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Children thrive with the strong support, encouragement, and engagement of their families in school life. I remember especially my first day of school each year. It was a big deal.

The first day always significantly changed the family routine. New flannel shirts were bought (we were always prepared for winter), bus schedules were checked, and preparations were made to trek to school to meet the teacher. The whole family went.

As a child, I thought this annual parade by parents and grandparents was to celebrate having their kids back in school. As an adult, I understood the importance of establishing a connection between parent and teacher from the very first day.

In smaller communities, my parents would also routinely meet my teachers in the grocery store or church. In larger communities, that routine connection between parent and teacher becomes more difficult. In today's world, the demands of the workplace may significantly interfere with the ability of parents to connect with teachers and the school.

Street-Level Reality

Recently, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce announced a national tour in conjunction with the showing of "Won't Back Down," a movie that depicts the distance between schools and parents.

The Chamber's webpage describes its goal as "...supporting effective school board governance and reforms that improve student achievement." We all support efforts to raise student achievement.

Parental involvement is a key factor in the success of students and their schools. Perhaps the U.S. Chamber of Commerce should pay as much attention to the street-level reality of how difficult business often makes it for parents to be involved in their children's education as it does to calls for massive reform.

Parents want their children to succeed—to have more opportunities than they had and to have a productive, enjoyable life. Many political and business leaders lament the fact that some students do not achieve proficiency in core subjects.

The reality of the American workplace is that too few parents are allowed—and even fewer are encouraged—to attend their child's parent-teacher conferences, school events, or other opportunities to strengthen the parent-school relationship.

The Chamber reminds business leaders of their critical role in supporting effective school reforms. Yes. Let these reforms begin with efforts to permit working parents to be the powerful force they should be in the school life of their children.

Business leaders, both at the national level and in every community across Nebraska, should be asked to demonstrate their commitment in unleashing the most powerful force schools have to help children—their parents.

A parent is a child's first teacher, life-long counselor, and guide. But in this economic situation, many parents are working long hours that impact family life and children's needs for support.

I do not suggest that businesses give away time and productivity. What we need are creative business leaders who are committed to find flexible solutions for their employees.

It is not as simple as just having teachers hold evening conferences. Not every parent works 9 to 5...or only one shift.

Make it Work Locally

A community commitment to find ways for parents to attend parent-teacher conferences is a beginning in recognizing the real and appropriate power of parents in a child's life. There is reputable research that shows a clear correlation between parent involvement and improved student achievement. It works. So, make sure it works in your community.

Ask your school to host a joint meeting of parents and business leaders to explore this issue. Ask your local chamber of commerce to recognize those businesses that support parent involvement in your local schools.

Friends, family, and businesses must all support parents who need time to confer with teachers and support their children.

Yes, parental involvement in a child's success is important for the family and the community. It is also just good business.