

Ensuring That Family Engagement Initiatives Are Successful, Sustainable, and Scalable

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Lessons learned from implementing i3 family engagement initiatives reveal the critical elements of successful, sustainable, and scalable family engagement programs.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education launched the highly competitive Investing in Innovation (i3) initiative.¹ Since its launch, the i3 program has invested \$1.3 billion in 157 projects (Klein & Sparks 2016). School districts and nonprofit partners nationwide have competed for coveted funds to *develop* a new program, *validate* an existing program with some evidence of success, or *scale up* a program backed by ample evidence.

When “parent and family engagement” became an absolute priority for the i3 competition in 2012, family engagement proponents rejoiced. School systems tend to view family engagement as peripheral, rather than integral, to instruction and curriculum. But, finally, here was an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of meaningful family engagement! I could not wait to take on this charge in my role as project lead for the external evaluation of an i3 grant in Central Falls, Rhode Island, to be conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Very quickly, however, it became clear to the community of family engagement grantees that i3 was not going to be the panacea for the field’s struggles to prove itself worthy. I had the honor of meeting i3 family engagement grantees throughout the country at annual convenings, where we lamented together how the short duration of implementation time (typically two to three years) and emphasis on evaluating student outcomes was a mismatch with the slow, patient, and intensely relational work of family engagement. As Soo Hong (2011) writes, family engagement is not a program, but rather a “process that seeks to change the institution one relationship at a time” (p. 50).

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¹ For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

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In the United States, more than 80 percent of public school teachers and principals are White, while half of public school students are of color (Goldring, Gray & Bitterman 2013; U.S. Department of Education 2013). Even when educators and families share the same racial background, differences in culture, class, and immigration history often exacerbate tensions and misunderstandings. In this context, family engagement is about so much more than parent-teacher conferences and homework support. Family engagement is about eroding racism, classism, sexism, and xenophobia and tinkering toward relationships that are rooted in trust and respect for human dignity.

Building such relationships across race, class, language, and culture is one of the hardest challenges for humankind. And changing relationships is a daunting enough challenge when the goal is to change the culture of a single school, but 13 grantees were tasked with changing whole districts, or in some cases, multiple districts across multiple states!

This issue of *VUE* provides an opportunity for 13 grantees to share the real story of what it takes to successfully implement and scale up a family engagement initiative across schools, districts, and states. We gave the authors a fairly general prompt: “What lessons can we learn from 13 grants about how to build the right conditions for family engagement initiatives to flourish?” Interestingly, each author or pair of authors focused on the people – and the relationships among those *people* – that made their work possible.

This outcome supports the widely used Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner 2013), and it also challenges the field to recognize that family engagement requires building the capacities of *all* members of schools and communities – superintendents, principals, teachers, school staff, family engagement liaisons, families, students, and community partner staff – to collaborate across lines of difference.

Together, the articles in this issue have important implications for family engagement practitioners, funders, and policy-makers. Among many other critical lessons, they imply that successful, sustainable, and scalable family engagement initiatives require:

- *Sufficient time and human and financial resources for:*
 - *planning*, including developing trust and a shared definition and vision for family engagement. Technical assistance providers should frontload support during the planning phase.
 - *flexible implementation*, including the freedom to reflect and change course in response to evolving needs and priorities of families, communities, and schools. Changing course does not indicate dysfunction, but rather a tone of reflection and responsiveness.
 - *capacity building* of all stakeholders – families, young people, teachers, program staff, principals, superintendents – to build relationships rooted in trust and respect.
- *Cultural brokers* – the individuals who build bridges between families and educators on a daily basis – who have access to professional development, supportive supervision, and a professional learning community.
- *Physical spaces* for families to call their own, within or outside of schools.

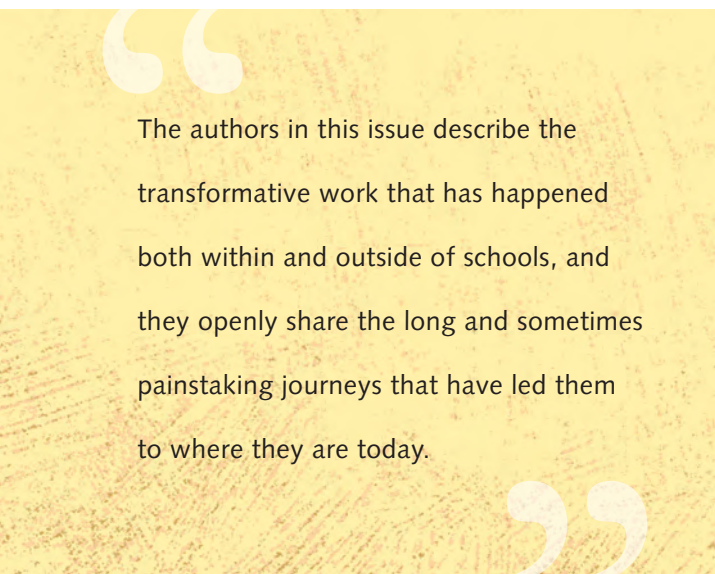
- *Multi-layered evaluations* that examine the degree to which initiatives have strengthened individuals, communities, and institutions, not just student outcomes.

The authors in this issue – program directors and coordinators, district administrators, evaluators, and youth leaders – represent a diverse array of experiences. They offer examples of implementing a family engagement initiative in both urban and rural areas from coast to coast and in between. They highlight the experiences of both immigrants and long-time neighborhood residents. They describe the transformative work that has happened both within and outside of schools, and they openly share the long and sometimes painstaking journeys that have led them to where they are today.

Patricia Martinez of the Central Falls School District and Joshua Wizer-Vecchi of Children’s Friend describe how the former and current superintendent of Central Falls set the tone for family engagement to flourish in the *We Are A Village* grant through their open door policies and visibility in the community. This tone created the conditions that allowed parent rooms, coffee hours, and parent leadership to flourish in Head Start centers and elementary schools.

Monique Fletcher, i3 project director of the Parents as Educators grant at the Children’s Aid Society in New York City, describes how deliberate team building and capacity building with her staff of school-based parent engagement coordinators had a powerful trickle-down effect on families and educators. She demonstrates how these staff have built trust, which she sees as the foundation for successful implementation.

Maria Quezada, i3 project director of the Project 2Inspire grant awarded to the California Association for Bilingual Education, discusses her multi-decade journey of refining a parent leadership program and the challenges of generating institutional support for parent leadership within schools. She writes about how the i3 grant has supported principal capacity building for family engagement in their work in Southern California schools.



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Aurelio Montemayor of the Intercultural Development Research Association and Nancy Chavkin, the i3 grant’s external evaluator, demonstrate how the sustainability of the *PTA Comunitario* initiative in rural communities of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas has depended on *liderazgo familiar intergeneracional* – intergenerational family leadership. They illustrate the powerful impact of youth involvement, critical dialogue, and collective action. Lupita Perez contributes a Perspective describing her experience as a youth leader and current staff member of ARISE, a partner organization supporting the PTA comunitario.

Momo Hayakawa and Arthur Reynolds of the University of Minnesota describe the Midwest expansion of the Child-Parent Center Pre-K to Third Grade program, a whole-school reform effort that provides comprehensive educational and family-support services to low-income families from preschool to third grade. The authors attribute their successes in scaling up their model to a flexible, menu-based system of supports and a dedicated collaborative leadership team.

Susan Smetzer-Anderson and Jackie Roessler of the University of Wisconsin openly share the challenges of implementing the internationally known and respected Families and Schools Together (FAST) program in the distressed Philadelphia school district. The authors share the critical importance – from the perspective of community outsiders – of hearing from parents and working with school staff to effectively implement the program. In a Q&A Perspective, Rob Lairmore, the lead FAST quality control manager at Turning Points for Children in Philadelphia, provides on-the-ground advice about what it takes to truly partner with schools and communities.

In contrast to the divisiveness that surrounds us, each of the articles in this issue illustrates how family engagement initiatives in poor communities of color are slowly shaping microcosms of what democracy should look like everywhere. These “micro-democracies” are evident when a White superintendent in Central Falls, Rhode Island, walks up to the door of an immigrant family from Colombia to welcome the family to the school district; when parents and young people gather together in a *comunitario* in South Texas to create a more equitable future for young people; when 150 families celebrate African culture at a public school event planned by African immigrant families in their new South Bronx community.

This work gives me hope for a world where people care about one another, understand the interconnectedness of their fate, and unite for a more just future. What could be a more important feat for our public education system?

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