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Parent and Family Engagement: The Missing Piece in Urban Education Reform

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Abstract

Parent and family engagement in the educational lives of children and youth positively influence student learning and achievement. While this connection may seem obvious, varying ideals of parent engagement limit the ways in which school communities understand, encourage, and benefit from meaningful school-home-community interactions. This is frequently the case in culturally diverse, urban communities where education reform has focused heavily on high-stakes testing, teacher accountability, and school choice, but less on the fragile connections that often exist between schools and the families they serve. The purpose of this policy brief is to review selected research on parent involvement and expand existing understandings of parent and family engagement in ways that are culturally relevant and responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of families in urban communities. It concludes with specific recommendations for strengthening parent and family engagement.

Introduction

Research literature on parent involvement shows that active parent and family engagement in the educational lives of children and youth positively influence student learning, engagement, and achievement (Ingram, Wolfe, & Liberman, 2007). Parent involvement has been correlated with everything from increased literacy and math competency (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008) to improved student attendance (Sheldon, 2007), better student-teacher relationships (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008), and college readiness (Auerbach, 2007).

While this connection may seem obvious, narrow and traditional conceptions of parent engagement limit how school communities understand, encourage, and benefit from home-school interactions. Perceptions by some educators that Black, Latino, low-income, and/or immigrant families do not value education, coupled with the lack of trust some working-class families of color have for public institutions, erect barriers between the home and school lives of historically underserved student populations.

For these reasons, home-school connections are increasingly important in low-income communities of color and must be based on shared understandings of what parent engagement is, what it looks like in practice, and how it improves student achievement. This policy brief addresses parent involvement and family engagement with particular attention to approaches that acknowledge the unique strengths and needs of working-class families in Clark County’s “urban” communities. In the next section, we define the various terms associated with parent participation in education, followed by a discussion of parent and family engagement in “urban” communities.

Defining Parent Engagement

The terms *parent involvement* and *parent engagement* are often used interchangeably to describe collaborative work and cooperation between parents and families

and their schools or school communities. While some researchers consider any form of parental presence at the school as involvement, others view parent participation as existing on a continuum, ranging from passive support to active engagement.

Traditionally, parent involvement has been defined as (a) parent attendance at school-wide functions and activities, (b) assisting students in academic work within the home, (c) communicating with teachers and school staff, (d) participating in parent-teacher association meetings, (e) attending face-to-face parent-teacher conferences, and (f) volunteering in the classroom and at the school (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

One of the most commonly used parent involvement frameworks is Joyce Epstein’s (1996) Six Types of Involvement, which focuses on parental support from the school’s perspective. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Epstein’s (1995) Six Types of Parent Involvement

Involvement Type	Description
Type 1: Parenting	Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
Type 2: Communicating	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children’s progress.
Type 3: Volunteering	Recruit and organize parent help and support.
Type 4: Learning at home	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.
Type 5: Decision-making	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
Type 6: Collaborating with the community	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

These categories also appear in National PTA®’s definition of parent involvement and strategies for family engagement. As the self-described “largest child advocacy organization in the nation,” National PTA® defines family engagement as “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” (<http://www.pta.org>).

This shared responsibility is illustrated by the organization’s Six National Standards of

Family-School Partnerships: (1) Welcoming all families into the school community, (2) Communicating effectively, (3) Supporting student success, (4) Speaking up for every child, (5) Sharing power, (6) Collaborating with community, and (7) Mentoring and coaching.

Similarly, the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (See Table 2) provides a roadmap for improving parent and family engagement outcomes through a systematic, comprehensive, integrated approach that highlights positive and goal-oriented relationships with families.

Table 2. Head Start Parent and Family Engagement Outcomes

Engagement Type	Description
Family Well-Being	Parents and families are safe, healthy, and have increased financial security.
Positive Parent-Child Relationships	Beginning with transitions to parenthood, parents and families develop warm relationships that nurture their child’s learning and development.
Families as Lifelong Educators	Parents and families observe, guide, promote, and participate in the everyday learning of their children at home, school, and in their communities.
Families as Learners	Parents and families advance their own learning interests through education, training and other experiences that support their parenting, careers, and life goals.
Family Engagement in Transitions	Parents and families support and advocate for their child’s learning and development as they transition to new learning environments, including Early Head Start to Head Start, EHS/HS to other early learning environments, and HS to kindergarten through elementary school.
Family Connections to Peers and Community	Parents and families form connections with peers and mentors in formal or informal social networks that are supportive and/or educational and that enhance social well-being and community life.
Families as Advocates and Leaders	Parents and families participate in leadership development, decision-making, program policy development, or in community and state organizing activities to improve children’s development and learning experiences.

As a federal early childhood education program, the Head Start framework targets learning and development from birth through third grade, but puts forth concepts that could be sustained well beyond elementary and secondary education.

Despite their common themes and shared usages, the key distinction between parent involvement and parent engagement is the idea that involvement is merely “doing” or “doing to” while engagement is “doing with”.

Parent and Family Engagement in “Urban” Communities

In response to persistent low achievement in many of the nation’s poor, large city schools, calls for increased parent and family engagement have focused largely on “urban” communities and getting “urban” parents to take a more active role in their children’s education. Although the definition of *urban* simply means *relating to or characteristic of a city*; in the field of education, “urban” increasingly serves as a proxy for Black, Latino, poor, and/or immigrant, suggesting different assumptions and expectations for students and families living in urban environments.

This focus on urban families and parents is not new. In fact, federal anti-poverty programs have historically mandated parent training and involvement as a condition of program participation (Berger, 1991). While some requirements later became recommendations; to include parents assisting teachers in the classroom, volunteering in the school office, attending parenting courses, and serving on advisory boards (Hiatt-Michael, 1994), many federal programs (e.g., Head Start, School Improvement Grants, Race to the Top) still require varying levels of engagement.

Despite these partnership models and attempts to engage parents in poor, urban communities, many parents still feel a “sense

of exclusion” and unwelcomed in their children’s school (Auerbach, 2007, p. 253). According to Auerbach, most traditional parent involvement models place “undue emphasis on school-based involvement, the priorities of educators, and cooperation that assumes shared goals and a level playing field for all” (Auerbach, p. 253), which in many cases do not value the nontraditional educational supports provided by working class parents and families.

Because they do not enjoy the social capital or social location of middle and upper class parents who tend to take a hands-on approach in managing their children’s education; low-income parents are more likely to provide support that is more indirect and “behind-the scenes” (Auerbach, 2007). This is an important distinction for educators to understand because it suggests “marginalized families need more home involvement by educators that addresses basic family needs and builds trusting relationships than more school involvement by parents” (p. 254).

Another less traditional perspective of parent engagement includes education organizing. Research organizations like the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University have shown how parent organizing in historically marginalized communities provides yet another way for parents to be involved – building and mobilizing power to create real change in their schools and districts.

Parent and Family Engagement and Education Reform

State Policy

Since 1989, Nevada has enacted nine laws pertaining to parent involvement (See History of Parent Involvement Legislation in Nevada <http://www.leg.state.nv.us/Session/76th2011/Exhibits/Assembly/ED/AED824C.pdf>) with the most recent legislation taking effect

last year. On July 1, 2011, Assembly Bill No. 224 created the Office of Parent Involvement and Family Engagement within the Department of Education—charged with integrating parent engagement practices into school improvement plans, accountability reporting, and statewide training for Nevada’s teachers and administrators. Although this office is still new and its impact yet to be seen, it reflects a sustained state level interest in parent and family engagement as an education reform component, which plays out differently from community to community at the district and neighborhood level.

Local Community Efforts

While Northern Nevada has a history of funded parent engagement initiatives, programs, and activities (See Education Alliance of Washoe County and the federally funded Parent Information Resource Center), Southern Nevada’s efforts have been fewer in scale and scope.

In response to local community interest in increasing meaningful parent and family engagement in Clark County, on March 16, 2011, The Lincy Institute at UNLV convened more than 90 community stakeholders (i.e., parents, educators, education advocates, non-profit and community leaders, faith leaders, and philanthropists) for a workshop to explore how parents could and should play a role in improving education in Clark County.

The workshop entitled, “Parent and Community Engagement: The Missing Piece in Education Reform?” featured experts from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and was followed by a series of meetings designed to outline a vision for improved parent and family engagement activities and support in Southern Nevada.

Much like the key themes presented in *Beyond Random Acts*, the working group determined the need for an effort that builds

parents’ capacity to serve as partners, advocates, and leaders in their children’s education. The group recommended strengthening parent and family engagement in Clark County in ways that would result in the following:

- Schools recognize they are community institutions that serve children and parents;
- Parents recognize it is every parent’s responsibility to be involved;
- Schools initiate and build trusting relationships with parents (e.g., engage parents in candidate selection, in-service trainings, professional development);
- Parents serve as leaders in the school (e.g., have parents lead family resource centers; welcome, train, and engage other parents); and
- Schools share best practices among administrators who are successful at engaging parents and families.

These objectives were very similar to the four key roles for parents outlined in *Beyond Random Acts*:

- ***Parents as school partners.*** Parents and families engaging as informed and knowledgeable partners within the school community; attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at the school building, and maintaining communication with teaching staff.
- ***Parents as supporters of learning.*** Improving academic and behavioral outcomes through positive and active parenting; establishing high expectations and engaging students in purposeful conversations about educational and career aspirations, as well as promoting and participating in children’s play and shared reading.

- ***Parents as advocates for school improvement.*** Cooperative community organizing resulting in broadened and enhanced parent and family engagement while impacting school climate and policy.
- ***Parents as decision-makers and leaders.*** A capacity-building role, which promotes parental social networks impacting and influencing school climate.

In the concluding section, we offer some recommendations to increase parent engagement and student achievement in Clark County's underserved communities based on the research literature and best practices highlighted at the statewide Connecting the Dots conference hosted on May 18, 2012 by the Nevada Parent Teacher Association.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Despite the varied motivations and rationales for targeting parent engagement efforts in urban school communities, research on urban education has revealed positive connections between parent involvement and student attendance, academic achievement, social and emotional development, and other related positive educational outcomes.

For these reasons, parent and family engagement can and should serve as an integral part of education reform efforts that seek to improve student learning experiences and achievement. These efforts may include:

- ***Building parent-teacher relationships through home visits.*** Home visits provide a unique chance for parents and teachers to build meaningful trusting

relationships that promote equal partnership in student learning. While this requires time and teacher compensation, these visits can help mitigate the negative assumptions that parents and teachers may have for one another and instead focus on what is best for the student.

- ***Creating a space for families in schools.*** Family resource centers are a great way to provide welcoming and supportive environments for parents. Successful models are often staffed by parents who are paid employees and serve as the relational bridge between other parents and school staff.
- ***Using nontraditional forms of parent-teacher communication.*** Given the increasing use of cell phones, email, text messaging, and social media for communication, educators should consider communicating to parents using these technologies rather than relying on snail mail and sending home flyers via the student backpack.

Education reform efforts have focused largely on holding students and educators accountable for results according to local, state, and federal standards. The research, however, points to the importance of home-school connections and fostering the role of parents as active participants in the education of their children.

As the promising piece of the education reform puzzle, meaningful family engagement developed through equal partnerships between parents and teachers can provide the support all students need to academically engage, learn, and achieve.

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Online Resources

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
<http://annenberginstitute.org>

Harvard Family Research Project
<http://www.hfrp.org>

National Head Start Association
<http://www.nhsa.org>

National Parent Teacher Association
<http://pta.org>

Nevada Department of Education
<http://www.doe.nv.gov>

Nevada Parent Teacher Association
<http://nevadapta.org/dev>

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