The most consistent predictor of children’s social development through the early school years turns out to be the sensitivity of maternal behavior across the infant, toddler, and preschool years. Recent research by UW–Madison education professor Deborah Vandell and colleagues in the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network shows that early family and child care factors predict a child’s social adaptation in school. Children’s social and behavioral competencies—and problems—in the early grades are important indicators of both early and later school success. But half of the nation’s kindergarten teachers reported that most of the children in their class lacked competencies in working independently, following directions, and peer relations, according to data from a recent survey.

Vandell and colleagues found that children are most likely to benefit from the resources provided to them in the early grades, and to succeed in later grades, if they demonstrate a cluster of social skills: communicating effectively, following directions, and cooperating; being attentive, enthusiastic, and actively involved in classroom activities; asking for and receiving help when needed; and getting along with other children.

Longitudinal studies show that children with problems in social functioning are at risk for failure in school. These problems include inattention, poor impulse control, difficulties following directions and conforming to classroom rules and routines, disruptive behavior, and aggression toward peers. There is growing evidence that early-emerging problems can interfere with developmental progress in social and academic settings. About 10% of young children may have adjustment problems serious enough to impair their functioning.

The study of early child care and youth development was designed to advance understanding of the relative role(s) of family, child care, and school experiences in predicting social functioning in the early grades. Good quality child care can enrich and promote academic development. At the same time, early and extensive child care is sometimes associated with increased problem behavior, particularly externalizing behavior, and was found in one study to be associated with lower than expected cognitive skill in the preschool years.

Vandell was particularly interested in how the first-grade classroom environment related to changes in children’s social functioning from the time of school

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Community in Families and Schools

Research shows that the quality of care that children receive in the early years is crucial—it shapes the rest of their learning and social lives.

In this issue of WCER Research highlights you’ll read about a program that builds social capital among families and schools in over 800 communities. Lynn McDonald developed Families and Schools Together (FAST) as a research-based parent involvement model that builds networks and helps children succeed in school.

The most consistent predictor of children’s social development through the early school years turns out to be the sensitivity of maternal behavior across the infant, toddler, and preschool years. Recent research by Deborah Vandell and colleagues shows that early family and child care factors predict a child’s social adaptation in school.

Researcher Sarah Archibald has found that a school’s concentration of poverty is a major factor in student achievement, along with student background characteristics and teacher performance. Archibald contributes to the work of WCER’s Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

A strong professional community among teachers can improve staff morale and teacher commitment, as well as teachers’ perceived efficacy. My research with colleague Eric Grodsky suggests that there is a lot of variance in the quality of professional community within each school. We should re-evaluate the notion of schoolwide professional community and recognize that within a loosely knit school community there are more tightly knit subcommunities of teachers.

Adam Gamoran
WCER Director
Professor of Sociology and
Educational Policy Studies

Family factors predict social functioning

When attempting to nurture children’s social development, Vandell says, it’s important to target resources before preschool. Academic and achievement skills in preschool appear to affect some aspects of social performance in school (primarily the child’s self-reliant functioning in the classroom). Yet children’s academic achievement is not a primary determinant of social functioning. This study found that family factors, as well as child care experiences before the transition to school, predict children’s social functioning in first grade. For example, children whose mothers provided more sensitive care were rated as showing fewer externalizing problems and greater social skills as first graders. They were also rated as displaying greater self-reliance and being more engaged in the classroom.

These findings provide continued support for the fundamental role of mothers’ sensitive interaction with children in shaping social and self-regulatory skills in early childhood. These results are consistent with other work from other NICHD studies demonstrating that child care quality is a stronger predictor of academic functioning than social functioning, and that time in nonmaternal care is the aspect of child care experience that is related to social functioning.

This study provides support for the role of early social development in predicting subsequent social functioning as children move from family and child care settings into school, and for the role of family and child care settings in shaping early social development. In addition, the results provide evidence for significant but fairly limited effects of schooling on social functioning—both in terms of the support to social development provided by emotionally warm and responsive classrooms and the potential stress associated with highly structured classroom settings.

Funding for this research was provided by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Some material in this article originally appeared in different form in the journal Child Development, November/December 2003, vol. 74, No. 6, pp. 1639-1662.
Children perform better in school when their families are supportive and when their parents are involved in school-related activities.

Schools offer many ways for parents to get involved in their children’s experience. The traditional method, known as the parent outreach model, places the school at the center, and focuses on bringing the parents into the circle of school resources. It emphasizes the central role of the school and presumes that this role will be supported by the parents.

UW–Madison’s Lynn McDonald has found remarkable results, however, by turning this model on its head. McDonald, a senior scientist at WCER, developed Families and Schools Together (FAST), a program that places parents at the center and helps them to establish their own support system around themselves. Like children, parents need strong relationships, including strong family relationships, relationships with other parents, relationships with the resources of the school, and relationships with community resources.

FAST uses a relationship-based model, rather than a curriculum-based model. Its tenets are:

1. Each child needs a caring, long-term relationship to learn, love and be resilient.
2. Parents need support from other adults to parent successfully.
3. A healthy community needs trusting, respectful, reciprocal relationships, also known as social capital.

FAST builds social capital by creating relationships among parents and between parents and teachers. These relationships help create an environment that supports children’s positive behavior and learning.

In eight weekly multi-family group sessions, groups of 5 to 25 families attend FAST after school and participate in team-led activities. Family meals and games provide opportunities to build relationships with respect, laughter, and time together, through the weekly, participatory activities. Of families who attend once, an average of 80% complete the weekly sessions and graduate in a ceremony; the parents then shift to monthly multi-family group sessions which they themselves organize. Parents who participate in FAST get to know the other families in the program; this increases the social capital of the families and of the school.

**A research base**

As enjoyable as the activities are, though, they are based on solid research. Applying theories of family stress, family systems, and social ecology of child development, each FAST activity was designed with findings from mental health research in mind. It has been shown, for example, that family stress is buffered by social support; social support can also strengthen the cohesion of families, and reduce family conflict.

The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration identified the FAST program as an evidence-based model. FAST has been replicated for 15 years in more than 800 sites, in 45 states, 5 countries, and 5 Indian nations. From 1990 to 2000, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction awarded $10 million in state funds to 110 Wisconsin school districts for FAST programs.

Each first implementation of FAST requires training of the local parent and professional collaborative team; repeat implementations of FAST require evaluations of outcomes and process, including quantitative and qualitative data. Teams self-assess, parent graduates provide their feedback, and trainers oversee the implementation of core components for site certification. The nonprofit organization FAST National (www.fastnational.org) provides training.

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In a recent presentation at the 2005 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, McDonald and graduate student Jen Sandler compared two (see references) randomized controlled trials of FAST: one for the U.S. Education Department’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), involving rural American Indian families; and a second for the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), involving urban, African-American and Latino families. Findings show that traditional, positive parent outreach does matter. But FAST, as an example of systemic relationship-based parent involvement, is moderately more effective than standard parent outreach.

**Dissemination**

From 1988 through 2002 the average FAST cycle graduated 10 families. (FAST National Training Center requires each multifamily group to graduate at least 5 families to be a certified FAST site.) Each family is called a ‘hub.’ From 2002 through 2004, FAST piloted and replicated multi-hub FAST programs in 20 elementary schools throughout Wisconsin. This model enables universal access across kindergarten/first grade classes.

The benefits of FAST were found to be lasting. Schools reported that high parent involvement rates were maintained. Parents and teachers reported improved relationships across home and community. Teachers noticed improvement in children’s classroom behaviors in just eight weeks and at 1-2 years follow-up, teachers reported academic performance in the classroom favoring FAST vs. the control/comparison group.

McDonald plans an experimental design research on multi-hub FAST to determine whether FAST builds social capital at the school level. She also plans a review of parent involvement intervention research, to compare the outcomes of positive parent outreach parent involvement strategies to systemic relationship-based parent involvement strategies.

For more information, visit the FAST site at: http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/fast/


![Lynn McDonald](image)

**Strong Professional Community Benefits Teachers, Students**

When teachers have a strong sense of professional community their morale is better and teacher commitment is higher.

Professional community helps support teaching practices, and helps teachers address the uncertainty that accompanies nonroutine teaching of the sort encouraged by many school reform initiatives.

Is the quality of teachers’ professional community constant across the school, or are there smaller pockets of professional community within the school? If professional community were a schoolwide entity, and if it were measured well, we would expect most of the variance to be found from one school to the next, and little variation within schools. Just the opposite is the case. Recent research shows that most (81%) of the variance in professional community is within schools, according to Adam Gamoran and colleague Eric Grodsky.

Their study also found that professional development opportunities are most likely to increase teachers’ sense of professional community if they are school-wide, while programs in which individual teachers participate without other teachers from their school are unlikely to do so.

Gamoran and Grodsky analyzed the Schools and Staffing Survey of 1993-1994 (National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/) which includes a nationally representative sample of more than 50,000 teachers in more than 10,000 schools in the U.S. Their study measured teachers’ professional community as the mean of seven standardized measures: shared values (2 items), collaboration (3 items), and teacher influence (2 items).

Earlier research had proposed that a school’s climate affected student and teacher outcomes through the school’s communal organization: shared values and norms, common standards of conduct, and shared expectations. Gamoran and Grodsky refined this approach: Rather than treating the school community as a whole, their research on professional community focuses on the community among adults, particularly among teachers, as the mechanism by which school effects are achieved.

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![Image](image)
Schools across the U.S. struggle to address critical learning gaps, and to identify ways to improve the quality of teaching for all students. Teacher evaluation, part of the process, plays an important role in teacher selection and induction.

But evaluation rarely appears to advance learning for senior teachers, according to research by UW–Madison education professor Carolyn Kelley and graduate student Victoria Maslow. In many schools, evaluations are haphazard and framed by the principal's cognitive lens, rather than by student learning needs or by any particular evaluation instrument.

Teacher evaluation systems ideally should foster improvements in both professional development opportunities and teaching practice. But evaluations may present an inaccurate view of teacher performance, especially with respect to standards-based instruction. Conditions that compromise the ability of evaluation to enhance teaching practice include:

1. limitations in supervisor competence;
2. inadequate time for observation and feedback;
3. lack of teacher/administrator understanding and acceptance;
4. narrow conceptions of teaching;
5. lack of clarity about evaluation criteria;
6. classroom observations that are subject to evaluator preferences;
7. conflicts between the roles of evaluator as instructional leader and as staff supervisor; and
8. principals' lack of content-specific knowledge, resulting in evaluation feedback that focuses on general behaviors, such as delivery, rather than on content-specific pedagogy.

Teacher Evaluation and Professional Development

Gamoran and Grodsky proposed that one effect of professional development at the school level may be the creation or enhancement of professional community. This could occur in two ways: First, effective professional development contributes to the professional skills of participating teachers, thereby increasing the pool of human resources available to a school. Second, professional development may strengthen teachers' social ties, contributing to the school's social resources when two conditions are met:

1. The professional development must be based in the school, or at least must include several members of the school's instructional staff.
2. Professional development must be reflective. Teachers must communicate openly with one another about instructional issues. Professional development programs that do not encourage such dialogue may still enhance the human resources of teachers, but will do little to improve the school's social resources.

Stronger professional communities

The study found that teachers who participate in school-based professional development reported stronger professional communities. A school in which all teachers participate in school-sponsored professional development could be expected to enjoy an advantage in professional community over a school in which no teachers participate in school-sponsored professional development activities. Combining the study's teacher- and school-level results suggests that professional development can have a meaningful effect on professional community. As expected, however, professional development sponsored by non-school entities has no statistically significant effect on professional community at either the school or teacher level.

Conclusions

Gamoran and Grodsky encourage re-evaluating the usefulness of schoolwide professional community as a concept. It may be the case that professional community in most primary schools exists in within-school networks rather than at the school level. Professional communities may form at the grade level, or across grades by area of subject specialization, or by preferred pedagogical approach, across schools, and so forth. A more precise specification might recognize that, within a loosely knit school community, there are more tightly knit subcommunities of teachers.

Some material in this article previously appeared in different form in School Effectiveness and School Improvement 2003, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1-29.

Adam Gamoran

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Given such limitations, how could evaluation advance teaching practice, particularly for experienced teachers? One avenue that has not been well explored is using evaluation data on all teachers to inform whole-school improvement efforts, such as targeting professional development to groups of teachers and focusing on system reform and capacity building.

Kelley and Maslow examined evaluation and feedback practices in seven diverse, medium- to large-size high schools, with particular emphasis on the role that evaluation played in:

° providing feedback to individual teachers to foster improvements in teaching practice;

° informing improvements in the organization as a system; and

° reinforcing or reducing inequitable distributions of high-quality teachers across students of varying abilities.

They also examined how the schools used evaluation to refine or reframe (and fundamentally reform) teaching practice, at individual and organizational levels.

Kelley and Maslow interviewed teachers, evaluators, administrators, and department chairs, collecting information about each school’s diversity, structure, performance, and evaluation system. They then grouped the effects of evaluation practice by geographic location and level of diversity: urban-suburban and most racially diverse; urban-suburban with moderate racial diversity; and rural with moderate socioeconomic and racial diversity.

They found that, across the schools, evaluation had limited utility as direct feedback to advance teacher learning. Instead, it was used to create structured opportunities for feedback, professional conversation, and teacher learning or to provide a source of data to focus structured professional development opportunities for teachers.

Evaluation and teacher feedback varied dramatically across the seven schools. In many ways, understanding the evaluation and feedback systems provided an important window on the “real” goals being pursued by these schools and the ways in which the schools dealt with—or ignored—significant educational challenges created by diversity in a strong accountability context.

Of particular interest was the extent to which the evaluation system provided meaningful feedback for teacher learning beyond the probationary period. Almost universally, teacher learning did not occur for experienced teachers through the feedback they received through the evaluation system. The system did provide a sense of accountability, however; and when teachers were not evaluated, they complained in some cases that there should be some accountability.

Systematic attention to evaluation and review of evaluation data occurred in one school of the seven studied—the only case in which teachers identified school or district professional development as a primary resource for professional learning.

Evaluation can be useful if meaningful data are collected. But in many of the schools studied by Kelley and Maslow, evaluations were haphazard and framed by the evaluator’s cognitive lens, rather than by any particular evaluation instrument. In several schools—particularly in large, diverse, urban high schools—evaluation focused on problem teachers.

Most teachers identified students as the primary source of feedback, and colleagues as secondary. Only in two of the seven schools did teachers indicate that professional development was an important source of teacher learning.

The Kelley and Maslow study suggests a need for continued examination of the human resource management of high school teachers and ways that feedback mechanisms can advance teacher learning, especially for experienced teachers.

Ongoing work by WCER researcher Sarah Archibald provides insight into how to improve schools that are evaluated on the basis of standardized tests. Her study for the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) takes as its starting point today’s standards-based accountability systems that focus most on student performance.

Archibald’s pioneering study combines teacher compensation research and school finance research across 3 levels—student background characteristics, teacher characteristics, and school characteristics (see Table 1). The 3-tier model closely resembles the reality that students are nested within classrooms, with teachers, which are nested within schools.

The study uses a statistical tool called hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to assess these characteristics concurrently across the levels of measurement. While other studies have focused on these characteristics, they analyzed a single variable at a particular level, or used only 2 levels, or did not employ a similarly sophisticated statistical technique.

Teacher quality, as measured by a standards-based evaluation system, is a significant, positive predictor of student achievement. CPRE researchers Tony Milanowski and Steven Kimball found the same result in their 2-level model, but Archibald’s work shows that adding variable predictors at the school level does not explain away any of the influence of the classroom teacher on student achievement.

Archibald found that a school’s socio-economic status (SES), or poverty index, has a significant, negative effect on student reading and math achievement. The poverty index includes student transience rate, percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch, and percent minority students. Its negative effect on student achievement has significant implications for policy, Archibald says.

It suggests that policymakers and education leaders pay more attention to a school’s poverty concentration. “If policymakers truly wanted to leave no child behind,” Archibald says, “they would implement plans that called for socioeconomic integration of schools.” She adds, “Leaving no child behind will be more difficult in schools serving predominantly poor students.” Practitioners, policymakers, and academics concerned with school improvement must face the question of where to focus precious resources to maximize student learning.

Research reported in this paper was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking and Management.

### Table 1
The three-tier model

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<th>School characteristics</th>
<th>school leadership</th>
<th>professional community</th>
<th>per-pupil spending</th>
<th>school size</th>
<th>school-level poverty</th>
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<td>Teacher characteristics</td>
<td>master’s degree</td>
<td>class size</td>
<td>evaluation score</td>
<td>years of experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>low income</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>minority</td>
<td>special ed.</td>
<td>pretest score</td>
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