

# Reducing Rural Literacy Inequity via Pennsylvania's Family Engagement Standards

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**Abstract:** Using the Pennsylvania Department of Education Family/Community Standards, university professors from the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford collaborated with multiple community clubs such as the Rotary and Kiwanis as well as local agencies including St. Bonaventure University on the development and implementation of a family literacy day event that assisted a rural community with increasing family literacy engagement. Seventeen community agencies/clubs and forty-two university students engaged in event coordination. Thirty-two families, including 82 children, attended. These standards aided in an efficacious first year event.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the first year experience the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford (UPB) Education Department underwent when they developed a community/family literacy event that incorporated all six of The Pennsylvania Department of Education Family/Community Standards. Through the development of partnerships with other community agencies the university education program implemented the *Pennsylvania's Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework: A Companion Guide for Families* (2019) when the Family Literacy Day (FLD) on campus event was developed. The Pennsylvania Department of Education Family/Community Standards developed a succinct framework that established not only the need for creating family/community engagement opportunities, but also provided specific guidelines when developing the FLD Event. In addition, this paper provides other university personnel with guidance on how to create and implement a similar community event in their own schools of education.

### Purpose for Family Literacy Day Event

Schools of education and community agencies are natural partners with the coordination and creation of family literacy programs. Jordaan and Mennega (2022) posit that many community members are experts in their fields and want to share their knowledge with students because they have a greater understanding of their own stakes in the educational system. Consequently, it is reasonable that community members and students should partner together for the betterment of the community. In rural communities, such as northwest

Pennsylvania where the UPB is located, family literacy events are needed to connect the child, the family, the school, and the greater community to improve family literacy engagement in the home. Due to a variety of academic challenges such as, weak community literacy skills, attracting and retaining teachers (Greco, 2007) as well as socioeconomic barriers that include increased poverty rates, increased numbers of migrant families, poorly educated parents, and an increase in single parent homes in rural communities, place-based family literacy programs that support adequate reading resources and experiences can help bridge the literacy achievement gaps (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Lester, 2012; Semke and Seridan, 2012; Smith, et al., 2008).

Research on child engagement with family literacy activities demonstrated those children had higher reading scores than children who participated in less family literacy activities (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Research indicates that parents participate in family literacy programs longer than other programs when the focus is primarily on literacy resulting in an improved attitude toward helping their child with literacy (Padak & Rasinski, 2003). When parents are provided with family literacy resources through attending community literacy events, reading skill behaviors are modeled, and literacy activities are completed in the home which resulted in increased home family literacy engagement (Swain & Cara, 2017).

The understanding that reading is a cognitive process and additionally enhanced within the sociocultural context provides support for community family literacy activities that helps minimize gaps in reading proficiency scores (Kieff, 2003; Mol & Bus, 2011; Purcell-Gates, et al. 2004). The family literacy event that will be discussed in this paper was constructed as a

place-based community event that included the FLD program and associated activities that sought to foster the family's ability to enhance young children's educational, language, and literacy development while improving the family home involvement in education – with a primary focus on the lower income, rural, marginalized families the UPB serves (Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, 2012).

### **Methodological Approach**

FLD was developed using a community based, participatory action research design. This design focused on community outreach to improve family-based literacy home engagement. The project also focused on engaging teacher candidates and other university students with providing a community event aimed at improving at home family literacy engagement. Minkler and Wallerstein (2010) created six core community-based research principles when developing a community event. These principles include the following: research is working together in a participatory way, equal cooperation in the research process, the research process is a co-learning process, the research method provides for building community capacity, the process provides participants with the opportunity to increase control over their lives, and the process maintains a balance between research and action. The researchers used these community-based principles as a basis to their study design.

### **Committee Recruitment**

The coordinator for the FLD was the Assistant Professor for Early Education at the UPB. She conducted outreach to community agencies by calling and emailing them asking if they would like to be a part of creating and implementing the first FLD event. An email list was created from those

community leaders who wanted to participate on the committee. These committee members then recommended other community agencies or leaders who would like to contribute to this literacy event.

All participants were committed to helping improve family home engagement with literacy. Professors from the UPB imbedded participating in the event in their syllabi as a course requirement. The early level professor designed FLD assignments in three of her courses to include student groupwork which consisted of developing arts, crafts, physical activities, or a read aloud activity from pre-school through middle school.

Two education clubs – one from the UPB, one from St. Bonaventure University - were asked to create a literacy activity to be done at the event. Local community clubs such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, the local libraries, and the YMCA were invited to be a part of the committee, to donate a basket for raffle, or to participate with an arts/craft or book giveaway at their display table. The coordinator for the event asked committee members for names of parents who would like to be on the committee. One of the committee members contacted two parents from the community who joined the FLD committee.

### **Student Recruitment/Engagement**

To facilitate university students' understanding of their role as an active community member through engaging in a practical community experience, university students were invited to help coordinate the event, manage, and participate in the event with developing activities and working with the families and children. Research conducted by McGrath and Erwin (2015) supported the importance of teacher candidates being involved with furthering children's literacy skills through the

development of a university-based literacy center. Through this engagement both the teacher candidates and the children gained not only more instructional time, but deeper relationships.

Similarly, FLD provided the opportunity for teacher candidates and students from other majors to collaborate with each other resulting in improved children's literacy skills while building relationships with families from the community. These relational community skills will serve the university students throughout their careers. For the UPB's Family Literacy Day, 34 UPB students gained additional knowledge about the children and families they serve in the community. As an early level course requirement at the UPB, seventeen students in the Families and Communities course were divided into small groups and then a developmental stage was assigned to them. Teams could negotiate with each other for a different developmental stage. With their team, they created a craft, art activity or a game that supported some element of literacy.

The UPB Education Club members decided which developmental stage they would address. Students searched the Internet and social media sites such as Pinterest for art, games, and craft ideas. The university students who volunteered at FLD included a variety of majors. Three teacher candidates and their advisor from the Education Club at St. Bonaventure University volunteered furthering partnership opportunities between the UPB and St. Bonaventure. Many student volunteers dressed up as a Dr. Seuss character and children got their picture taken with their favorite character.

### **Committee Meetings**

Once the interest in the FLD event was established, a one-hour weekly meeting for

the committee members was scheduled via Zoom to establish the event budget, theme, date/time, goals, activities, and participants. FLD themes were put to a vote. The theme chosen by the committee and the students from the UPB education courses was Dr. Seuss. The committee provided the contact persons for the emotional support dogs and pony. Committee members discussed how to implement Pennsylvania's *Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework: A Companion Guide for Families* while creating the event.

The committee meetings were used for planning the event as well as for identifying agencies or individuals' gifts, talents, or resources that the committee members believed would be engaging for the children. The UPB Management and Education Department allocated \$900 for the event which included such items as decorations, plastic tablecloths for all the tables, snacks, as well as the materials the students would need to carry out their literacy project at the event.

### **Display Table Reservation and Facility Approval**

Participants who wished to reserve a display table were asked to email the coordinator and identify how many tables and chairs were needed as well as whether they required technology. In addition, vendors identified whether children were going to be playing a game, doing a craft, reading a story, or some other type of activity. They were asked if they would be donating baskets for raffle.

To adhere to university policies and procedures, we met with the appropriate facilities manager. A space study occurred, and it was decided that the best space for the event to be held was at the university community building. Space was needed for 38 display tables as well as space for

physical activity games. The lower level was reserved for arts, crafts, and games. A portion of the second floor was reserved for book distribution to children reading to the support animals as well as for children to get their picture taken with a university athlete. The facilities manager spoke with campus safety to distribute signs throughout the campus to identify where the event was as well as where appropriate parking spaces were located for our attendees.

### **Marketing**

An early level teacher candidate created the flyer that would be used for marketing the event. Students and committee members passed out the flyer at the local grocery store and at the local early childhood learning centers. Flyers were emailed to all local libraries, elementary schools, and middle schools. Business and school leaders posted the flyer on their Facebook and Instagram pages. The event was advertised in the local paper and with the Chamber of Commerce. One of the student committee members advertised the event on the local radio station. The event was advertised in the university campus weekly calendar.

### **PA Family/Community Model Outcomes**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education created Pennsylvania's *Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework: A Companion Guide for Families* to lead educators with developing effective family/community events. This guide supports the need to develop effective community engagement opportunities for families, children, community members, and professionals across developmental stages and educational systems (Halguseth, 2009).

Research has deemed it important to create community events using a well-planned and custom-tailored community

engagement model that is sensitive to sub-groups within a community (Kabue, et al., 2022). The PA Family/Community Model's standards follow this recommendation and are in alignment with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) six family engagement practices which supports early childhood education initiatives (NAEYC, 2023). The committee developed FLD event based on the support provided by research and other national agencies, such as NAEYC, alignment with this framework.

To facilitate and guide family/community engagement opportunities in Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Department of Education created six family/community engagement standards. The six standards are as follows: Standard 1: Connect families to community resources that support their goals, interests, and needs; Standard 2: Build partnerships with families that are strengths-based, authentic, reciprocal, and respectful; Standard 3: Partner with families to identify information, resources, and strategies to support them in their roles as teachers, models, encouragers, monitors, leaders and advocates as they support their child's learning and development; Standard 4: Provide intentional opportunities for families to connect and engage with each other; Standard 5: Support families as they develop their leadership and advocacy skills; and Standard 6: Build partnerships with families during times of transition.

### **FLD Standards Engagement**

#### ***Standard 1***

The FLD Event was developed using a strengths-based approach that was designed to focus on the literacy needs of the students in our rural community. To implement the benefits of having strong educational

community supporters, we designed our event connecting families to community resources by inviting representatives from community organizations and clubs, local libraries, childhood mental health centers, theater companies, and a local hospital system.

Representatives from such organizations and clubs provided the participants with several educational literacy strategies that included crafts, games such as bingo for books, book marker art activity, “Tooth Book” information table, which provided dental care resources, and “Create and Take” projects.

### ***Standard 2***

Educators who know their families are more likely to create meaningful, authentic instruction that will engage children and help them be more successful academically (Kyle, et al., 2002). The FLD Event provided families the opportunity to engage with university staff and students, community library representatives, university staff and students, Pennsylvania Intermediate School District educators, as well as with St. Bonaventure University faculty and students. These groups of individuals organized a variety of arts/crafts, and games that not only focused on literacy, but also engaged mathematical skills, self-reflection, financial literacy, health resources, and psychomotor skills.

### ***Standard 3***

The FLD Event committee asked community parents on the committee about the community agencies and resources that would be most helpful with advocating for local families while supporting literacy development. According to Epstein et al., (2019), collaborating with the community includes identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen the school program.

Prior to the FLD Event, committee members identified local agencies that might be able to collaborate with the committee and provide families with community resource information in a variety of health areas. The faculty sent out an email inviting community family providers to participate on the committee. Two parents from the Bradford, Pennsylvania community and three early level teacher candidates – two teacher candidates from the UPB and one from St. Bonaventure University – volunteered to provide parent and student insight and time to developing an engaging community-based literacy event that met both the parents’ and students’ needs.

During the FLD Event committee meetings, members discussed the current partnerships parents had with their community agencies and the programs they were able to provide families. Discussion centered on the types of resources parents needed to support them. Community agencies ranging from mental health to volunteer clubs were invited to set up an event table to speak with parents about their program’s community resources as well as to distribute information.

Volunteers’ tables had activities that could be completed during the event that included facilitating parents seeing themselves as their child’s teacher. There were eighteen tables that teacher candidates managed. The students created games and/or arts and crafts families could take home with them furthering the likelihood of emergent literacy taking place at home. This teacher candidate involvement furthered their understanding of the importance of taking a strengths-based approach when removing barriers to successfully engage with families outside of classroom.

### ***Standard 4***

FLD addressed intergenerational relationship engagement by providing parents, children,

grandparents, and extended family members and friends with the opportunity to communicate with each other positively while engaging and/or assisting their child during games and crafts.

This intergenerational relationship engagement transferred to grandparents introducing themselves to other grandparents with their grandchildren as the catalyst for discussion. Families were engaging and learning from each other during the writing reflection activity as well as during the scavenger hunt. These activities provided families with the opportunity to engage with each other and discuss what they were learning. When family members engaged with their children during the financial literacy activities, they were able to talk with the adults about what finance means to a young child, e.g., an allowance. In turn, the young child learned about adult futuristic financial planning when their family members played the adult financial literacy game and conversed with the presenter about the difference between investing early in adult life to the child's parents and how to catch up with investing if you are ready to retire to the child's grandparents or older extended family members/friends. While waiting in line to play the financial literacy games, the parents were talking to each other about their new financial literacy understanding. Participants were able to observe other family units engaging with each other and their children resulting in valuable observational learning. During the physical activities, families and children encouraged participants from other families to win. Because there were diverse ways to complete the craft activities, families and children were talking to each other about their art and complimented each other.

### ***Standard 5***

The FLD activities provided families and

children opportunities to develop their leadership and advocacy skills. An example of this transpired during the financial planning activity when families and children learned lessons in economic education/financial literacy. Learning outcomes such as taking the lead for goal planning were achieved as children and families gleaned the importance of creating a financial plan over time – which relates to wise saving and learning solution-based investing habits.

This financial goal setting and solution-based investing activity helped parents relate to understanding the importance of saving for their child's college education, increasing the likelihood their child will attend college and further their leadership skills. During the FLD, children and families were engaged in following the increase in their investments over time from a child's understanding of investing as well as from an adult's perspective.

These types of early age literacy educational opportunities establish positive habits and attitudes about money (Totenhagen et al., 2015) and positively affect future financial behavior (Ramalho & Forte, 2019). This transfer of financial knowledge results in social capital providing opportunities for leadership (Tett & Maclachlan, 2007).

Access to advocacy materials and introduction to leaders from family/women advocacy agency tables provided families the opportunity to learn about self-advocacy. For example, one mental health community group distributed information regarding parenting classes for teens and older parents and childhood mental health services. Another community agency that provides domestic abuse help passed out literature on their services. The ability to have this information on hand helps families to access resources and advocate for themselves during times of distress. In addition, many

of the providers who are now community leaders once needed their own or a similar service.

### ***Standard 6***

Times of transition are hard for families because change is difficult. Connections between families and community agencies increase support during transitions. According to Kim, et al., (2008) social support is one of the most effective ways that people can cope with stressful events. Because of the lack of cultural capital, social support is not always available for underrepresented groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Oldfield, 2007). Oftentimes, college campuses may be intimidating. However, once that initial contact occurs and families and children find social and emotional support at community events such as FLD, partnerships can be created, and families are then more likely to attend future events where they can access support during a time of transition.

The FLD event included involvement for intergenerational families as activities were designed for families to help their children at different developmental stages - toddlers through adolescence, thus improving transition support. For example, traditional and non-traditional families attended with grandparents as well as other extended family members. In terms of transition, the children had the opportunity to collaborate and engage with family members, friends, and others who were functioning at different transitional developmental stages, thus providing insight for their futures.

### **FLD Event Success**

The FLD Event was successful and demonstrated the importance of intentionally integrating *The Pennsylvania Department of Education Family/Community Standards*

into planning and implementing family community events. Following the event, both universities made a commitment to continue the event next year, thanks in part to positive community feedback as well as an interest in supporting the lives of the children growing up in rural communities. Attendance at the event demonstrated support for the first year and included thirty-two families with eighty-two children. Families in attendance consisted of same-sex, multi-generational, and multi-ethnic family structures.

There were seventeen community agencies/clubs who volunteered their time to move forward family literacy engagement while providing emotional and literacy support for families. As an example of family engagement with these agencies, to further understand the importance of emotional support animals, children could read to emotional/disability support dogs as well as to an emotional support pony. Parents reported that this was the best time their families had had when learning about reading and reported how ‘cool’ it was to learn about financial planning.

The researchers and event planners received positive feedback about the scope of the event, the students who helped with organization and implementation, the arts, crafts, and games available. Anecdotal comments supporting the success of FLD included an excited comment from a local teacher, “This was the best literacy day I’ve ever attended!” A local community club member provided support for the event when stating, “It was wonderful for our clubs to participate in FLD!” One parent when leaving the event said, “We have had such a great day, and the kids are taking home so many books and things to do at home!” Another early level teacher candidate stated, “I learned how important it is for me to see my students outside of the classroom and learn about them and their

parents in a fun way.” A senior level education major stated, “I appreciated the opportunity to observe the different parenting styles and interactions that take place between parents and children. Some parents let their children lead and other parents led.” A faculty member brought her two children to the FLD event and complimented the team on providing everyone – even faculty members with children – the opportunity to engage in an event that related to their family.

There was discussion at a Rotary meeting about the event’s efficacy and an invitation to present on FLD at both a Kiwanis and Rotary meeting where both clubs thanked the FLD committee for their hard work and commitment to the community while pledging their volunteerism and assistance next year. Both community clubs took an active role with basket/book donation, club information, and arts/crafts/games for the children to engage with.

Cross-generational support for the success of FLD included a wonderful comment from an attendee who was the father of one of the UPB early educator majors and the grandfather of the young child he brought to the event. This father/grandfather stated, “It’s amazing to see my university tuition dollars at work today. My daughter is really learning a lot here. And I get to play games and make crafts with my granddaughter at the same time! Maybe she’ll be a Panther, too!”

### **Limitations**

For the next FLD event the researchers are going to be more intentional with data collection and analysis. They will collect data on all adult FLD attendees including grandparents, fathers, and extended family members. The researchers plan to collect data via family and community member

surveys that address the six family engagement standards. In addition, the researchers will be conducting personal interviews. A final area that will be addressed is intentional outreach to local Indigenous community families. The researchers plan on meeting personally with Indigenous community agencies and school leaders. The goal is to make certain children and families receive a warm invite to participate. This invitation provides the local Indigenous children and families the opportunity to connect with and engage with the university community and surrounding families. This engagement would increase connection to the university system.

It is important for teacher candidates to understand the importance of being a positively engaged community member who provides the link between home and school for their students’ families. Due to the positive outcomes of incorporating *The Pennsylvania Department of Education Family/Community Standards* when planning and implementing family literacy events, The UPB will coordinate, sponsor, and host a FLD annual event. The researchers intend to recruit new participation from university members including faculty/staff, education major students, non-education major students, while extending outreach to new community organizations and schools.

### **Future Directions**

Future FLD events will continue to empower teacher candidates and students from other programs such as Sport and Recreation Management/Coaching to engage their teacher candidates and other participants with an opportunity to model social responsibility, facilitate relationships with culturally diverse families resulting in getting to know the families in the community at a deeper level. In addition,

future FLD events will continue to be course-based providing teacher candidates and students from other majors the opportunity to assist in planning, as well as the opportunity to affect rural children's literacy skills developing a culturally sensitive, hands-on, family focused event. Furthermore, teacher candidates and students from other majors will be involved in future FLD events to improve their understanding of the importance of developing trusting and respectful relationships between themselves and the families they will serve. A final goal for future growth of FLD is to partner with other community groups who are hosting event.

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