Student Achievement Beyond the Classroom:

Engaging Families and Communities

by Jane Best and Allison Dunlap

Family and community involvement is consistently recognized as an important factor in cultivating success for all students. Indeed, decades of research have consistently demonstrated that family engagement in a child's education is strongly associated with positive student outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Au, 1993). Moreover, a recent analysis of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data demonstrated that this is true even across cultures and countries regardless of socio-economic circumstances (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011). In other words, research suggests that whether students are Korean or Portuguese, of high socio-economic status or low, they will see greater academic success if they have adults at home who are engaged in their education (OECD, 2011).

Despite the positive outcomes associated with family engagement, many schools and districts still struggle to cultivate meaningful relationships with community members. Moreover, the loss of federal funding for Parental Information and Resource Centers intensifies the need for states and districts to evaluate their policies related to family engagement in education. In response to the need to implement strategies to engage families in education, this brief identifies engagement issues and provides school board members and other policymakers with guidance regarding the promotion of family engagement in education.

Barriers to engagement

Some family members serve on school boards, tutor children, and volunteer in the classroom, but not all family members have the time or resources to devote to this high level of involvement. This is particularly true when economic pressures—such as the need to work multiple jobs—make attending school events impossible. Other barriers, such as speaking a language that is unknown or devalued in a school, immigration status, encountering bias, or previous negative experiences with the education system may also contribute to a family member's lack of engagement in a child's school life.

In a 2008 study conducted under the Institute for Education Sciences contract by the Regional Educational Laboratory-Central at McREL, American Indian parents reported several barriers to their engagement, including the perception of an unwelcome school environment, previous negative experience with the education system, a school's lack of cultural sensitivity, and differences in interpersonal communications styles (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008). Home-related barriers included difficulties with scheduling, transportation, childcare, and finances (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008).

Similarly, Chuukese parents with children in Guam schools reported that differences between themselves and school officials inhibited their engagement in their children's school lives; these differences included language, communication styles, and philosophical approaches to education (Stoicovy, Murphy, & Sachuo, 2011). Like American Indian parents, Chuukese parents also reported difficulties related to transportation, scheduling, and finances that hindered their ability to attend school meetings and events (Stoicovy, Murphy, & Sachuo, 2011).

These two studies examine specific examples of barriers to family engagement in a child's education. Research that examines multiple groups and regions reports similar findings: socio-economic status, previous experiences with the education system, and even health affect the degree to which family members are involved in education (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Engagement Issue	Questions for Policymakers to Consider
Understand barriers to family engagement	What are the local policies to document, analyze, and address the needs of students? Are family and community members surveyed on their involvement in their child's education and their perspectives on barriers to involvement? If so, are those surveys administered in a manner that will reach all family members (non-English speakers, those with limited reading abilities, homeless populations, etc.)? Are there groups that face special economic or cultural barriers to engagement in a particular community? If so, are there policies that require creating and implementing plans to reach these groups? Do teachers and school leaders receive the information they need to understand potential barriers to family engagement in a student's education?

Strategies for overcoming barriers and effectively engaging families

Despite the many barriers to family engagement in a child's education, research demonstrates that regardless of their socio-economic status, parents are interested in their children's academic success, and there are numerous, evidence-based strategies for overcoming barriers to family engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). According to a National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools literature review, systemic approaches to family engagement produce better results for students and their communities than do approaches that are irregular (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). The authors of this research suggest that successful systems of family involvement work to promote "a culture of continuous learning in the home and at school" (Ferguson et al., 2008, p. 17) by collaborating with various stakeholders, creating policies that support the needs of all, and providing "school-, home-, and community-based resources" (Ferguson et al., 2008, p. 18).

In addition to fostering productive relationships with all stakeholders, schools that successfully engage diverse families also promote partnership and power-sharing among those stakeholders (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Additionally, these schools place a strong emphasis on understanding and addressing class and cultural differences (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

This research serves as a starting point for communities seeking to improve upon family engagement. However, individual schools will encounter unique challenges and opportunities as a result of their local context, and such challenges and opportunities will undoubtedly drive their policies. The following examples represent four different approaches:

1. **Family Leadership:** Several organizations emphasize the importance of training the adults in children's lives to be proactive teachers and advocates. Established by the Connecticut General Assembly in 2001, the Parent Trust Fund, for example, offers a variety of programs for parents designed to increase their leadership skills as they work to promote the well-being of their children (Connecticut Commission on Children, 2011). These programs include a 20-week training session called the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) (Connecticut Commission on Children, 2011). According to a University of New Hampshire study, PLTI graduates reported increases in their self-confidence, public advocacy and speaking activities, and levels of participation in community organizing activities, among other benefits (Solloway & Girouard, 2004). Like Connecticut's PLTI, Kentucky's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (CIPL) trains Kentucky parents, known as "Fellows," to advocate for improved schools (Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, 2010). In their evaluation of CIPL, Wilson and Corbett (2008) found that CIPL Fellows "significantly increased their knowledge about schools and school reform, built their confidence to work in those settings, and expanded their willingness to act for the betterment of all students" (p. 28).

2. **Early Childhood Education:** Given the abundance of research supporting the value of early childhood education, some family engagement programs focus on family engagement in early childhood education. With 141 sites in 23 states and the District of Columbia, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) promotes parent involvement in early childhood education by offering parents information, resources, and training designed to help them promote their children's educational success from an early age (HIPPY USA, 2012). Similarly, Project EAGLE Community Programs of the University of Kansas Medical Center uses a Response to Intervention approach to promote the health and well-being of young, at-risk children (University of Kansas, 2012). Starting from pregnancy, Project EAGLE works with parents to help them become their child's first teacher as they learn about their child's developmental needs (University of Kansas, 2012).

3. **Specific Populations:** Schools and districts in the Pacific Region tend to have student populations characterized by significant ethnic and linguistic diversity. To address such diversity, the Pacific Islands School Community Parent Liaison (PISCPL) project used various strategies tailored to Pacific Region contexts in an effort to increase Pacific Islander family engagement in education. These included the creation of parent reading tutor programs, social service supports, a parent's Fono (biweekly parent meetings in schools), a Samoan/Pacific Islands Parents' Association, Tagata Pasifika (a group composed of parents and others who work to raise cultural awareness in schools through Pacific Island culture celebrations and other events), a commitment to making cultural icons more visible in schools, home visits, and a community liaison coordinator to manage these activities and bring communities together (Gorinski, 2005). An independent study of this program found that the most successful participating school "had the widest range of initiatives, with robust systems in place to implement them" and that the community liaison coordinator was essential to the program's success (Gorinski, 2005, p. 23).

4. **Whole Communities:** In a literature review conducted for the Stupski Foundation, McREL researchers reviewed research on student supports, including comprehensive approaches to student achievement. They found that "systemic, family-centered, collaborative, and culturally appropriate approaches to student support services" produce positive results, particularly for students who live in poverty (Moore, Rease, & Barker, 2009, p. 4). These comprehensive approaches reach their peak with the Full-Service Community School model "wherein a public school building serves as a neighborhood hub" in which

"activities are geared towards both academic achievement and positive youth development" and "family support services (child-rearing, employment, housing, immigration) as well as medical, mental health, and dental services are available on site" (Moore, Rease, & Barker, 2009, p. 23). Although this model is likely to require the most resources, the Full-Service Community School is gaining popularity with initiatives such as the Harlem Children's Zone and the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods program.

Engagement Issue	Questions for Policymakers to Consider
Build relationships and foster partnerships among all stakeholders	What policies are in place for engaging families beyond those addressed in No Child Left Behind?
	Are there communication and dissemination methods available to educators and community members? Are these customized to meet the needs of a variety of community members? Can community members from different cultures and backgrounds access these communication channels?
	Are there opportunities for community members to participate in school-related activities? In what ways are family members encouraged to participate? Are policies in place to ensure that all groups have equal access to opportunities to participate in school and community activities?
	Do schools have established relationships with a variety of community organizations (e.g., youth organizations, faith-based groups, local clubs, community centers, etc.) to gain access to a wide range of community members?
	Are there rewards or recognition for communities that demonstrate success in building relationships and fostering partnerships?
Provide resources to families and community members	Are there local policies in place to respond to the needs of families and community members?
	Are schools addressing barriers to family engagement related to transportation, scheduling, communication, and child care?
	Do schools offer parent or family resource centers?
	Are community members offered information or special training to help them participate in their children's education (e.g., literacy classes; leadership training; workshops; information on local, state, and federal issues related to education)?

Support educator needs	Are there policies in place to provide educators with the time and resources they need to build productive relationships with multiple stakeholders?
	Do preparation programs or certification requirements include training that addresses family engagement? Cultural competency?
	Are there professional development opportunities that allow educators to gain skills related to family engagement?
	Are there professional development opportunities that allow educators to gain skills related to cultural competency? Are such opportunities customized for local contexts?
	Are educators rewarded for successfully engaging a variety of community members in education?

Recommendations

Because an abundance of research demonstrates the positive outcomes associated with family involvement in education, school board members and other policymakers should ensure that their policies promote meaningful rather than token family engagement. To begin evaluating the efficacy of family engagement policies in schools and communities, policymakers might consider the following issues:

Barriers to family engagement

- Policies on needs-sensing activities related to family engagement
- Reporting requirements related to those needs-sensing activities
- Policies related to identifying and reaching groups who face special economic or cultural barriers to engagement
- Resources offered to educators to help them understand potential barriers to family engagement in education

Relationships and partnerships among stakeholders

- Types of communication channels available to community members and how those communication channels relate to the specific needs of community members
- Opportunities available to family members to participate in school and district activities and whether those opportunities accommodate all groups
- School and district outreach activities related to reaching a variety of community organizations
- Policies related to fostering a welcoming environment in schools
- Current policies regarding rewards for schools and districts that achieve successful and meaningful family engagement

Resources for families and community members

- Current policies designed to address the needs of families and community members
- Policies related to addressing barriers to engagement such as transportation, scheduling, communication, and child care

- The presence of family or parent resource centers in schools
- The presence of special training and other resources designed to help family members participate in a child's education

Support for educators

- The presence of policies to ensure that educators have the time and resources to develop productive relationships with multiple stakeholders
- The incorporation of family engagement and cultural competency requirements in education preparation programs
- The presence of professional development opportunities related to family engagement and cultural competency
- The presence of policies related to rewards for educators who demonstrate success in engaging a variety of stakeholders in education

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