

National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICY

Today, the nation's education system is poised for transformation. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is investing \$100 billion in education with a long-term objective to implement evidence-based solutions and accountability systems that will help all students succeed. As we know, the research is clear that family engagement prepares children for kindergarten and leads to better student achievement, improved social skills and behavior and increased likelihood for graduation. Furthermore, family engagement is increasingly recognized as a key component of raising the achievement of low-income and ethnic minority students and eliminating the achievement gap between them and more advantaged students. Parent and community organizing in urban areas is also leading to changes in education policy, more equitable resource distribution and improved school capacity to improve student outcomes. Now is the time to develop a shared vision and strategy to carry us to the next level of family, school, and community engagement.

Over the past four decades, the federal government has supported the critical role of families in education by investing in a number of programs and initiatives that support family engagement. These investments, however, have been fragmented in conceptualization and in implementation, resulting in random acts of family engagement rather than a systemic approach. There is an urgent need to promote a research-based definition and a coherent and comprehensive strategy for family, school, and community engagement that will, in turn, increase the return on program investments and, ultimately, student success.

Below, we offer a definition of family, school, and community engagement that builds on the definition in NCLB (Title IX, section 9101, 32) and is based on research about when and how children learn and the relationships among families, schools, and communities in supporting that learning. We also lay out some of the elements we believe are necessary to enable states, districts, schools, families, and community organizations to develop effective approaches to family engagement from birth to young adulthood. These elements include federal leadership to create an Office for Family, School and Community Engagement in the Department of Education to develop a multi-year strategic plan, as well as to provide resources for enhanced capacity-building and continuous learning that are necessary to implement the strategic plan.

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group was recently created to inform educational policy on family engagement and in so doing, to increase educational opportunities for all children, from cradle to career. We present a broadened definition of family engagement and a platform to strengthen it in education reform efforts.

Re-defining family engagement

We believe there is a need for a clear, research-based, and commonly shared definition of family engagement that can be applied to policy and practice in order to increase the likelihood that investments in family engagement will contribute to kindergarten readiness, student success and school improvement. The definition we propose has two parts.

First, families play critical roles in student success. They support their children's learning, guide them through a complex school system, advocate for more and improved learning opportunities, and collaborate with educators and community organizations to achieve more effective educational opportunities.

Second, families raise their children in multiple settings and across time, in collaboration with many others. Family engagement is:

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Continuous across a child's life, spanning from Early Head Start programs to college preparation high schools.
- Carried out everywhere that children learn – at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities.

This definition recognizes that family engagement needs to focus on activities that are linked to children's learning at home, at school, and in the community, and to reflect the many different ways in which families, community organizations, and schools engage with and support one another, from encouraging reading at home, to school governance and improvement. This definition also recognizes the role that parents and families play in advocating for educational opportunity and quality. Taken together, this definition supports the creation of family engagement pathways that honor the dynamic, multiple and complementary ways that children learn and grow, from cradle to career.

Recommendations

Now is the time for federal policy to develop a robust vision and a three-tiered federal, state, and local infrastructure that will elevate family, school, and community engagement as a necessary reform strategy for the success of all students. Specifically the federal government should:

Vision and Leadership

1. Use the bully pulpit to shift the national mindset about family engagement to reflect its importance in learning and reinforce the need for shared responsibility.

Using his leadership role, President Obama has helped the public understand the key roles of families in shaping the life trajectories of their children, which is one part of a comprehensive and targeted message about family engagement. This message should be expanded from a focus on parenting alone to emphasize the shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities to support pathways for family engagement in supporting student achievement. With this definition, parents have the responsibility to support, monitor, and advocate for their children from cradle to career, and to demand reform when the schools serve their children poorly.

Reciprocally, schools and community organizations have a responsibility to reach out, support, and listen to parents to ensure that they continuously have the information and tools to guide their children's learning, to exercise their voice and leadership on the school improvement team, and to participate in district educational policymaking and budgetary decisions. In addition to integrating this message into the language of the President and First

Lady, the First Family can spotlight family engagement in public forums, as well as hold summits and other meetings to solicit ideas from parents, educators, and others about how families, schools, and communities can work together to support student learning.

2. Elevate and centralize family engagement within the U.S. Department of Education.

Family engagement is currently spread across a number of programs and initiatives within the USDE rather than within one well-resourced and focused office. As a result, there is currently no overall family engagement strategy, and resources to oversee current family engagement investments within the USDE are limited. The USDE should centralize responsibility for family engagement in a separate office or initiative that reports directly to a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Education. To function effectively, this office/initiative will require the appropriate staff, expertise, and program responsibilities to implement a long-term family engagement strategy across federal education programs. The major responsibilities of this office/initiative should include the development and implementation of the multi-year strategic plan, coordinating family engagement programs within the USDE and across other agencies, and expanding these programs to improve state and local capacity for and responsiveness to family engagement. In addition to these functions, a more centralized office/initiative for family engagement should carry out and ensure improved monitoring and accountability of current and future family engagement efforts.

Capacity-building

3. Build capacity at the state and local levels for family, school, and community engagement.

We need a robust system and infrastructure to implement a comprehensive and effective family, school and community engagement strategy, particularly at the local level. A key step is to create incentives for school districts to place a senior level officer for family engagement on its leadership team overseeing program coordination, implementation, and accountability. Furthermore, building on recommendations from the Keeping PACE Act, schools should be staffed with parent and community coordinators trained, overseen and coordinated by the district-level family engagement officer.

In addition to this human capital, schools and other education agencies need ongoing professional development and technical assistance on the importance of, and effective and culturally appropriate strategies for family engagement, including understanding how to work effectively with community organizations that train and support parents in leading school and district improvement initiatives. More attention and resources are also needed for collaborations between districts and higher education to support pre-service and in-service training for school leaders, teachers, family-school coordinators, and other educators in family, school, and community engagement and for collaborations with community organizations.

To help build these state and local capacities, the federal government must maintain current investments in family engagement and offer additional resources for state and local family engagement efforts. One mechanism is to create incentives for the strategic allocation of the current 1% minimum set-aside of Title I funds for family engagement. Some incentive options could be the immediate incorporation of provisions for more strategic approaches to family engagement with the new education stimulus funds, or increasing the percentage allocations for and alignment of family engagement within Title I.

A strong three-tiered infrastructure is necessary to build effective local family, school and community engagement. Promising federal efforts that build state and local capacity and share knowledge about research-based best practices, such as the Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs), which have re-focused attention on quality and continuous learning, should be strengthened. The PIRCs, guided by their new quality framework, are a key element in building a strong system of family, school, and community engagement

because they provide statewide leadership and coordination for family engagement; they offer technical assistance to state and local education agencies; and they help states and districts align family engagement with other reform initiatives in early childhood education, after-school programs, community schools, summer learning initiatives, and teacher quality.

Continuous learning and improvement

4. Strengthen the research and evaluation base of family involvement.

Despite the extensive research that links parent engagement with increased student achievement, there is a limited body of evidence about family involvement interventions. The federal government has the opportunity to encourage research, and especially evaluation, about innovative family engagement practices that are associated with improved learning outcomes. Empirically based research can extend understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions. It can shed light on how state and local education agencies develop their programs and are to be held accountable for their results. The federal government, for example, could require all federal education and child development program grants to include an evidence-based plan to involve families and indicate how they will track and measure the results.

5. Ensure reporting, learning and accountability through a three-tiered system.

Although requirements exist for state and local education agencies to implement and report on federally mandated family engagement activities, compliance has been weak. The federal government should proactively monitor and enforce the implementation of parent engagement provisions in Title I and elsewhere in NCLB. Part of the problem in compliance and reporting can be traced to the lack of a rigorous and well-understood definition of family engagement across or even within agencies and programs.

Based upon a clear definition and a coherent strategy, the federal government can develop a first-tier accountability system that includes a common set of standards and meaningful indicators for family engagement for use in monitoring state accountability. Only then will it be possible to develop a system of continuous improvement that, in turn, increases the likelihood of attaining the goal of student achievement.

States can also create a second-tier accountability system for schools and districts that is keyed to the federal standards, but allows for local adaptation. In this system, state and local agencies work with families, schools, and communities to develop or expand the indicators against which they can report and benchmark their progress.

A third tier of accountability resides at the school and community level where school and school staff performance assessments should include family engagement indicators, which families have had a voice in creating, and measure how families' capacity to support their children's learning is being increased, as well as how their involvement in school quality discussions is actively supported. The local accountability system should respond to federal and state standards.

It cannot be overemphasized that this three-tiered accountability system must be organized for learning and continuous improvement, and that one of its critically important roles is sharing lessons learned with other states and communities. Thus, accountability becomes a reflection and manifestation of a continuing and shared responsibility for both family engagement and student outcomes.

We believe that these recommendations form a strong foundation for supporting improved learning and student achievement through a comprehensive family, school, and community engagement strategy.

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