

# Family-School Partnerships in Rural Communities: Benefits, Exemplars, and Future Research

Susan M. Sheridan, Gina M. Kunz, Shannon Holmes  
and Amanda Witte

**Abstract** Research has established that families significantly influence students' development, with parental engagement positively predicting academic and social-behavioral adjustment. When families and schools partner in students' education, positive benefits for the students as well as their families and teachers are realized. Although rural schools are uniquely positioned to foster and benefit from family-school partnerships, limited resources, logistical barriers and lack of familiarity challenge the development of effective partnerships in rural settings. This chapter will examine *Teachers and Parents as Partners* (TAPP), a structured, indirect intervention that focuses both on promoting students' social-behavior and academic success and strengthening family-school partnerships. Research on TAPP has documented its positive effects on students' behavioral, academic and social-emotional functioning across home and school settings; this chapter will outline its efficacy and utility in rural settings. Authors will review results from a four-year randomized controlled trial investigating the effects of TAPP in rural schools and provide suggestions for future research considerations of family-school partnerships in the rural context.

**Keywords** Rural home-school partnerships · Teachers and parents as partners · Rural parent-teacher partnerships · Rural education research on parent-teacher partnerships · Parents and teachers as partners · Rural education research partnerships · Rural education research

---

S.M. Sheridan (✉) · G.M. Kunz · S. Holmes · A. Witte  
Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families  
and Schools, National Center for Research on Rural Education,  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 216 Mabel Lee Hall, Lincoln,  
NE 68588-0235, USA  
e-mail: ssheridan2@unl.edu

# 1 Introduction to Family-School Partnerships

Student learning is a dynamic, interactive process. It occurs through experiences within and across many interconnected systems and environments. Grounded in ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992), attention to methods for augmenting proximal learning environments (microsystems, characterized as homes *or* schools) and relationships among them (mesosystems, characterized as homes *with* schools) is necessary for maximizing student academic and social-behavioral outcomes. Because students spend the majority of their time within and between the home and school systems, promoting cohesion across these two systems is a particularly relevant goal. The ways in which families and schools work together are important, and it is only when parents and teachers engage in partnership with one another that positive benefits for students are maximized (Christenson and Sheridan 2001; Semke and Sheridan 2012).

Family influences, practices, and relationships have a significant effect on students' development. It is now widely accepted that parents' attitudes, behaviors, and the provision of personal and educational resources to support a child's learning and development (i.e., parent engagement) is strongly related to students' academic and social-behavioral adjustment (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Families can be engaged in their child's education in several ways. Definitions espousing a *family involvement* frame emphasize the unique roles and contributions of families, and activities they practice to support education (Fantuzzo et al. 2000). When family involvement is extended in specific ways to include shared responsibilities of parents and teachers in relationships that are viewed as mutual and collaborative, there is a shift from isolated contributions to *partnerships* between home and school settings (Christenson and Sheridan 2001; Henderson et al. 2007; Witte and Sheridan 2011).

Rural schools and families are uniquely positioned to foster and benefit from family-school partnerships. Limited availability of specialized student support resources, logistical barriers for accessing supports, and lack of familiarity with and routine use of services challenge the development and practice of effective family-school partnerships in rural settings. This chapter will examine Teachers and Parents as Partners (TAPP; also known as Conjoint Behavioral Consultation; Sheridan et al. 1996; Sheridan and Kratochwill 2008), a structured, indirect service delivery model that focuses both on promoting students' academic and social-behavioral success *and* strengthening connections between parents and teachers as a means for supporting family-school partnerships in rural communities. We provide an overview of family-school partnerships and the research supporting their efficacy, describe TAPP and its application in rural communities, and conclude with a discussion on future research directions for family-school partnerships in rural settings.

## 2 What are Family-School Partnerships?

Family-school partnerships are student-centered actions wherein parents and educators cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents (Christenson and Sheridan 2001; Sheridan et al. 2014a). A hallmark of family-school partnerships is the centrality of students in every interaction between home and school. In true partnerships, families and schools come together for the common purpose of supporting a student's positive growth and development. The goals of family-school partnerships are to (a) improve learning experiences and outcomes for students; (b) strengthen relationships within and among systems in a student's life (parent-child, parent-teacher, teacher-student); (c) address concerns for students across home and school settings; and (d) increase cooperation and collaboration between home and school settings. Family-school partnerships are poised to increase shared commitments between parents and schools; enhance mutual understandings of problems, challenges or needs of students; and establish joint ownership for solutions, rather than assign blame (Christenson and Sheridan 2001).

Partnerships between families and schools are couched in relationships, developed and refined through intentional interactions over time. Effective partnerships place priority on the relationship between home and school, rather than the distinct roles that each serves. Elements of trust, mutual respect, bi-directional communication and joint planning are foundational components of effective family-school partnership approaches (Sheridan et al. 2014a). There is a close collaboration between parents and schools as they share information, perspectives and resources.

## 3 Importance of Partnerships Between Families and Schools

When families and schools engage in effective partnership practices, students' educational, behavioral and social-emotional outcomes are enhanced (for review see Fan and Chen 2001). Decades of research show that when families and schools work together, students demonstrate (a) increased achievement and performance (Galindo and Sheldon 2012), (b) long-term academic success and school completion (Barnard 2004), and (c) fewer problems related to school discipline (e.g., fewer occurrences of suspensions and detentions; Sheldon and Epstein 2002). In fact, benefits of quality family-school partnership intervention programs are evident for even the youngest students. Galindo and Sheldon (2012) reported significant increases in math and reading gains for students in kindergarten, and Miedel and Reynolds (1999) reported fewer occurrences of students in preschool and kindergarten being retained a grade. Beyond academic improvements, family-school partnership programs have been shown to reduce students' disruptive behaviors

(Pearce 2009; Sheridan et al. 2013) and ADHD symptoms (Owens et al. 2008), and increase adaptive behavior and social skills (Sheridan et al. 2012).

Parents and schools also benefit from quality family-school partnership programs. Greater knowledge of school functioning and increased levels of participation on school decision-making committees has been associated with high quality parent engagement programs (Sheldon and Van Voorhis 2004). Significant gains in parental competence in problem-solving, home-school communication, and family and classroom functioning have been noted in research on collaborative family-school intervention programs (Owens et al. 2008; Sheridan et al. 2014c).

#### **4 The Value of Family-School Partnerships in the Rural Context**

Several research studies examining the role of family involvement and family-school partnerships in rural communities found these programs to be critical for rural students' achievement. In fact, in a review of six types of rural family-school-community connections, parent involvement was recognized as a predictor of student success (e.g., Epstein 1995 and Tompkins and Deloney 1994, in Bauch 2001). Similarly, Barley and Beesley (2007) found that success for students in high-performing, high-needs rural schools was strongly linked to supportive relationships with families and communities.

Benefits associated with *involving* parents in rural students' education are evident across age and grade ranges, ethnicity, and various rural geographic locations. One study examined the relationship between parent involvement and student outcomes for middle-school (e.g., 9–12 years) African American students in rural schools (Brody et al. 1995). They found that involvement from mothers mediated the relationship between parental demographic characteristics (education, SES) and student functioning (academic skills and self-regulation). Another study examined the relationship between family involvement and student language outcomes for predominantly Hispanic, immigrant families in rural schools (St. Clair et al. 2012). Findings revealed that students of families who participated in the family involvement training program scored higher on language measures than the students of families who did not participate in the program. Even for older students, parental involvement remains important. Schools in rural Appalachia that employed successful efforts to secure parent involvement in their children's education found this resulted in the highest levels of students enrolling in college (King 2012). This study identified parental involvement as one of the factors that contributed the most to students' decisions to enroll in college.

Benefits of rural families and schools *partnering* on behalf of students have also been documented (for review see Semke and Sheridan 2012). Notably, Owens and colleagues (2008) examined the effects of a family-school partnership intervention with a sample of students with disruptive behaviors in a rural community in

the Appalachian region. Of the students (grades K-6) that participated, those that received the treatment, which was comprised of a daily report card intervention, biweekly consultation meetings, and behavioral parenting sessions, showed significant improvements in behavioral functioning (i.e., hyperactivity, impulsivity, and conduct disorder symptoms). Moreover, parents and teachers that received the intervention reported better relationships with the participating students, as well as improvements in classroom and family functioning.

Indications point to the likelihood of success for rural schools that implement programs to engage parents in true family-school partnerships. The benefits to the students, as well as to the families and schools are clear. Additionally, when schools do not employ family-school partnership programs, they lose an opportunity to capitalize on parents as a valuable resource for students' education. Rural schools stand much to gain and little to lose in implementing effective family-school partnerships. Recommendations for establishing family-school partnerships in rural schools are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Recommendations for establishing family-school partnerships in rural communities

<p><i>Provide the context for parents to feel empowered</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always consider parents/families as a resource and help them to recognize themselves as resources</li> <li>• Communicate to parents that they have power, dignity, and authority in rearing their children and contributing to their child's education</li> <li>• Empower parents in an intentional and ongoing way by demonstrating respect, belief, and expectations so that parents can gain greater access to and control over resources</li> </ul>
<p><i>Negotiate roles and responsibilities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include parents in decision making for their child</li> <li>• Explain to parents the importance of families to their child's learning, right away and often</li> <li>• Expect parents to be engaged in helping their child learn at home and other out-of-school settings</li> <li>• Clarify how parents can help; provide options that are meaningful and acceptable to them</li> <li>• Encourage parents to be assertive</li> <li>• Develop a family-school agreement</li> </ul>
<p><i>Reduce barriers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have contact with parents early in the school year</li> <li>• Establish ongoing communication systems; include "good news" phone calls</li> <li>• Use two-way communication formats that are both school-to-home and home-to-school</li> <li>• Bridge the language gap; strive to have the best communication between school and home with all parents, including those who speak a language other than English</li> </ul>
<p><i>Create a spirit of cooperation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore what goals parents have for their child</li> <li>• Devise opportunities for engagement that parents see as practical and meaningful</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

---

- Reach out to parents with warmth, friendliness and sensitivity

---

*Take parents' perspectives*

- Identify why parents might not be involved
  - Diverse background experiences of parents with schools
  - Economic and time constraints
  - Diverse linguistic and cultural norms
- Recognize that resistance is a form of communication
  - Failure to achieve a connection between home and school highlights the lack of understanding about what is important to each party rather than the presence of resistance
  - Rather than defining parents as resistant, appreciate that they may simply hold different perspectives that need to be understood

---

*Make the school welcoming and family friendly*

- Create a physical appearance that is inviting and open to all
- Consider whether the affective climate (unwritten and unspoken messages and attitudes about students and families) fosters warmth, sensitivity, and trust, or judgment and preconceived notions

---

*Consider a range of other strategies*

- Use technology-mediated forms of communication that preclude the need to be physically present (e.g., Skype, Facetime, text messaging)
- Offer flexible scheduling
- Provide information and data in advance of meetings, and explain planning/partnering processes
- Create opportunities to connect with parents when they are already attending school events
- Use multiple efforts; no one way will work for all families
- Make events fun for families
- Plan for logistical barriers (e.g., work schedules, transportation, child care) and build in flexibility
- Invite parents to help determine the best way for them to be involved
- Meet parents “on their turf”
- Identify a parent in the school who can help spread positive messages
- Make sure roles for parents are meaningful to them

---

Adapted from Sheridan et al. (2014a)

## 5 Challenges of Family-School Partnerships in the Rural Context

Despite the overwhelming support for family-school partnerships, in general, and in the rural context, in particular, there are challenges associated with the practice of family-school partnerships in rural communities. Realities faced by rural schools as well as families pose unique context-specific practice challenges to family-school partnerships.

### ***5.1 Increased Demands and Limited Access to Services***

Schools in rural communities are expected to meet multiple needs of students, including those that are educational, behavioral and social-emotional in nature (National Education Association 2008; Roeser and Midgley 1997; Witte and Sheridan 2011). Unfortunately, the geographic isolation of rural schools often results in limited resources to support efforts to meet the educational demands placed on them, and they are further limited in their access to additional or specialized resources to meet a wider range of student needs (Arnold et al. 2005; Howley and Howley 2004; Monk 2007). In a real sense, they are expected to “do more with less” (Barley and Beesley 2007). While the demands on schools to increase student achievement levels continue to rise, further complications result from a myriad of realities in the rural school context: school closures and consolidations, high rates of teacher turnover, and a large number of teachers who are early in their careers and might lack the experience necessary to meet increased student demands beyond traditional educational needs (Barley and Beesley 2007; Jerald 2002; Monk 2007).

Given the limited resources for rural schools and families and high demands placed on rural educators to meet student needs, families have the potential to serve as a significant resource (Witte and Sheridan 2011). In some cases, the physical locations of school buildings, families’ homes, and teachers’ residences creates distance barriers for collaborative, relationship-building meetings between parents and teachers. School consolidations have increased the distance from homes to schools for many rural educators and families (Phillips et al. 2007), creating challenges associated with access to parents and effective, frequent family-school interactions. Distance also creates difficulties when specialized staff are necessary to structure or support the partnership; such specialized service providers (e.g., school psychologists) frequently work across multiple school districts, travel extensively for their jobs (McLeskey et al. 1984), and may therefore be unavailable for participation. Indeed, parents and teachers have reported that the physical locations of school buildings, families’ homes, and teachers’ residences creates distance barriers and further constraints on their time for collaborative, relationship-building meetings (Kushman and Barnhardt 2001; McBride et al. 2002). Finally, school personnel (e.g., teachers and administrators) often lack training in how to effectively engage families as a partner in students’ education, including effective communication strategies and cultural sensitivity (Agbo 2007; Dornbusch and Glasgow 1996; Witte and Sheridan 2011).

### ***5.2 Relational Characteristics of Rural Communities***

Lack of availability and access to specialized services for rural families is not the only challenge. For some families, partnerships focus on addressing student concerns regarding academic, behavioral or social-emotional functioning. Due to the

small size of rural communities and multiple relationships among their residents, there may be challenges associated with lack of privacy, stigma associated with seeking help for problems, lack of trust of outside professionals, and fear of judgment from community members (Beloin and Peterson 2000; Owens et al. 2007). Rural communities have closely connected professional and social networks, enabling information and attitudes to spread quickly among community members. Parents may fear that other family members, friends, and colleagues will discover their need for intervention or other private information (Larson and Corrigan 2010), and react with skepticism even when confidentiality is promised. Realities that might further hinder families' abilities or desires to access specialized services are linked to demographic factors of the changing face of rural communities, including high poverty rates, parents with lower levels of formalized education, immigrant families or single parents (Grey 1997; Schafft et al. 2008).

Despite the potential for families to partner with schools as a viable resource in supporting the educational success of their students, families in rural settings experience certain realities that pose challenges to effective practice of family-school partnerships. In a study of rural, Hispanic families, Smith and colleagues (2008) found that despite parents' desires to be involved in their children's education, they lacked the knowledge of how to become involved in a meaningful way that contributed to their children's education, and they did not feel welcomed in their children's schools. Previous, negative histories of interactions between parents and their children's teachers can hinder families' desires to partner with school personnel. It is not uncommon in rural communities for teachers of current students to also have taught the parents of those students. Thus, parents and teachers in rural communities may have long-standing relationships and histories of previous interactions (some predating current school situations) that influence their initial abilities to work together as partners.

## **6 Teachers and Parents as Partners (TAPP)**

One family-school partnership intervention that demonstrates promise in rural communities is Teachers and Parents as Partners (TAPP; also known as Conjoint Behavioral Consultation; Sheridan et al. 1996; Sheridan and Kratochwill 2008). TAPP is a consultative approach wherein parents and teachers work as joint consultees under the guidance of a trained consultant to address students' academic delays and social-behavioral challenges through structured, collaborative problem-solving interactions. Consistent with other family-school partnership interventions, the primary goals of TAPP are to improve students' academic, behavioral, socioemotional functioning at home and school and build the capacity of parents and teachers to effectively work together to support students' healthy development (see Table 2 for a detailed list of the goals of TAPP). In TAPP, positive outcomes for students are realized when constructive and quality relationships are established and supported between parents and teachers allowing them



**Table 2** Goals and objectives of CBC

<p><i>Goals</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promote healthy development of children through cross-system intervention development</li> <li>2. Build the capacity of families and educators for data-based decision making and evidence-based intervention implementation</li> <li>3. Establish and strengthen home-school partnerships</li> </ol> <hr/> <p><i>Outcome objectives</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Obtain comprehensive, functional progress monitoring data over time and across settings</li> <li>2. Establish intervention plans across home and school and program for generalization and maintenance of intervention effects</li> <li>3. Improve skills, knowledge, and behavior of families and educators for immediate and ongoing problem-solving</li> </ol> <hr/> <p><i>Relational objectives</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish and strengthen relationship within and across home and schools</li> <li>2. Improve communication, knowledge, and understanding across home and school to maximize opportunities to meet the needs of the family, child, and school</li> <li>3. Promote perspective taking, shared ownership of educational goals, and joint responsibility for problem solution</li> </ol> <hr/> <p>Adapted from Sheridan et al. (2014b)</p>
---

to engage in collaboration, problem-solving, and evidence-based intervention implementation (Sheridan et al. 2012).

### 6.1 TAPP Objectives and Stages

Meaningful changes in students’ behaviors during TAPP are accomplished through attaining specific relational and structural objectives that co-operate to support positive, working relationships between parents and teachers, allowing them to engage in constructive and meaningful problem-solving (Sheridan et al. 2014b). The relational objectives of the TAPP intervention are concerned with building and promoting partnerships to provide the foundation for parents and teachers to work together to support student success. The structural objectives, which are concerned with student-focused results that occur with successful problem-solving, provide the means and organization for effectively addressing students’ difficulties across home and school.

Relational and structural objectives of TAPP are met through a four stage collaborative problem-solving sequence in which parents and teachers share responsibility for identifying the strengths and prioritizing a concern to address for each student and conjointly contribute to the development, implementation, and evaluation of evidence-based intervention plans across home and school (Sheridan and

Kratochwill 2008). Semi-structured interviews and ongoing, reciprocal contacts among parents, teachers, and a trained consultant are used to guide the consultation team through the problem-solving objectives of each stage of TAPP (see Fig. 1 for a depiction of TAPP meeting objectives).

During the *Building on Strengths* interview, the consultant and consultees (i.e., parents and teachers) work together to set goals for consultation and establish a collaborative, working relationship. The team jointly identifies the assets of the student, family, and school and agrees upon and operationally defines a behavioral concern that will be targeted during the process. Consultees collaboratively set meaningful and achievable behavioral goals for the student and identify the unique environmental conditions that may impact the presentation and maintenance of the target behavior. Hypotheses are generated about the function the student’s behavior may serve at home and school (e.g., access to adult attention, escape from demands) and valid procedures for collecting pre-plan, baseline data are established. After baseline data have been collected, individualized home and school behavior plans

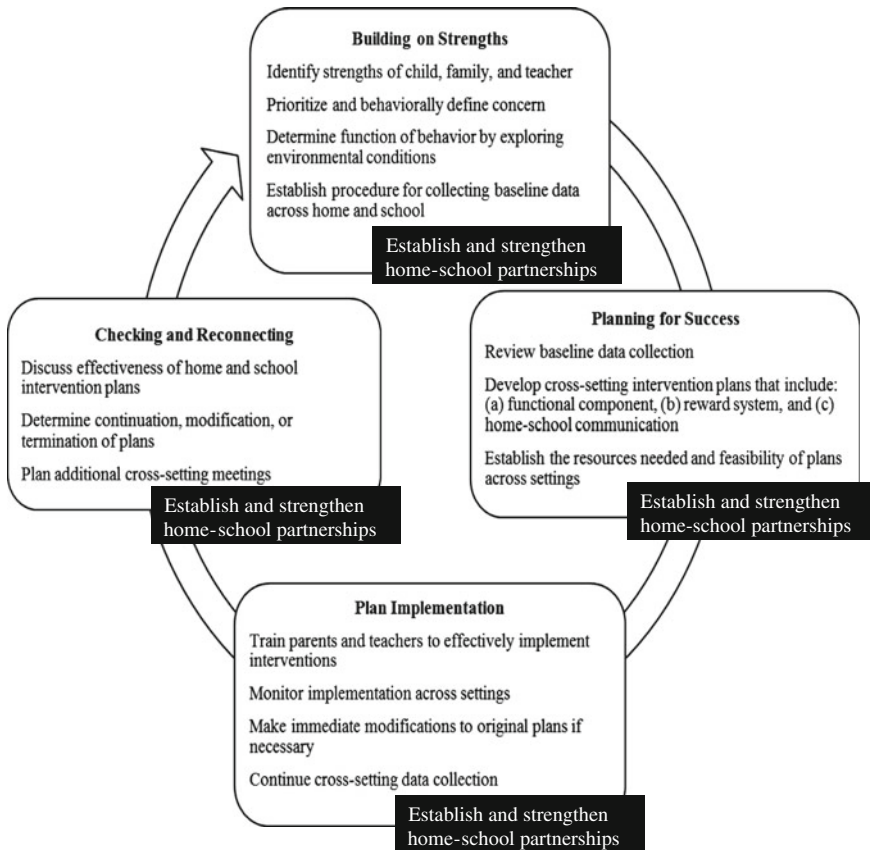


Fig. 1 TAPP stages and meeting objectives

are discussed during the *Planning for Success* interview. Cross-setting intervention plans are collaboratively developed that build upon the competencies of the student, parents, and teacher; address the hypothesized function of the target behavior; reward the student's progress toward behavior goals; and create methods for consistent and frequent communication between home and school. Consultants support parents' and teachers' implementation of the cross-setting behavior plans during the *Plan Implementation* stage. During this stage, consultants remain in close contact (e.g., phone calls, personal visits, e-mail communication) with parents and teachers to support accurate implementation of the developed interventions. Consultants provide parents and teachers with ongoing coaching and skills-based training, including performance feedback regarding their implementation of the plan (Noell et al. 2005) and modeling and rehearsing plan steps. Consultees continue to monitor their adherence to the plan (Swanger-Gagne et al. 2009) to ensure the intervention fits within each home and school context (Durlak and DuPre 2008) and can be implemented with fidelity. The efficacy of the intervention plans are evaluated during the *Checking and Reconnecting* interview. Data collected during baseline and the plan implementation stages are used to determine the attainment of consultation goals and discuss the need to continue the intervention, terminate the process, and/or plan for maintenance and follow-up. Plans for future partnering and problem-solving between the parent and teacher are developed through reviewing the relevance of the skills established and strategies used during the process, identifying methods for continued open communication, and preparing for future collaborative problem-solving meetings.

## **6.2 Research Support for TAPP**

Decades of randomized controlled trial (Sheridan et al. 2012) and single case experimental research (Sheridan et al. 2001) conducted in non-rural settings support TAPP as an effective intervention to improve the functioning of students and their family homes and teachers' classrooms. Individual experimental studies have examined the use of TAPP to address a variety of student difficulties. These small-*n* and single case studies have shown TAPP effectively addresses student academic concerns (e.g., Galloway and Sheridan 1994; Weiner et al. 1998), social problems (e.g., Sheridan et al. 1990), and disruptive behaviors (e.g., Ray et al. 1999). These outcomes have been replicated with large-scale experimental studies of TAPP. Sheridan and colleagues (2012) conducted a randomized controlled trial with a sample of kindergarten through third grade students identified with disruptive behavior problems. The students that received TAPP showed significant improvements on teacher reports of their adaptive functioning and social skills. Parents of students receiving TAPP reported significant reductions in the frequency of their children's arguing, defiance, noncompliance, and tantrums at home (Sheridan et al. 2013) and improvements in their social skills (Sheridan et al. 2012).

Findings from this research suggest the effects of TAPP extend beyond student outcomes. For example, Sheridan and colleagues (2013) found that parents who received TAPP reported greater improvements in their perceived competence to engage in educational problem solving compared to reports from parents in the control groups (Sheridan et al. 2013). In fact, TAPP consistently results in improvements in the quality of the relationship between parents and teachers (Sheridan et al. 2006, 2012). Recently, this relationship has been identified as critical to the success of TAPP. Sheridan et al. (2012) found the quality of parent-teacher relationship partially mediated the effects of TAPP on students' social skills (Sheridan et al. 2012).

## 7 TAPP in Rural Communities

Like other family-school partnership programs, TAPP theory and practice is undergirded by an ecological-systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1977). As such, emphasis is placed on the interactions and relationships within *and* among the primary environments (i.e., home, and school) and local contexts (e.g., community) that support students' development and shape their learning and functioning. This consideration of environmental, contextual, and relational conditions that influence students' development uniquely positions TAPP to bypass challenges faced by rural parents and teachers seeking to work together to address students' difficulties while building upon the inherent strengths of rural communities. The following sections discuss features of TAPP that address common challenges in rural communities associated with access to services, lack of privacy, and stigma associated with accessing specialized support services.

### 7.1 *Availability of and Access to Acceptable Services*

By definition, rural communities are geographically isolated and specialized services to address students' behavioral, emotional, and academic difficulties are often unavailable, inaccessible, or unacceptable in these communities (DeLeon et al. 2003). There is often a reliance on rural schools to provide specialized services; however, rural schools often lack the necessary infrastructure (e.g., professional development, onsite support) to effectively meet the needs of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Malhoit 2005; Monk 2007; Thornton et al. 2006). TAPP addresses challenges to partnerships in rural settings by providing access to evidence-based instructional and behavioral supports. Intentional emphasis is placed on building the capacity of parents and teachers to effectively work together to address students' behavioral, emotional, and academic concerns. Meaningful communication and cooperative, solutions-focused interactions between parents and teachers are planned, modeled, and reinforced throughout the process with the goal of promoting future

partnering and problem-solving. Considerable efforts are made to provide parents and teachers with the skills and rationale to allow them to appropriately identify behavioral concerns, develop methods for monitoring students' behavior, set achievable and challenging behavioral goals for students, and implement and evaluate effective strategies to support students' development. Yet, the long-term impact of TAPP depends on the fit of TAPP within the daily activities of rural educators and families. Mutual input toward solutions and a consideration of contextual features that may facilitate or hinder the implementation of behavioral interventions is solicited to ensure services are acceptable to rural parents and teachers and feasible to implement within each child's unique home and school environment.

## ***7.2 Establishment of Relational Supports and Partnerships***

Fears about being judged, distrust, and lack of privacy may prevent rural parents and teachers from working together to address students' difficulties (Beloin and Peterson 2000; Owens et al. 2007). TAPP's strengths-based and goal-oriented approach may increase trust between parents and teachers and improve attitudes about partnering to improve students' behavior (Sheridan et al. 2015). Rather than placing blame on any individual or assuming the student's problems are the result of internal causes, focus is placed on identifying and modifying environmental conditions that contribute to students' difficulties. Efforts are made to build upon the existing strengths and competencies of students, parents, and educators to promote shared ownership and mutual accountability for developing solutions.

## **8 Research Support for TAPP in Rural Communities**

Recent and ongoing research extends the empirical support for the efficacy of TAPP to rural communities. In this section, we report the preliminary results of a recently completed five-year large-scale randomized controlled trial evaluating the efficacy of TAPP for rural students with challenging behaviors. The purpose of the study was threefold: (a) to identify the effects of TAPP in rural communities on students' behavioral and social-emotional outcomes; (b) to determine TAPP's effects on rural teachers' and parents' use of effective behavioral strategies and problem-solving skills; and (c) to discern the effects of TAPP on parent and teacher partnership outcomes. The study involved 250 students and their parents, and 146 teachers across 45 rural schools in three Midwest states. Rural designation was defined using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric locale designation system whereby schools fall into a locale category based on community population size and proximity to a densely settled urbanized area. Schools in NCES designated rural communities and towns were included. Participating students were identified by teachers as having disruptive behavior concerns (e.g., aggression,

non-compliance). Teachers were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups and all students within a classroom were assigned accordingly. Measures of students' behavioral and academic outcomes, parent and teacher effects, and partnership quality were used to evaluate the efficacy of TAPP. Additionally, the degree to which TAPP "fits" into rural communities as a feasible and acceptable approach was assessed.

### ***8.1 Preliminary Outcomes of TAPP in Rural Communities***

**Student outcomes.** Initial analyses of parent and teacher reports of students' functioning and direct observations of student behavior indicate that TAPP is effective for reducing rural children's problem behaviors and improving their prosocial skills. Relative to a business-as-usual control group, students who received TAPP demonstrated a significant reduction in parent-reported externalizing problems and teacher-reported school problems (measured on the Behavior Assessment Scale for Children; Reynolds and Kamphaus 2004). Independent observations confirmed that compared to students in the control group, TAPP students showed significantly greater increases in appropriate social behavior and engagement in academic activities, as well as a significant decreases in off-task behavior, distracting peers (interference), and inappropriate motor movements (Sheridan et al. 2015).

**Parent and teacher outcomes.** Consistent with objectives of TAPP, preliminary evidence suggests the effects extend beyond student outcomes to influence rural parents' and teachers' practices. Relative to the control group, teachers who received TAPP reported significant improvements in their use of effective teaching strategies and competence to use problem-solving to remediate students' difficulties in the classroom. Corroborating evidence from direct observations of teachers' behavior suggests teachers who participated in TAPP delivered significantly more positive attention and rewards than the teachers in the control group (Sheridan et al. 2015).

Results for rural parents also suggest that TAPP helps parents develop the necessary skills to address problem behaviors at home. Relative to the control group, parents who received TAPP reported a significant improvement in parenting strategies (measured on the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire; Dadds et al. 2003) and competence in problem solving (Sheridan et al. 2014c). Given the paucity of services available to rural parents and teachers, TAPP appears to be a promising method to increase families' and schools' access to effective behavioral supports and build rural teachers' and parents' skills to address problem behaviors.

**Partnership outcomes.** In addition to behavioral outcomes, TAPP has shown to overcome some of the challenges with establishing constructive family-school partnerships in rural communities. In particular, relative to the control group both parents and teachers who received TAPP reported significant improvements in their relationships with each other. Moreover, both rural parents and teachers reported improvements in engagement in consultation activities (Sheridan et al. 2014c, 2015).

## **8.2 “Fit” of TAPP in Rural Communities**

Despite promising outcomes, TAPP’s long-term impact on rural communities is dependent on how well it fits the daily realities faced by rural schools and families. Parents and teachers must find TAPP beneficial and feasible for it to meet the needs of rural students. Initial reports indicate that TAPP is indeed a viable intervention for rural communities. One father reported that TAPP was an efficient way to meet his son’s needs saying, “The benefits far exceed any time or effort required of the parent.” Similarly, a second-grade teacher explained that what she most enjoyed about TAPP was that “it has been very beneficial to the students and their families who participated.” According to parents and teachers, TAPP is particularly beneficial to rural students. As one first-grade teacher stated, “TAPP provides access to resources and ideas that wouldn’t otherwise be available in a small school.” The father of three boys stated “I grew up in small schools and I appreciate them so much, but I think to bring TAPP to a smaller rural school is a huge benefit for the community because it brings in resources that might not be there otherwise.” Furthermore quantitative survey data reveal that parents and teachers find TAPP highly acceptable. On a 15-item survey designed to capture the acceptability of TAPP, parents rated TAPP as 5.05 and teachers rated TAPP as 5.07 (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

## **9 Rural Family-School Partnerships: Future Research Directions**

Despite what is known about the empirical and practical benefits of family-school partnerships in rural settings, a significant number of elusive issues remain in need of careful and intentional empirical attention. Some areas for future research follow.

### **9.1 Access and Relationships**

Rural schools are by definition distal and sometimes very small. As described previously, access to the availability of family-school partnerships is challenging for several reasons. Research addressing these logistic and interpersonal challenges to family-school partnerships in rural settings is sorely needed. The use of technology is being explored as a potential means to bridge families and schools. For example, digital video conferencing may provide a method by which personal interactions between teachers and parents can occur without the need for travel. Web-based distance meeting software (e.g., WebEx) can provide an inexpensive and convenient tool for parents and teachers to meet for purposes of creating and maintaining partnerships. The use of cellular or internet technology (e.g., text messages, email), social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and other platforms hold promise

as potential sources for supporting partnerships. Very little research has been conducted on the utility and efficacy of these formats and represent significant directions for research investigations.

Beyond technology addressing logistical issues, the relational aspects involved in creating and sustaining family-school partnerships in rural communities are significant. Promoting partnerships in rural settings may benefit from intentional efforts to create climates that are positive, inviting, and rewarding for parents and teachers to work together in constructive ways. Processes described in previous sections may be particularly effective in rural schools, yet research has not identified evidence-based practices for establishing and sustaining rural family-school partnerships. Interventions that support family-school connections have the potential to positively impact students, parents, and teachers, and the connection between the school and the community may be a critical component of effective rural schools. It is likely that the practice of forming and sustaining family-school partnerships in rural schools may differ from other settings; however, too few studies have been conducted with research questions that investigate the unique and specific effects of the rural context on family-school connections and outcomes. Finally, additional unknown barriers to the development of family-school connections may be present in rural communities, warranting greater attention to the importance of uncovering specific and operational strategies fostering connections within rural school settings.

## ***9.2 Implementation and Sustainability***

The long-term benefit of interventions in rural schools is dependent upon the capacity of the system to sustain evidence-based programs within its typical structures. That is, it is necessary that interventions identified as efficacious through grant-supported research programs in highly controlled conditions be tested within the context of natural school practices. The effectiveness of family-school partnership interventions for promoting social and behavioral competence and positive, high-quality relationships between parents and teachers given a rural school's available internal resources (i.e., once an externally-supported program "goes away") requires research attention.

Research is needed to determine methods to deliver family-school partnership interventions in rural schools with greater efficiency, while maintaining integrity of the process and student-focused interventions. Small numbers of staff members in rural schools require the adoption of several responsibilities; thus, additional requirements associated with parental engagement and social-behavioral support may increase burden. On the other hand, school personnel in rural schools often have a "do what it takes" mentality and challenges are often usurped by individuals with the capacity to intervene early. Empirical attention toward the interaction of unique practice and personnel characteristics in rural schools and the delivery of family-school partnership programs is warranted.



### ***9.3 Increased Rigor***

There is currently a dearth of studies conducted on family-school connections in rural settings. Those available in the published literature tend to be largely descriptive and take advantage of qualitative methods that explore the unique nuances of rurality. Hence, literature on the distinctive role and efficacy of rural family-school partnerships and their role at producing generalizable outcomes is currently underdeveloped (Semke and Sheridan 2012). It is essential that research in the area of rural family-school connections increase, with particular emphasis on studies using sound quantitative, qualitative or mixed method designs.

Much more research is needed that is designed to draw clear and causal relationships associated with the efficacy of family-school partnerships within rural educational settings. When testing the efficacy of interventions to promote family-school partnerships, evidence of random assignment, reliable and valid measures, implementation fidelity, and statistical validity is necessary. Furthermore, highly rigorous qualitative and mixed methods research is needed to address certain questions about rural context and place-based education. Any one type of research is not sufficient to advance a rich and broad agenda, and the strength of conclusions one can draw is bound by the rigor of the design used. A general call for increased sophistication and rigor in research related to family-school partnerships in rural schools is made, irrespective of the methodological paradigm employed.

### ***9.4 Unique Aspects of Family-School Partnerships in Rural Contexts***

Within rural schools, the distinctions of what type of family-school paradigm works for which students in what contexts or under what conditions is of significant importance (Semke and Sheridan 2012). Questions about operative elements of rural family-school partnerships to achieve distinctive outcomes are relevant and in need of research attention. Arnold and colleagues (2005) called for research that addresses parent expectations for student achievement, asserting that schools can improve student achievement by encouraging parents and community members to recognize the potential of high academic aspirations and expectations. This is one aspect of family/parent involvement, but only a small component of what we envision as family-school partnerships to boost learning and achievement. Also necessary are broadened questions that begin to ask about relevant roles and novel practices for rural families and schools to work together to promote student achievement. Continued research on the efficacy of actions associated with joint decision making, collaborative problem-solving, complementary learning opportunities, and relevant out of school activities are ripe areas for research attention in rural schools.

**Acknowledgments** This research was supported by grants awarded to the first author by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (R324A100115; R305C090022).

## References

- Agbo, S. A. (2007). Addressing school–community relations in a cross-cultural context: A collaborative action to bridge the gap between First Nations and the school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22, 1–14.
- Arnold, M., Newman, J., Gaddy, B., & Dean, C. (2005). A look at the condition of rural education research: Setting a difference for future research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 20(6). Retrieved from <http://www.umaine.edu/jrre/20-6.pdf>
- Barley, Z. A., & Beesley, A. D. (2007). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22, 1–16.
- Barnard, W. M. (2004). Parent involvement in elementary school and educational attainment. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 39–62.
- Bauch, P. A. (2001). School–community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76, 204–221.
- Beloin, K., & Peterson, M. (2000). For richer or poorer: Building inclusive schools in poor urban and rural communities. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 47, 15–24.
- Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., & Flor, D. (1995). Linking family processes and academic competence among rural African American youths. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 567–579.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513–531.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Six theories of child development* (pp. 187–250). Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.
- Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Dadds, M. R., Maujean, A., & Fraser, J. A. (2003). Parenting and conduct problems in children: Australian data and psychometric properties of the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire. *Australian Psychologist*, 38, 238–241.
- DeLeon, P. H., Wakefield, M., & Hagglund, K. J. (2003). *The behavioral health care needs of rural communities*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Dornbusch, S. M., & Glasgow, K. L. (1996). The structural context of family–school relations. In A. Booth & J. F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family–school links: How do they affect educational outcomes* (pp. 35–44). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Durlak, J. A., & DuPre, E. P. (2008). Implementation matters: A review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 327–350.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 79, 701–712.
- Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13, 1–22.
- Fantuzzo, J., Tighe, E., & Childs, S. (2000). Family Involvement Questionnaire: A multivariate assessment of family participation in early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 367–376.
- Galindo, C., & Sheldon, S. (2012). School efforts to improve parental involvement and effects on students' achievement in kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27, 90–103.

- Galloway, J., & Sheridan, S. M. (1994). Implementing scientific practices through case studies: Examples using home-school interventions and consultation. *Journal of School Psychology, 32*, 385–413.
- Grey, M. A. (1997). Secondary labor in the meatpacking industry: Demographic change and student mobility in rural Iowa schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 13*, 153–164.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Education Development Laboratory.
- Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., et al. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *Elementary School Journal, 106*, 105–130.
- Howley, C. B., & Howley, A. A. (2004). School size and the influence of socioeconomic status on student achievement: Confronting the threat of size bias in national data sets. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 12*, 1–35. doi:10.14507/epaa.v12n52.2004
- Jerald, C. D. (2002). *All talk, no action: Putting an end to out-of-field teaching*. Retrieved from <http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/AllTalk.pdf>
- King, S. B. (2012). Increasing college-going rate, parent involvement, and community participation in rural communities. *The Rural Educator, 33*(2), 20–26.
- Kushman, J. W., & Barnhardt, R. (2001). Reforming education from the inside-out: A study of community engagement and educational reform in rural Alaska. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 17*, 12–26.
- Larson, J. E., & Corrigan, P. W. (2010). Psychotherapy for self-stigma among rural clients. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 66*, 524–536. doi:10.1002/jclp.20679
- Malhoit, G. C. (2005). *Providing rural students with a high quality education: The rural perspective on the concept of educational adequacy*. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust.
- McBride, B. A., Bae, J., & Wright, M. S. (2002). An examination of family-school partnerships in rural prekindergarten programs. *Early Education and Development, 13*, 107–127.
- McLeskey, J., Huebner, E. S., & Cummings, J. A. (1984). Issues in the delivery of psychological services in rural school settings. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 15*, 579–589.
- Miedel, W. T., & Reynolds, A. J. (1999). Parent involvement in early intervention for disadvantaged children: Does it matter? *Journal of School Psychology, 37*, 379–402.
- Monk, D. (2007). Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas. *The Future of Children, 17*, 155–174.
- National Education Association. (2008). *Rural education*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Noell, G. H., Witt, J. C., Slider, N. J., Connell, J. E., Gatti, S. L., & Wi, K. L. (2005). Treatment implementation following behavioral consultation in schools: A comparison of three follow-up strategies. *School Psychology Review, 34*, 87–106.
- Owens, J. S., Murphy, C. E., Richerson, L., Girio, E. L., & Himawan, L. K. (2008). Science to practice in underserved communities: The effectiveness of school mental health programming. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 37*, 434–447.
- Owens, J. S., Richerson, L., Murphy, C. E., Jagelewski, A., & Rossi, L. (2007). The parent perspective: Informing the cultural sensitivity of parenting programs in rural communities. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 36*, 179–194.
- Pearce, L. R. (2009). Helping children with emotional difficulties: A response to intervention investigation. *The Rural Educator, 30*(2), 34–46.
- Phillips, R., Harper, S., & Gamble, S. (2007). Summer programming in rural communities: Unique challenges. *New Directions for Youth Development, 114*, 65–73.
- Ray, K. P., Skinner, C. H., & Watson, T. S. (1999). Transferring stimulus control via momentum to increase compliance in a student with autism: A demonstration of collaborative consultation. *The School Psychology Review, 28*, 622–628.

- Reynolds, C. R., & Kamphaus, R. W. (2004). *Behavior assessment system for children* (2nd ed.). Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- Roeser, R. W., & Midgley, C. (1997). Teachers' views of issues involving students' mental health. *The Elementary School Journal*, *98*, 115–133.
- Schafft, K. A., Prins, E., & Movit, M. (2008). *Poverty, residential mobility, and persistence across urban and rural family literacy programs in Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy.
- Semke, C. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). Family-school connections in rural educational settings: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *School Community Journal*, *22*(1), 21–48.
- Sheldon, S. B., & Epstein, J. L. (2002). Improving student behavior and discipline with family and community involvement. *Education in Urban Society*, *35*, 4–26.
- Sheldon, S. B., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2004). Partnership programs in U.S. schools: Their development and relationship to family involvement outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *15*, 125–145.
- Sheridan, S. M., Bovaird, J. A., Glover, T. A., Garbacz, S. A., Witte, A., & Kwon, K. (2012). A randomized trial examining the effects of conjoint behavioral consultation and the mediating role of the parent-teacher relationship. *School Psychology Review*, *41*, 23–46.
- Sheridan, S. M., Clarke, B. L., & Christenson, S. L. (2014a). Best practices in promoting family engagement in education. In P. L. Harrison & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology: Systems-level services* (pp. 439–453). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Sheridan, S. M., Clarke, B. L., Knoche, L. L., & Edwards, C. P. (2006). The effects of conjoint behavioral consultation in early childhood settings. *Early Education and Development*, *17*, 593–618.
- Sheridan, S. M., Clarke, B. L., & Ransom, K. A. (2014b). The past, present, and future of conjoint behavioral consultation research. In W. P. Erchul & S. M. Sheridan (Eds.), *Handbook of research in school consultation: Empirical foundations for the field* (2nd ed., pp. 210–247). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis Group/Routledge.
- Sheridan, S. M., Dee, C. C., Morgan, J., McCormick, M., & Walker, D. (1996). A multimethod intervention for social skills deficits in children with ADHD and their parents. *School Psychology Review*, *25*, 57–76.
- Sheridan, S. M., Eagle, J. W., Cowan, R. J., & Mickelson, W. (2001). The effects of conjoint behavioral consultation: Results of a four-year investigation. *Journal of School Psychology*, *39*, 361–385.
- Sheridan, S., Holmes, S., Witte, A., & Dent, A. (2015). CBC: Operationalizing a family-school partnership Tier III intervention. In S. A. Garbacz (Chair), *Family engagement across tiered mental health service delivery in schools*. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists, Orlando, FL.
- Sheridan, S. M., & Kratochwill, T. R. (2008). *Conjoint behavioral consultation: Promoting family-school connections and interventions*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Sheridan, S. M., Kratochwill, T. R., & Elliott, S. N. (1990). Behavioral consultation with parents and teachers: Delivering treatment for socially withdrawn children at home and school. *School Psychology Review*, *19*, 33–52.
- Sheridan, S. M., Kunz, G. M., Witte, A., Holmes, S., & Coutts, M. (2014c). *Rural parents and teachers as partners: Preliminary results of a randomized trial* (R<sup>2</sup>Ed working paper no. 2014-4). Retrieved from <http://www.r2ed.unl.edu>
- Sheridan, S. M., Ryoo, J. H., Garbacz, S. A., Kunz, G. M., & Chumney, F. L. (2013). The efficacy of conjoint behavioral consultation on parents and children in the home setting: Results of a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of School Psychology*, *51*, 717–733.
- Sheridan, S. M., Witte, A., & Holmes, S. (in press). Case studies of randomized controlled trials in rural education settings. In J. Bovaird & S. M. Sheridan (Eds.), *Conducting education research in rural settings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

- Smith, J., Stern, K., & Shatrova, Z. (2008). Factors inhibiting Hispanic parents' school involvement. *The Rural Educator, 29*(2), 8–13.
- St. Clair, L., Jackson, B., & Zweiback, R. (2012). Six years later: Effect of family involvement training on the language skills of children from migrant families. *The School Community Journal, 22*, 9–20.
- Swanger-Gagne, M., Garbacz, S. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2009). Intervention implementation integrity within conjoint behavioral consultation: Strategies for working with families. *School Mental Health, 1*, 131–142.
- Thornton, B., Hill, G., & Usinger, J. (2006). An examination of a fissure within the implementation of the NCLB accountability process. *Education, 127*, 115–120.
- Tompkins, R., & Deloney, P. (1994). *Rural students at risk in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Weiner, R., Sheridan, S. M., & Jenson, W. R. (1998). The effects of conjoint behavioral consultation and a structured homework program on math completion and accuracy in junior high students. *School Psychology Quarterly, 13*, 281–309.
- Witte, A. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2011). Family engagement in rural schools. In S. Redding, M. Murphy, & P. Sheley (Eds.), *Handbook on family and community engagement* (pp. 153–156). Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute/Center on Innovation and Improvement.