

# Meeting National Expectations for Partnering with Families

*The vast majority of state standards do not align with family involvement guidelines from national organizations. This article introduces six national organizations, presents key themes resulting from an analysis of standards, and proposes ideas for those interested in infusing their programs with nationally recognized best practices for family involvement*

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The field of early childhood education supports the notions that early childhood programs need the active support of families and that the school and the home are the most critical environments impacting children's development (Mart, Dusenbury, & Weissberg, 2011). These ideas are consistent with the extant literature on family involvement and provide the foundation for the expectations and guidelines contained in standards developed by six national organizations and forums for parent and family involvement.

A recent study (Walsh, Sánchez, Lee, Casillas, & Hansen, 2016) analyzed the expectations and guidelines contained in the national standards vis à vis 51 sets of state-level early learning and development standards for preschool children. This study determined that the vast majority of state standards examined did not align with family involvement guidelines from the national organizations. In the cases where state standards did align with the national guidelines, the state standards made reference to family concepts in a peripheral fashion – outside the statements describing what students are supposed to know and be able to do. The present article briefly introduces the six national organizations Walsh et al. (2016) analyzed, presents key themes that resulted from this analysis, and proposes ideas for implementation for those interested in infusing their programs with nationally recognized best practices for family involvement practices. Next, we introduce the national organizations and forums whose guidelines for family involvement provided the basis for Walsh et al.'s analysis of state-level standards for early learning and development.

## The Six National Organizations & Forums

### Family Support America's Guidelines for Family Support Practice

This organization is dedicated to providing the information, support, and connections that families need. In the early 1990s, a group of family support leaders convened to discuss a conceptual framework for training in family support. At their request, Family Support America (then called the Family Resource Coalition) undertook the task of defining best practices in family support programs. This project enlisted extensive participation from local family support practitioners from the U.S. and Canada. More than 350 programs comprising 2000 people participated in facilitated focus-groups for staff and parents participating in the programs. The analyzed focus-group data became the basis of the *Guidelines for Family Support Practice* (Family Support America, 2001), which have benefited from the collaboration of a wide array of practitioners, family participants in programs, scholars, and advocates of family support.

### Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP, Processes of Family Involvement and Young Children's Outcomes)<sup>1</sup>

HFRP was founded in 1983 and its mission is to promote more effective educational practices, programs, and policies for disadvantaged children and youth through the generation, publication, and dissemination of research. HFRP's basic belief is that for all children to be successful from birth through adolescence, mul-

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<sup>1</sup> As of January 2017, The Harvard Family Research Project is no longer affiliated with Harvard University. It is called Global Family Research Project.

multiple learning supports beyond the school should be linked to work in tandem towards consistent learning and developmental outcomes (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006).

### The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC's) Guidelines for Establishing Reciprocal Relationships with Families

The purpose of the current NAEYC position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8 is to promote excellence in early childhood education by providing a framework for best practices. The position statement's fifth guideline is devoted to establishing reciprocal relationships with families (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2009).

### NAEYC's Principles for Effective Family Engagement

In 2010, NAEYC—in collaboration with Pre-K Now—endorsed key principles of family engagement (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; NAEYC, 2010).

### Head Start's Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework

The PFCE Framework was developed in partnership with programs, families, experts, and the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. It provides programs with an organizational guide for implementing relevant Head Start Program Performance Standards. The Framework is a research-based approach to program change with a focus on parent and family engagement and children's learning development (U.S. Depart-

ment of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011).

**Early childhood programs need the active support of families.**

### National Parent Teacher Association's (PTA) Standards for Family-School Partnerships

Drawing on the research findings from Henderson and Mapp (2002), the PTA updated their former standards, titled *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs*, to improve parent and community involvement practices. The updated National Standards, now titled *National Standards for Family-School Partnerships*, focus on what parents, schools, and communities can do together to support student success (National Parent Teacher Association, 2014).

### Family Involvement Expectations from Six National Organizations

National standards contain high-quality principles or guidelines aimed to improve the condition of education by raising the bar for education stakeholders. Although states usually do not adopt national standards in their entirety, many states use these standards to inform the process of developing their own (Mart et al., 2011). Walsh et al. analyzed the principles, guidelines, and standards for family involvement/partnerships previously

developed by six national organizations and forums with the purpose of creating a framework for the analysis of early learning and development standards from 51 states. Walsh et al.'s analytical framework consisted of seven overarching themes. These themes constituted the coding categories of the instrument used to analyze state-level standards, and these categories represented main themes related to the field's expectations of family engagement, involvement, and family-school partnerships in early childhood education according to the six national sources examined (Walsh et al., 2016).

We now present the key themes (coding categories) derived from Walsh et al.'s analysis. Under these themes, which we present in the form of *recommendations*, we share ideas for implementation for schools and centers dedicated to serving young children.

## Key Themes/ Recommendations

### Recommendation 1: Incorporate families'/parents' home language

The importance of incorporating families'/parents' home language into programs serving young learners is a guideline stressed across the national principles and guidelines examined. Validating families' native language is a way to involve parents by acknowledging and celebrating their cultural and linguistic identity (De Gaetano, 2007). In addition, the use of families' preferred language allows for meaningful, two-way, school-home communication. The practices below can help school personnel validate families' language.

**Take a language course.** Becoming proficient in a second language



Photo courtesy of SECA Family Engagement Contest/Submitted by Bright Beginnings/Siloam Springs, AR

This early childhood program “welcomes families and friends to gather here.”

takes a long time, but one does not need to be fully proficient in a second language to start communicating in it. Fundamental second language courses allow learning basic communication skills and can take the form of an online learning tool (such as Mango Languages available at <https://www.mangolanguages.com/>, whose focus is oral proficiency in over 70 languages) or a face-to-face experience (such as tutoring sessions where the tutor and student take turns as teacher and learner) (Sánchez, 2015).

**Use proverbs in the home language.** Two obstacles facing many Hispanic Spanish-speaking communities are school-home language barriers as well as families’ need of familiarity with U.S. school practices and policies. One possible way to counter these obstacles in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way may be the use of *dichos* or proverbs/folk sayings in the Spanish language (Sánchez, 2009). *Dichos*, or popular sayings, may prove effective in enhancing communication between the school and Spanish-speaking

families since they are a key component of the Hispanic oral culture and Spanish language discourse. *Dichos* are deemed as culturally and linguistically appropriate tools for family involvement. Rooted in oral tradition, *dichos* are commonly used by Spanish-speaking people to express their values, attitudes, and perceptions (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). Given their cultural and linguistic relevance among Spanish speakers, and their potential to impact individuals’ belief systems, *dichos* may also influence the ways parents bring up a child, as well as families’ style of communication and their thoughts about formal education (Sánchez, 2015).

*Dichos* can be used as slogans or mottos to encourage behaviors conducive to family involvement (Sánchez et al., 2010). Teachers, administrators, and other school staff can incorporate the slogans or mottos to communicate with families in settings where Spanish is spoken. For example, if teachers wish to partner with parents in the education of their children, one *dicho*

to help persuade parents to become involved is “*Dos cabezas piensan mejor que una.*” which means “*Two minds are better than one.*” The *dicho* could be used to convey the idea that neither the school nor the home will help children succeed when working in isolation. Another helpful *dicho* that could help persuade families to join efforts with the school is “*En la unión está la fuerza.*” which means “*In unity, there is strength.*” This *dicho* also conveys the idea that good outcomes are achieved when the school and the home work in tandem to help children succeed. Schools can integrate families’ *dichos* into flyers, e-mails, posters, websites, and other methods of communication. Also, *dichos* can be used as opening remarks at teacher-parent conferences or meetings.

In settings where Spanish is not commonly used, it is recommended that teachers and school staff integrate *dichos* into their communication efforts with families; however, it is critical that *dichos* be used appropriately and in a meaningful way. Native speakers of Spanish can assist school staff adapt the use of *dichos* when communicating with parents. A popular bilingual resource book that can provide non-Spanish-speaking teachers and school staff basic guidance on the use of *dichos* is titled *101 Spanish Proverbs* (Aparicio, 2009).

## Recommendation 2: Engage in regular, meaningful, two-way communication with families

The quantity and quality of efforts to communicate with and engage families predict the level of family involvement in school (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). National principles and guidelines for school-family communication stress the impor-

tance of the regular nature of this interaction, as well as its significance and bi-directionality (from school to home and from home to school) (National PTA, 2014; NAEYC, 2009).

Unless there is evidence of a two-way home/school communication that is frequent and sustained throughout the school year every year, no school could claim that it succeeds in involving families or that it can relate well to families' languages and cultures (Sánchez, 2015). Family involvement is often a difficult goal to achieve. Differences between minority family and school cultures frequently become barriers that hinder effective communication and prevent schools and families from developing successful partnerships (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004). In addition to school and home language barriers, other obstacles often include families' contextual factors, families' and schools' cultural beliefs with respect to the roles of parents and schools, families' lack of familiarity with U.S. school practices, policies, children's academics including the subject matter of homework, and families' exclusion and discrimination by educational staff or organizations (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005b). Although research shows that most parental involvement efforts launched by schools are directed to minority parents and families, these efforts often have a low rate of success due to the ways in which schools attempt parental and family involvement approaches (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005b). Using families' preferred ways of communication and integrating communication strategies that maximize family involvement are two practices encouraged by the published literature.

**Use families' preferred ways of communication.** Effective family

involvement strategies can be identified by asking families about the ways in which they prefer to communicate with the school. Successful strategies for minority families have included warm and positive face-to-face conversations, personalized phone calls (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004; Vazquez-Nuttall, Li, & Kaplan, 2006), and monthly parent meetings. Also, informal interactions and personal relationships with teachers have been found successful.

**Incorporate a child's home language into your program.**

**Communication strategies for maximizing family involvement.**

Trumbull and Pacheco's (2005b) guidelines for maximizing family involvement include four suggestions.

- **First**, have informal and personal interactions with families that make families feel comfortable asking questions or sharing information.
- **Second**, be flexible about scheduling conferences, meetings, and volunteer opportunities to allow for more parental responsiveness.
- **Third**, work closely with paraprofessionals and school volunteers from students' communities, as well as staff from community-based organizations, to facilitate communication and a genuine two-way understanding.
- **Fourth**, reach out to families both formally and informally.

**Recommendation 3: Encourage the formation of programs by and for the community**

Children's development and learning is deeply grounded in the context of their community (Molina, 2013), and it is the role of the community to strengthen both program and family functions, as well as to encourage optimal child development and learning (Epstein, 2011). To encourage the formation of a program by and for the community, national organizations highlight the need for programs to continually embed themselves in the community and its building process (Family Support America, 2001). It is also critical for programs to be responsive to emerging family and community issues (Family Support America, 2001) and to link families with a wide array of available services and opportunities to address families' priorities and concerns (NAEYC, 2010; National PTA, 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011). Since one cannot successfully grow that which one does not know well, perhaps the first step toward creating a program by and for the community is for school leaders and staff to get to know students' and families' cultures and communities through cultural self-immersion experiences (Sánchez, 2015).

**Immerse yourself in families' cultures.** To engage families in linguistically and culturally sensitive ways (De Gaetano, 2007), school leaders, teachers, and staff need to be familiar with the cultures of the children's families and communities. Learning about another culture is best done through direct experience with that culture and by immersing one's self in it (instead of studying the culture from afar). Schools and center staff



Photo courtesy of SECA Family Engagement Contest/Submitted by The University of Alabama Children's Program

*Opportunities to share the cultural backgrounds of families can be created by programs*

need first-hand experience with the cultures with which they aim to establish long-term, meaningful, and regular communication (Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 2006). Learning about another's culture is an inside-out process that starts by examining and re-examining one's own values and beliefs in light of the similarities and differences between one's own culture and that of the other. Immersing one's self in another culture requires engaging in experiences that will teach one about families' and community's values, customs, beliefs, and communication patterns. A good place to start a cultural immersion process may be community-based organizations, since these can help introduce families' cultures (Warren, 2005) and serve as cultural and language brokers for schools and families alike. Some examples of the ways in which school and center leaders and staff can immerse them-

selves in the community's cultures include:

- Visiting students' neighborhoods and their homes
- Learning from families when conducting home visits and talking to students' family members (grandparents, extended family members)
- Going to places where the community gathers socially, such as churches and temples
- Shopping at grocery stores within families' communities
- Watching television or listening to the radio with students and families, and
- Listening to the music grandparents, parents, and children like and asking what the lyrics to the songs mean

Once engaged in these experiences, one can reflect on the ways in which

one is culturally similar to and different from students' families and their communities. This continued reflection has the potential to promote a deeper intercultural understanding and, as a result, a solid basis for the formation of a program by the community and for the community.

A community-driven program identifies and integrates resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning development (Epstein, 2011). Program practices may include:

- Sharing information with families on resources and services related to community health, cultural, recreational, and social support, and other community programs. Information includes resource directories, and advice on how to locate and use resources and services.

- Encouraging service integration through partnerships involving school; civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies/organizations, and businesses.
- Promoting service to the community provided by families and schools (for example, recycling, art, music, and other activities for seniors and others).

### Recommendation 4: Support family advocacy and decision making

National standards and guidelines for family involvement state that programs should advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to families served (Family Support America, 2001). Practices that may assist in advocating for children and families in poverty include forming and participating in multicultural committees for family advocacy, having a system in place to identify and advise families in need, and encouraging professional development activities focused on student and family advocacy.

**Form and participate in multicultural school committees for family advocacy.** The vital role of educators' advocacy for students and

families is well documented in the literature, and is also part of teacher education standards and competencies (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005a). School leaders who are well aware of their own and teachers' roles as advocates consequently support the development of educator advocates through the creation of family advocacy committees. The committees can consist of teachers, aides, community members, administrators, and parent representatives. To get started, members can define their general goal for advocacy as well as specific objectives with corresponding tasks and benchmarks. In defining a general goal for advocacy, stakeholders should consider that efforts to strengthen collaborations among schools, families, and community-based organizations can contribute to the larger political and social efficacy of neighborhoods and communities (Warren, 2005). Advocacy committees can assist in bridging the gap between the school culture and families' cultures by promoting deeper intercultural understanding (Sánchez, 2015; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005a).

**Establish a system to identify and advise families in need.** From parent support and education to health care and financial assistance, today's school leaders, teachers,

and personnel must be knowledgeable of community resources that can assist families in need. Further, schools must find ways to make families aware of such resources and to advise families on how to access help. Effective school leader and staff advocates are well aware that all assistance to families must be communicated in the language families speak well. In the contexts of schools that offer families classes on native language literacy, English as a second language, GED, parenting, and computer literacy (Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 2006), further advocacy efforts can be built into this infrastructure. Schools that do not offer these classes to families could start their advocacy efforts through the creation of classes in areas of interest to the community.

### Recommendation 5: Foster families'/parents' active participation in the school setting

According to national standards and guidelines for family involvement in schools and centers dedicated to the education of young children, families' active participation in the life of the school is essential (NAEYC, 2009; 2010; National PTA, 2014). In these programs, it is critical that families feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are doing in class (NAEYC, 2009; National PTA, 2014). Families also share their unique knowledge and skills while they participate in parent-teacher conferences, extended class visits, and class activities (Weiss et al., 2006).

To foster families' active participation in the school setting, leaders and staff need to recognize that families' understanding of parental



Photo courtesy of SECA Family Engagement Contest/ Submitted by the University of South Florida Preschool for Creative Learning

*A multilingual literacy night can achieve multiple goals... family engagement and the advancement of child and family literacy.*

involvement may differ from the schools. As well, leaders and staff need to raise awareness among families about the ways in which the school system works.

**Recognize that families' understanding of parental involvement may differ from the school's.** Different cultural groups understand the role of parents in children's education in different ways. Culturally diverse families' beliefs and practices often differ from schools' expectations (De Gaetano, 2007). For example, many Hispanic families, especially recent immigrants from rural areas, may understand that their role is not to interfere with the school's or teacher's work. This understanding may translate into refraining from visiting the school or classroom and not expressing their opinions or asking questions of the teacher or school staff. To many Hispanic families who have not yet fully assimilated to the dominant culture, these behaviors are often synonymous with respect for and trust in the teacher's work. In some instances, however, educators will mistake these behaviors for disengagement or indifference.

School leaders and staff should find out how families view involvement, and should not assume families share the school's beliefs. Ask families how they wish to participate in their children's education, let them know what the school recommends they do to become involved, and assure them that it is appropriate—and expected—to visit, ask questions, and share their opinions about their children's schooling. Also, once you have identified how the school and family expectations differ, be flexible in terms of what you expect from families and take cues from parents and families as to what

they feel is appropriate for them in terms of their involvement in their children's education (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005b).

**Raise awareness among families about the way the school system works.** Family involvement in children's schooling is successful if it results in teachers' increased understanding of their students' families and communities, as well as families' increased understanding of how schools operate (Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 2006). Rather than assuming families know their way through the school system, school leaders and staff should investigate how much they really do know. To this end, schools should conduct informal group talks and share any vital information parents may wish to know (Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 2006).

Parents familiar with the way the school system works understand the meaning of schooling concepts such as homework, desirable reading habits, report cards, standardized tests, and the PTA. Families unaware of how the school system works may be unfamiliar with the meaning or implications of these concepts, so may need abundant information and guidance to successfully internalize new understandings of schooling (Sánchez, 2015).

**Become an  
informed advocate  
for families.**

## **Recommendation 6: Support parents/family-child relationships**

One of the main goals of early childhood education is to support parent-child relationships (NAEYC, 2009). In addition to active family/parental participation, national standards and guidelines prescribe the need for nurturing, warm, and responsive family/parent-child relationships that encourage children's positive learning and development outcomes (Weiss et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011).

According to Epstein (2011), a key to successful school, family, and community partnerships involves schools' efforts to assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. For example, families need to be aware that talking with children and exposing them to rich oral language is the basis for literacy development. Also, families' encouragement and guidance allow children to explore their world and thrive in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

Dialogues on parenting and optimal childrearing practices can be furthered by workshops/parent education classes, videos, online content, and phone messages. For example, educators can share with families a video clip of a high quality parent-child interaction alongside a low quality parent-child interaction and co-construct with parents what defines differences in quality. A good source for videos is *Ready Rosie*, available at <http://www.readyrosie.com>

## Recommendation 7: Promote the role of families/parents as teachers

Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development at home, at school, and in their communities. In addition, families and school staff have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills (NAEYC, 2010; National PTA, 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011). Educators can empower parents to support their children academically at home (Epstein, 2011) by sharing ideas on how to become involved through reading, homework, monitoring and discussing schoolwork at home, discussing time management and scheduling of curricular and extra-curricular activities, setting academic goals with children, and other curriculum-related activities and decisions. An example of a parent-involved assessment that families might consider as a starting point to set goals for the child is the *Ages and Stages Questionnaires-3* (ASQ-3; Squires & Bricker, 2009). ASQ has a reputation for being parent friendly because it offers parent education and relies on parents' vast knowledge of their children when screening for developmental milestones and delays between the ages of one month to five and a half years (Squires & Bricker, 2009). Teachers and administrators can find more information at the ASQ website ([www.agesandstages.com](http://www.agesandstages.com)) and purchase the ASQ-3 through Brookes Publishing Company.

## Closing Remarks

The early childhood education field prescribes the idea that early

childhood programs need the active support of families and that school and home are important environments impacting children's development (Mart et al., 2011). No matter how effective an early childhood program may be in connecting with families, there always is room for re-envisioning one's current family involvement practices by gauging the extent to which such practices respond to national guidelines, standards, and expectations. This article presented ideas for meeting national expectations endorsed by national organizations and forums supportive of family involvement. School leaders, teachers, and other school personnel are encouraged to reflect on their own family involvement practices and to continue their efforts to achieve solid school-family partnerships whose end goal is children's successful academic growth and social development.

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# SECA's Commitment to Play and Outdoor Learning

## A Wealth of Professional Resources



### From *Dimensions of Early Childhood* & *Dimensions Extra*

The 2013 and 2014 issues of *Dimensions of Early Childhood* and *Dimensions Extra* featured articles on the programs recognized for Exemplary Outdoor Classrooms. Each issue of the journal highlighted programs and *Dimensions Extra* provided additional resources that could be accessed to assist in developing outdoor classrooms.

Copies of these journals are archived at [http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/members\\_only.php](http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/members_only.php) for SECA members.



October 2014



June 2012

### From Our Monthly Membership E-mail Articles

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