

POLICY NOTES

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In this Issue

Families matter. When parents are married and employed, when they turn off the television and monitor homework, their children are more likely to succeed in school. Today, however, many families are struggling, and their struggles contribute to the stubborn achievement gap separating low-income and minority students from their more affluent White and Asian peers. Education reformers have focused on what happens inside classrooms, but the impact of family means that school reform alone cannot eliminate the achievement gap. An array of programs aimed at strengthening families — home visits to expectant mothers, marriage and fatherhood

(continued on page 11)

“ There is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child’s education from day one. ”

— President Barack Obama, Thornton, Colorado, May 28, 2008

Addressing Achievement Gaps

The Family: America’s Smallest School

Intuitively, it seems like common sense: children do better in school when the homes they leave each morning are stable, secure and conducive to learning — when their parents are married and employed, read to them every day and ensure they attend school. Decades of research have confirmed this common-sense intuition, linking the quality of family life to children’s health, happiness and school achievement. “Parents serve as children’s first lifelong teachers,” **Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana**, Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education, told an audience

of 200 during ETS's recent symposium on the family. "I've seen parents turn the love of learning into a precious legacy passed down through the years." Three years ago, an ETS report titled *The Family: America's Smallest School* attributed two-thirds of the differences among state scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress to four home-related factors, including the proportion of single-parent families and the number of hours children spend watching television.¹ "Learning does not stop when the child leaves the school," said ETS Board Chair **Piedad F. Robertson**, a conference participant. "It is the home that reinforces that learning process. And without that family involvement, children are being cheated out of half of their education."

"Parents serve as children's first lifelong teachers. I've seen parents turn the love of learning into a precious legacy passed down through the years."
— *Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana*

The ETS conference, also titled "The Family: America's Smallest School," which was held October 18, 2010, at the Willard InterContinental Hotel in Washington, D.C., featured presentations by 15 academics, advocates and government officials. The conference, the 14th in ETS's seven-year series of "Addressing Achievement Gaps" symposia, was co-convened by the Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University, the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, the National Black Child Development Institute, and the National Center for Children & Families at Teachers College of Columbia University.

The closeness of the connection between home influences and school results suggests that education reform alone cannot eliminate the wide achievement gaps dividing low-income and minority students from their

more affluent White and Asian peers, conference speakers said. Other programs — from home visits with expectant mothers to high-quality early childhood education — are necessary to strengthen struggling families and build connections between home and school. Such programs face significant challenges, speakers said: Programs must adapt to the cultural needs of different kinds of families and must show not only that they help families, but also that such help translates into student-achievement gains. Perhaps most fundamentally, those who seek to help families have to wrestle with difficult questions about the relationship between the behavior of individuals and the broader social context. "Is it something wrong with those families, or is it something wrong with the capacity of the society?" asked psychologist and researcher **Edmund W. Gordon**, a conference speaker. "The way in which we pose the question influences the ways in which we think about intervening."

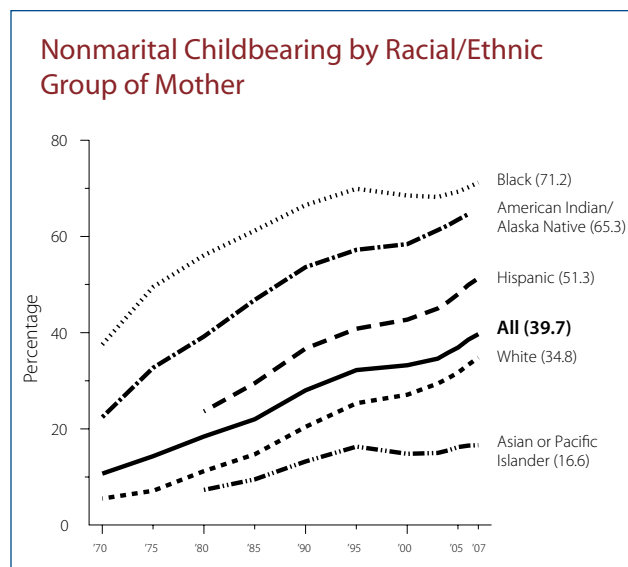
Fragile families, troubled children

In 1965, in a report initially intended for in-house eyes only, a U.S. Labor Department official named Daniel Patrick Moynihan linked such inner-city social ills as school dropout rates, crime and welfare dependency to high levels of unwed parenthood among African Americans. Moynihan, later a Democratic senator from New York, was a liberal who hoped his grim assessment of inner-city family life would galvanize President Lyndon Johnson's administration into funding social programs for African Americans, but the left condemned his work as racist victim-blaming, historian **James T. Patterson** said at an ETS gathering the night before the conference. In *Freedom Is Not Enough*, his new book on the document that came to be known as "the Moynihan report," Patterson describes how the controversy helped end the possibility of

¹ Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley, *The Family: America's Smallest School*, Policy Information Report, ETS Policy Information Center, Princeton, NJ, September 2007.

progress on the issue and, until the 1980s, made scholars reluctant to endorse Moynihan's conclusions.²

The worsening situation of many families, including African American families, has changed the intellectual and policy landscape, Patterson said. When Moynihan wrote his report, fewer than 10 percent of all births were to unwed mothers; today, the number is about 40 percent. That sea change in American life has potentially serious consequences for children's well-being, because "unwed births are coupled with other conditions that make it very difficult for children to succeed," said conference speaker **Jeanne Brooks-Gunn**, a developmental psychologist who is the co-director of the National Center for Children & Families at Columbia University's Teachers College. "Sometimes, we talk about income and education and family structure as three separate things, but guess what? They come bundled in families."



Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

What is it about unwed parenthood that hurts children? The ongoing longitudinal study "Fragile Families," which began in 1998 in 20 cities, seeks to answer that question by following 5,000 families recruited in hospitals following

their babies' births. The study has found that married and unmarried parents differ significantly, said Brooks-Gunn, one of the principal investigators, and the differences make clear the huge challenges facing many families. Unwed parents are younger, poorer, less healthy, more likely to have been in prison, and less educated — almost 45 percent of the unwed mothers had no high school diploma when their babies were born, compared with 17.8 percent of the married mothers. That statistic is especially ominous, Brooks-Gunn said, because maternal education correlates strongly with children's school achievement.

"Unwed births are coupled with other conditions that make it very difficult for children to succeed. Sometimes, we talk about income and education and family structure as three separate things, but guess what? They come bundled in families."
— Jeanne Brooks-Gunn

Children of unwed parents also experience far more upheaval in their family lives than do children of married parents, she said. Although many of the unwed parents got along well when their children were born, most of those relationships eventually soured. By the fifth year of the study, more than three-quarters of the unmarried parents had changed partners at least once, Brooks-Gunn said, and such relationship transitions were associated with maternal stress and the use of harsh parenting techniques. "There's a lot more instability in kids' lives because of unmarried status at birth than most of us had expected," she said, and, for children, that instability increases emotional and physical problems, including obesity and aggression, and depresses important indicators of future success in school. "As families become more unstable, the receptive vocabulary scores at age 5 and at age 9 get lower," Brooks-Gunn said. "We can control for all our other demographic characteristics, and these instability effects do not go away."

² James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: America's Struggle Over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

If family influences are so crucial in setting the stage for children's success or failure in school, education reform alone cannot close the achievement gap, conference speakers said. The business community often sees education, wrongly, as a production function, ETS President **Kurt M. Landgraf** told the conference audience, with the school as a kind of factory transforming inputs into outputs. "Education is so much more complex," Landgraf said, because students enter the classroom with such varied life experiences. "It's not like bringing steel through the front door." That complexity calls into question some currently fashionable policy priorities, suggested psychologist Gordon. "I think the Obama administration is moving in the wrong direction in investing so heavily in school reform," he said. "I don't think that's where the core of the problem is. I think the core of the problem rests in the capabilities of communities and families."

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— *Edmund W. Gordon*

Learning to be a father

To improve those capabilities, an array of programs seeks to strengthen families long before children start school, and to bridge the gap between home and school once they do. Some are federal or state initiatives; others are grassroots projects launched by passionate advocates eager to give back to the communities they know. "There are a lot of nongovernmentally funded programs," said conference speaker **Vivian Gadsden**, a professor of child development and education who directs the National Center on Fathers and Families at the University of

Pennsylvania. "They operate in church basements and community centers."

"There are a lot of nongovernmentally funded programs. They operate in church basements and community centers." — Vivian Gadsden

At the federal level, a network of programs in both the education and human services departments aims to support low-income children from birth to their teens, conference speakers said. The newest link in that chain is a \$93 million program of home visits to expectant mothers and women with young children, which is currently in the planning stages and will be funded through the new federal health care law, said conference speaker **Shannon Rudisill**, Associate Director of the Child Care Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Infants and toddlers move on to Early Head Start, preschoolers can enroll in Head Start classes, and school-age children qualify for subsidized child care, she said, with the entire network of programs offering a "whole-child approach" to children's development.

Like many traditional social programs, these initiatives target women and children, but advocates are increasingly realizing that helping mothers and their children requires helping fathers, too, conference speakers said. Research shows that young children with responsible, committed fathers grow up to feel more secure and to earn higher test scores, Gadsden said. Yet 19.4 million children — 27 percent of those under 18 — do not live with their fathers, and 40 percent of those children have not seen their fathers even once in the preceding year. Parenting skills are transmitted from generation to generation, and, without fathers of their own, "many young men have no idea what it means to be a good father," Gadsden said.

That theme echoed through a documentary shown by another conference speaker, **Joseph T. Jones Jr.**, founder and president of the Baltimore-based Center for Urban Families, which tries to connect inner-city men with jobs and to teach parenting skills to young fathers. The film describes how Jones, abandoned by his own father at the age of 9, numbed his pain with drugs before climbing back to sobriety and a career counseling young men with similar life stories. The work can be arduous — the film shows a counselor from Jones’s organization knocking on doors and chasing down leads, as he hunts for a 21-year-old he hopes to enroll in a support group for new fathers. The hunt ends hopefully: The young man is found at his girlfriend’s house, cuddling his newborn. Over video of young men in a parenting class struggling to diaper baby dolls, Jones describes the dilemma of inner-city fathers. “They want to be involved in the lives of their children,” he says. “They just don’t know how.”

Nudging couples toward marriage

One way to strengthen the bond between fathers and children may be to strengthen the bond between fathers and mothers — the more romantic partners a father has, the less involvement he has with his children, said Brooks-Gunn of Columbia. Because research shows that children who live with both parents are less likely to be poor and more likely to be healthy and academically successful, marriage promotion has been an explicit goal of federal policy since the 1996 welfare-reform law, said conference speaker **Diann Dawson**, an official in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families. In 2002, her agency began funding marriage- and fatherhood-education programs, Dawson said, and the Obama administration’s 2011 budget proposes spending \$500 million on similar efforts.

Why Marriage Matters for Children

- More likely to attend college
- More likely to succeed academically
- Physically and emotionally healthier
- Less likely to attempt or commit suicide
- Demonstrate fewer behavioral problems in school
- Less likely to be victim of abuse
- Less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol
- Less likely to exhibit delinquent behavior
- Have better relationship with mothers and fathers
- Decreases chances of divorcing when they get married
- Less likely to become pregnant as teenager or impregnate someone
- Less likely to be sexually active as teenagers
- Less likely to contract STDs
- Less likely to be raised in poverty

Source: “Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences,” Institute for American Values.

Sustaining a healthy marriage demands a variety of emotional and communications skills, and underlying the marriage-education initiative, Dawson said, is the assumption that “these skills could be taught.” To test that assumption, the department sponsors research into the effectiveness of marriage education, and the mixed results of one such study point up the complexity of trying to intervene in human relationships, said conference speaker **Robert G. Wood** of Mathematica Policy Research, the study’s lead author.³ In the “Building Strong Families” (BSF) project, eight community organizations in seven states launched relationship-education programs for unwed parents, centered around intensive group instruction in the skills needed for marriage and shared parenting. BSF aimed to nudge couples toward healthy marriages and thus to help their children, since “improving the quality and stability of the parental relationship is good for children,” Wood said.

³ Robert G. Wood et al., *Strengthening Unmarried Parents’ Relationships: The Early Impacts of Building Strong Families*, Mathematica Policy Research, May 2010.

Initial comparisons between BSF participants and a control group suggest, however, that none of the local BSF programs increased the odds that couples would marry, Wood said, and six of the eight programs had virtually no effect on other key outcomes, such as the quality of couples' relationships, the chances that they would remain romantic partners, or the likelihood that fathers would live with their children and provide financial support. The Baltimore BSF program actually had negative effects in key areas: only 59 percent of participating couples remained romantically involved, compared with 70 percent in the control group, and participating fathers were less likely to stay involved with their children. Only one program, in Oklahoma City, showed positive results for key measures, Wood said. In the Oklahoma BSF program, 81 percent of the enrolled couples remained romantically involved, compared with 76 percent of the control group, and relationship quality and fathers' involvement with children also improved.

It is uncertain why results in two of the eight BSF programs differed so markedly from the rest, Wood said, although some differences among the programs are obvious. The successful Oklahoma program used a more intensive, shorter-term curriculum; paid participants to attend instructional sessions; and included low-income married couples in the discussion groups attended by unwed parents. The problematic Baltimore program served a more disadvantaged clientele than the other programs, enrolling men who were less likely to have jobs or high school diplomas and couples who were less committed to each other at the outset. Although the Oklahoma program's success shows that marriage education can have an impact, the study's overall results suggest that "it's hard to make this approach work," Wood said. "Our results also suggest that the approach may not be right for all unmarried parents."

Closing gaps by starting early

Research on the impact of early childhood education programs has yielded far more optimistic results, and many conference speakers argued that effective preschool offers the best hope for closing the nation's achievement gap.

Economic Returns to Pre-K for Disadvantaged Children (In 2006 dollars, 3% discount rate)			
	Cost	Benefits	B/C
Perry Pre-K	\$17,599	\$284,086	16
Abecedarian	\$70,697	\$176,284	2.5
Chicago	\$ 8,224	\$ 83,511	10

Sources: Barnett, W. S., & Masse, L. N. (2007). Early childhood program design and economic returns: Comparative benefit-cost analysis of the Abecedarian program and policy implications. *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 113-125; Belfield, C., Nores, M., Barnett, W.S., & Schweinhart, L.J. (2006). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program. *Journal of Human Resources*, 41(1), 162-190; Temple, J. A., & Reynolds, A. J. (2007). Benefits and costs of investments in preschool education: Evidence from the Child-Parent Centers and related programs. *Economics of Education Review*, 26(1), 126-144.

The longer children spend in a high-quality preschool, the better the chance of narrowing or eliminating the achievement gap that shows up even before kindergarten, said Rudisill, the federal child-care official. Low-income children who spent three years at the Educare schools — public-private collaborations providing full-day preschool for at-risk children — scored at the same levels as middle-income children upon school entrance, Rudisill said. And the positive effects of high-quality preschool programs persist throughout the school years and into adulthood, conference speakers said, showing up in improved test scores, lower dropout rates, higher lifetime earnings, and reduced levels of crime and welfare dependency. "We know from the research studies, we know from our experience, that the younger we are able to have an impact on children's lives, to move them in developmentally sound directions, the longer-term the results can be," said conference participant

Carol Brunson Day, President of the National Black Child Development Institute.

“We know from the research studies, we know from our experience, that the younger we are able to have an impact on children’s lives, to move them in developmentally sound directions, the longer-term the results can be.” — Carol Brunson Day

In New Jersey, a court-ordered urban preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds has improved test scores and halved the number of children repeating a grade early in elementary school, said conference speaker **David G. Sciarra**, executive director of the nonprofit Education Law Center, which brought the school finance lawsuit that eventually led to the court directive. New Jersey’s program, which offers full-day instruction in small classes staffed by certified teachers, costs \$12,000 per child, but the hefty price tag is essential to ensuring success, Sciarra said. “The issue isn’t just access to preschool — we need very high-quality programs,” he said. “Those are programs which are not cheap. Unless the programs are very high-quality, we’re not going to get to where we want to go.” Nor does the battle end once adequate funding levels are established, he said. Programs must fight to sustain their funding over the long term, making community and parental support crucial, especially in recessionary times.

“The issue isn’t just access to preschool — we need very high-quality programs. Those are programs which are not cheap. Unless the programs are very high-quality, we’re not going to get to where we want to go.” — David Sciarra

Nationwide, 25 percent of 4-year-olds and 4 percent of 3-year-olds attend state-funded preschool programs, Sciarra said, and state offerings vary widely, with only Oklahoma offering universal preschool. New Jersey’s state-funded initiative, which currently enrolls 43,000 children, integrates the preschool offerings of public schools, community child care providers and local branches of the

federal Head Start program. Sciarra argued that similar coordination needs to occur at the federal level — and federal official Rudisill said such an effort is already beginning — if the country is to move toward ensuring that every low-income child has access to high-quality preschool. “The United States has a very long way to go,” Sciarra said. “This needs to be a national movement. We need a national commitment that every state is going to move in this direction.”

Reaching out to parents

In the preschool years as well as in the many years of schooling that follow, involving parents in their children’s education can be a powerful way to bridge the gap between home and school and, eventually, to improve student achievement, conference speakers said. In its next budget, the Obama administration plans to double the appropriation for parental involvement programs to \$270 million, said Meléndez de Santa Ana, the deputy education secretary, and states will be encouraged to use another \$145 million in federal money to award competitive grants to promising parent-involvement initiatives.

To further stimulate new thinking, the education department has sponsored online seminars and a policy forum designed to show schools and communities how to integrate parent-involvement programs into reform efforts, rather than viewing them in isolation. In the past, parent involvement “has not been used strategically to impact student outcomes,” said conference speaker **Anna Hinton**, an official in the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement. “Educators have looked at family engagement programs as disconnected from instructional practice.” Yet, research shows that children with involved parents are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to continue their educations after graduation, said conference speaker **Eugene Garcia**, an Arizona State University vice president. “If families are

engaged, particularly Latino families, we do see those achievement gains,” Garcia said.

Successful early childhood education programs have learned this lesson; New Jersey, for example, requires state-funded preschools to budget money for family-involvement staff, Sciarra said. In good programs, “it’s not that the family is a sort of afterthought,” said speaker **Jacqueline Jones**, Senior Advisor for Early Learning in the U.S. Department of Education. “This is a key component of the child’s success. These are key constituents.” The federal Head Start early-childhood program built in extensive parental participation from its beginnings 45 years ago, with local programs required to give parents a role in budget and staffing decisions. “The nature of the involvement is categorically different than any other human services program I’ve encountered,” said conference speaker **Amanda Bryans**, a Head Start official in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Educators sometimes claim that low-income parents are unwilling to get involved in their children’s schools — but parents just like them helped run the local Head Start program she once headed, Bryans said. “It isn’t that these were unique parents, or that they had it all together and other low-income parents don’t,” she said. “We had set up a different kind of relationship with them that included them as equal partners.”

“It’s not that the family is a sort of afterthought. This is a key component of the child’s success. These are key constituents.” — Jacqueline Jones

But the schools children attend once they finish preschool are not always well-equipped to reach out to parents, conference speakers said, especially parents who belong to minority groups. Language differences and logistical issues, such as inflexible scheduling and a lack of transportation, can get in the way of school involvement, speakers said. For Native Americans, formal education was

historically a tool of forced assimilation, said speaker **John W. Tippeconnic III**, Director of American Indian Studies at Arizona State University, and that legacy still shadows the relationship between schools and parents. “Education was used as a tool to change the American Indian, to make them into something that they were not,” Tippeconnic said. “Initially, parents were not involved in the schools — in fact, they were not welcome in schools. It’s a long-standing issue that we struggle with today.” Some Latino parents also may have deeper fears, Garcia said. “You think families are going to be anxious to be participating in schools when they feel that they might in fact be turned in, essentially, as a function of their immigration status?” he asked. “It’s a real issue in places like Arizona.”

“Education was used as a tool to change the American Indian, to make them into something that they were not. Initially, parents were not involved in the schools — in fact, they were not welcome in schools. It’s a long-standing issue that we struggle with today.” — John W. Tippeconnic III

Parents Step Ahead, the parent-involvement program launched in 2006 by **Lupita Colmenero**, the publisher of a Spanish-language newspaper in Dallas, directly addresses many of the obstacles that sometimes keep parents from connecting with their children’s schools. The program, which now reaches four Texas cities, brings parents into the schools for seminars on everything from test-taking skills to gang awareness, drawing participants with free food, free child care and raffles featuring donated computers as prizes. Fifty-four percent of the parents who attend have no more than a high school education themselves, said Colmenero, a conference speaker; for them, the seminars are an education in working with schools to help their children succeed. And the schools are receptive, she said: When Parents Step Ahead first asked teachers to telephone hard-to-reach parents and invite them to one of its seminars, 75 teachers volunteered. “The

schools are already so overwhelmed with what they have to do,” Colmenero said. “But when you come to them with an idea and with a plan and with a proposal, they will be responsive.”

“You think families are going to be anxious to be participating in schools when they feel that they might in fact be turned in, essentially, as a function of their immigration status? It’s a real issue in places like Arizona.” — Eugene Garcia

Many communities, many models

Even promising ideas for strengthening families or connecting home and school face challenges that confront social programs everywhere, conference speakers said: designing programs that are culturally sensitive and that can show results.

Cultural awareness is a necessary ingredient for programs that seek to intervene in as personal an area as family life, conference speakers said. In some communities, the extended family plays an important role in children’s lives, and, to be successful, outreach programs may have to connect with grandparents, aunts and uncles. Among Latinos, “it is not mother or father engagement — it is family engagement,” said Arizona State’s Garcia. Minority communities are also not monolithic, speakers emphasized. Latinos differ by national origin; Native Americans represent hundreds of different tribes. “It’s not enough to just have one model that works,” said Day, of the National Black Child Development Institute. “It’s critical that we have many models that work in many communities.”

Successful Family Engagement Strategies for Immigrant Families

- Initiatives should be carried out in the families’ home language
- Programs should be community based
 - Families should be consulted when creating programs intended for their use
 - When possible, programs should be facilitated by members of the community
- Information about schools and programs, leadership and decision-making power needs to be shared with parents

Source: Eugene Garcia.

Cultural sensitivity takes different forms, conference speakers made clear. Sometimes, cultural sensitivity can be expressed through an institutional commitment — the federal marriage-promotion initiative spawned programs targeted specifically at African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian and Pacific Islanders, HHS official Dawson said. Sometimes, cultural sensitivity means avoiding *faux pas* — for example, when Parents Step Ahead offered a seminar at a Texas school with many Muslim families, the menu was adjusted to avoid problematic foods, Colmenero said.

“The schools are already so overwhelmed with what they have to do. But when you come to them with an idea and with a plan and with a proposal, they will be responsive.” — Lupita Colmenero

And sometimes cultural sensitivity means designing curricula that will appeal to a particular constituency. One after-school program in the Bronx built on Dominican parents’ strong desire to connect their children to family roots by designing an environmental science project

that traced the migration of a small bird, Bicknell's thrush, from upstate New York to the Dominican Republic, said conference participant **Elba Montalvo**, Executive Director of the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families. "By listening to parents and incorporating their cultural traditions in the classroom," Montalvo said, "we give parents the opportunity to be promoted to their rightful place as an asset to their child's education."

"By listening to parents and incorporating their cultural traditions in the classroom, we give parents the opportunity to be promoted to their rightful place as an asset to their child's education."

— *Elba Montalvo*

If closing the academic achievement gap is the ultimate goal, programs must demonstrate not only that they strengthen families, but also that they affect children's school success. In the federal government's new home-visiting program, funding will flow only to programs that can show effectiveness in randomized, controlled trials, said Columbia's Brooks-Gunn; only the best such programs affect children's school achievement, she added. To maintain support for the significant investment that high-quality preschool programs require, such programs should be rigorously evaluated, so that the most promising practices can be scaled up, said Sciarra, of the New Jersey Education Law Center. "Invest in what works," Montalvo urged. "Let's not waste money on programs just because the people that run them are politically connected."

Sometimes, however, research on what works can be sparse, speakers said. Because American Indians constitute such a small minority — 4 million people, or 1.4 percent of the American population — they are often overlooked, Arizona State's Tippeconnic said. "We have a lot of narratives from educators and parents about what is going on and what they feel works, but we don't have the

empirical evidence to show what really works," he said. "We're often left out of national studies or national data banks." Even when research exists, effectiveness can be a complicated metric when the ultimate goal — closing the student-achievement gap — is many steps removed from the immediate intervention. Research on Early Head Start, a federal program aimed at infants and toddlers, shows "sustained effects on children's behavior and attention, and on parenting, but not on school achievement scores," Brooks-Gunn said. "So the question is, why are we getting a nice pattern for everything but the achievement scores?" Nor are test scores always the sole criterion of achievement. Latino parents "don't just want their kids to learn to read and write and do mathematics," said Arizona State's Garcia. "They want them to be good people."

Complex conundrums

As they assess the condition of family life and seek ways to strengthen the homes from which children come, both researchers and advocates face a complicated question: Does the plight of families stem from problematic individual behavior — bearing children out of wedlock, abusing drugs, dropping out of school — or from larger social forces that limit and shape the choices individuals can make? The answer, conference speakers said, is both. Understood in its broadest sense, the achievement gap means not only the test-score differences dividing low-income minority children from their wealthier White peers, said Gadsden of the University of Pennsylvania, but also the differences in the opportunities available to the disadvantaged. "We have work to do in terms of our personal lives and behaviors, but we also know those structural issues are deeply, deeply troubling," said Dawson, of the Health and Human Services Department. "When we talk to young women about marriage, they say, 'Where are the men?' Well, the men are in prison. These are very complex issues."

“We have work to do in terms of our personal lives and behaviors, but we also know these structural issues are deeply, deeply troubling. When we talk to young women about marriage, they say, ‘Where are the men?’ Well, the men are in prison. These are very complex issues.” — Diann Dawson

The central conundrum is the complicated intertwining of education, income, childbearing and race, conference speakers said. The poor are disproportionately people of color, and they often have little education. They bear children out of wedlock more often than do the wealthier and better educated, and those children do less well in school, putting them at risk of perpetuating the cycle of poverty into another generation. In his famous 1966 report on educational opportunity, sociologist James Coleman “got it right when he said much of the problem is in the families and in the neighborhoods,” said historian Patterson. “In other words, government can’t do it. Government can’t stop people from having babies.”

“Government can’t do it. Government can’t stop people from having babies.” — James Patterson

Other conference speakers, however, emphasized the role that decades of social and economic change have played in families’ lives. In the past 50 years, the gap between the family incomes of the least educated and the best educated has more than doubled, said Brooks-Gunn of Columbia. When a family is poor, the father’s lack of job skills is often an important reason why, Gadsden said, yet employment alone is not a panacea. Low-wage jobs cannot lift single mothers with little education above the poverty line, Brooks-Gunn said, and their children’s school achievement improves only if government subsidies supplement their earnings. School conditions, too, can further exacerbate inequalities. Latino children, for example, suffer under unusually poor educational

conditions, Garcia said, attending schools that are overcrowded, segregated and staffed by underqualified teachers.

“We want to help parents understand how to shape families, so they can better support the optimal development of the young. But the other side of that intervention has got to be a political/economic one that enables families to discharge their function.” — Edmund W. Gordon

Such social conditions call not for changes in individual behavior but for collective action, psychologist Gordon said. “We want to help parents understand how to shape families, so they can better support the optimal development of the young,” Gordon said. “But the other side of that intervention has got to be a political/economic one that enables families to discharge their function.”

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training, high-quality early childhood education, efforts to involve parents in schools — promises a way out of this dilemma, though not all such programs produce the results they promise. Meanwhile, scholars and advocates wrestle with the complicated question of whether families’ struggles stem from the problematic behavior of individuals, or from larger social, political and economic forces beyond their control.

The challenge of helping families prepare their children for school success was the subject of “The Family: America’s Smallest School,” the 14th in ETS’s series of “Addressing Achievement Gaps” symposia, launched in 2003. The conference was held October 18, 2010, in Washington, D.C., and featured presentations by 15 academics, advocates and government officials. Conference co-conveners included the Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University, the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, the



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Director: Richard J. Coley

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National Black Child Development Institute, and the National Center for Children & Families at Teachers College of Columbia University.

Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana, Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education, gave the luncheon address, and introductory remarks were delivered by **Carol Brunson Day**, President of the National Black Child Development Institute; ETS President **Kurt M. Landgraf**; and **Elba Montalvo**, Executive Director of the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families. Sessions were moderated by ETS Postdoctoral Fellow **Donnell Butler**; **Wade Henderson**, President of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and the Leadership Conference Education Fund and ETS Board of Trustees member; ETS Senior

Vice President **Ida Lawrence**; ETS Executive Vice President **Walt MacDonald**; ETS Senior Vice President **Michael T. Nettles**; ETS Board of Trustees Chair **Piedad F. Robertson**; and Stanford University Education Professor and ETS Board of Trustees member **Guadalupe Valdés**.

The conference included sessions on the following topics:

- the “Fragile Families” study and its implications for education;
- research and practice in early childhood education, fatherhood education and parental involvement in schools;
- federal efforts at marriage promotion;
- federal efforts to involve families in schools.

More information about the conference, including PowerPoint presentations, is available from http://www.ets.org/sponsored_events/achievement_gap/.