachers attend private school.
- In Miami, 35.4 percent of the children of the city's public school teachers attend private school, whereas only 15.6 percent of K–12 students in Miami-Dade county are not enrolled in public schools.

- In Los Angeles, 18.9 percent of the children of the city's public school teachers attend private school, whereas approximately 12 percent of all K–12 students in Los Angeles are enrolled in private schools.³²

Parents do care where their child attends school and make choices that reflect the desire for their child to attend a school with high achievement records, and in many cases, they are willing to pay the price.

▶ CHAPTER NOTES

1. Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *Digest of Education Statistics, 2001* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), table 2, p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, table 42, p. 58.
3. U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000*, available online at <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>.
4. Snyder, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2001*, table 52, p. 66.
5. William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators 2001* (Washington, DC: Empower.org, 2001), p. 51, available online at <http://www.empower.org>.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
9. Public Agenda Online, *Education: People's Chief Concerns* (New York: Public Agenda Online), available online at <http://www.publicagenda.org>.
10. Caroline M. Hoxby, "If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?" in *A Primer on America's Schools*, ed. Terry M. Moe (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), pp. 89–123.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.* Note: All estimates control for family background characteristics, control for metropolitan areas' demographic characteristics, and use instruments for public school choice based on natural boundaries.
20. Hoxby, "If Families Matter Most."
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Rural parents were excluded from the analysis of NHES data because in many a rural area, there is only one school that is reasonably nearby.
29. Hoxby, "If Families Matter Most."
30. Ibid.
31. Denis Doyle and James Hirni, *Business/Education Insider*, no. 42 (October-November 1995), available online at <http://www.heritage.org>.
32. Doyle and Hirni, *Business/Education Insider*; California Department of Education, available online at www.cde.ca.gov; Florida Department of Education, available online at www.firn.edu/doe.