

# Research Brief

## Parent Engagement in Education

### What are the Definitions of Family Engagement in Education?

The term *parent involvement* can evoke a variety of definitions from different audiences. Because of changes in society, the concept of *parent involvement* has been expanded to include extended family and caregivers. In addition, we must recognize that the relationship between families and schools should include shared responsibility and two-way communication. We suggest that the term *family engagement* better describes this relationship.

**Family engagement comprises all activities that parents undertake to help their children learn and do well in school and through life.**

- As their children's first teachers, families support healthy development, reinforce what children are learning at school, develop the values and life skills children need to become responsible adults, and provide a home environment that promotes learning.
- As supporters of education, families contribute their knowledge and skills to the school, enriching the curriculum and providing extra services and support to students.
- As advocates, parents guide their children through the education system, plan for their children's future, and make sure that schools serve their children well.
- As decision-makers, parents serve on advisory councils, committees, and school improvement teams,

taking part in joint-problem solving at the school and district levels.

- As active community members, families organize and take advantage of community learning opportunities and other resources and participate in civic activities that promote a positive environment for all residents (Henderson and Mapp, 2001).

**This inclusive definition takes into account that family engagement takes place at home as well as in school and community settings, and that parents play several different roles in their children's education.**

In the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001, the federal government defined *parent involvement* as:

**"Regular, two-way and meaningful communication about student learning and other school activities."**

Dr. Joyce Epstein, director of the National Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, has developed a six-part typology that expands *parent involvement* to include the following categories:

***Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision-making, and Collaborating with community.***

In 1997, the National PTA adopted these types as the basis of their standards for parent involvement.

# How Does Family Engagement Influence Student Achievement?

A review of 50 recent studies (1995-2002) on how family engagement affects student achievement found that students with involved parents are more likely to:

- earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs,
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits,
- attend school regularly,
- have better social skills and show improved behavior, and
- adapt well to school.

These students are also more likely to graduate and go on to post-secondary education (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

Studies of early childhood programs that instill support for student learning into the home environment can demonstrate dramatic effects on student achievement and other outcomes over the long term. Studies of the Child-Parent Program in Chicago found that participation at ages 3 or 4 is associated with educational and social outcomes that continue for at least 18 years. The longer parents participated, the greater the results for children. Children whose families participated from 4-6 years had higher reading and math achievement, and lower rates of special education, grade retention, and child

maltreatment. They were also 40% more likely to graduate from high school (Reynolds and Clements, 2005).

What families do to encourage their children will be more effective if teachers ensure that parents are getting good information about what their children are learning at school. A study of Title I schools showed that test scores in math and reading between third and fifth grade grew at a 40-50% higher rate for students whose teachers reported high levels of parent outreach. The outreach to parents was through face-to-face meetings, sending materials on ways to help their children at home, and regular telephone contact (Westat and Policy Associates, 2001).

School programs and activities that inform, support, and encourage parent involvement at

home are related to higher gains in achievement and longer-lasting effects. Practices that are logically linked to specific outcomes are more likely to have a positive effect. For example, holding workshops about applying to college influences students' grades and courses completed (Simon, 2000). Practices that encourage parents to read to children at home affect students' reading achievement (Epstein and Sanders, 2000).

As a result of community, family, and school collaborations, schools in Madison County, Indiana have seen a marked increase in ISTEP+ scores. Over a four-year period, the county saw an increase from 45% to 69% passing ISTEP+.

"We saw significant improvement as a result of the work we did, connecting families and schools with the focused goal of improving student achievement. We worked closely with our state Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), The Indiana Partnerships Center, which was an invaluable resource to us."

Mary Lee Ewald, Director of Madison County CAPE  
(Community Alliances to Promote Education)

"Monitoring how children use their time, engaging in home learning activities, and expressing high expectations for their children have a greater effect on student achievement than does family income or structure. Reginald Clark's\* studies of what families do at home, across all backgrounds, have found that many high-achieving children live in single-parent households where the mother does not have a college education." *Beyond the Bake Sale* by Henderson, Mapp, et al.

\*Reginald Clark, "Ten Hypotheses About What Predicts Student Achievement for African-American Students and All Other Students: What the Research Shows," in Walter Allen et al., eds., *African-American Education* (Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science, 2002), 155-77.

# What are Some Essential Elements of Parent Involvement Programs?

## Linking Involvement to Learning

Activities and programs for families will be more effective if they are linked to what students are learning and focus on improving academic achievement. Some simple examples include mentioning how the students' field trip to the zoo is connected to their science unit on the study of wildlife, and providing examples of follow-up questions parents can ask their students after the field trip.

Joyce Epstein and her colleagues have developed an effective program called TIPS (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork) that is specifically linked to improving an aspect of learning (math and reading).

Epstein found that "the strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and at home are the *specific* school programs and teachers' practices that *encourage and guide* parent involvement...Parents are more likely to become partners in their children's education if they perceive that the schools have strong practices to involve parents at school" (emphasis added).

## Providing Parents with Knowledge and Skills

Schools can help parents feel empowered and capable of supporting children's learning by providing them with general knowledge about the learning process and specific skills and strategies they can use to promote their children's overall growth in learning (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler, 2005).

Many commonly-used activities and events, if well-designed and grade-specific, can initiate the parent involvement process:

- Take-home folders
- Parent/family nights
- "Take the test" nights
- Make-it Take-it workshops

Additionally, it is essential that communication with families—in print and in person—be in a language and format that is family-friendly.

## Welcoming Culture

In their research, Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler found that three key concepts influence the choices parents make about being involved in their children's education. Effective programs should take all three into account:

1. How parents develop their job description as a parent, which is known as *role construction* and is influenced by their cultural background.
2. How confident parents feel about their ability to help their children, also known as *efficacy*.
3. Whether parents feel invited—both by their children and the school. Of the three factors, *invitation* is very often the most important.

In addition, Karen Mapp offers a framework called "the joining process" that connects families through a focus on their children and learning. This process welcomes families into the school and honors families' participation. This creates a school community in which people say they feel "like family" and are more likely to become loyal members who take part in their children's education consistently.

## Strong Commitment and Leadership for Parent Engagement

The leadership of parent involvement programs needs to be linked to the infrastructure of the school improvement process. Consistent leadership from an individual who is the driving connecting force for all parent involvement initiatives is essential. This person also ensures that parent involvement activities are well-connected to the rest of the school plan. The school leadership team needs to have a primary individual who can provide consistent and dedicated direction to family engagement initiatives over the course of the year and across grade levels or parent groups. In addition, the principal needs to be a consistent presence in the development and implementation of parent involvement strategies.

For case study examples, see "The Boston Story" and "The New York Story" in *Beyond the Bake Sale* by Henderson, Mapp, et al.

# Do Schools and Families See Parent Engagement Differently?

Over the past thirty years, the definition of parent engagement has evolved to encompass a variety of activities both at home and in school (Jeynes, 2005). Researchers have found that families interpret their roles in their children's education in a variety of ways. Families' home culture and their perceptions of schools are powerful factors of parent involvement (Harry, 2005; Lopez, 2001; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Woestehoff, 2006; Ho-Sui-Chu and Willms, 1986).

For example, Lopez found that migrant parents of successful students perceived themselves as being "highly involved" in the educational lives of their children but did NOT regularly attend school functions. The families defined involvement as teaching their children the "value of education through hard work." They took their children to the fields and explained this is the work they would have to do unless they finished school (Lopez, 2001).

Scribner and colleagues' study of high-achieving majority Hispanic schools found that school staff tended to see parent involvement as participation in activities and events at the school, and being available as volunteers and fundraisers. After working more closely with families, teachers realized that the parents' primary concern was to help children be successful academically and socially and to strengthen the home-school relationship.

While schools and parents often hold different understandings of what parents' roles should be, schools can take important steps to welcome and honor families' participation in a number of ways. Often, a personal invitation is key. Additionally, information needs to be shared in warm, respectful ways, and the method of presentation needs to be geared to the parent audience.

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- [www.fscp.org](http://www.fscp.org) The Indiana Partnerships Center, Indiana's Parent Information and Resource Center.
- <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/> The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University.
- [www.cell.uindy.edu/transformingeducation/researchreviewteams.php](http://www.cell.uindy.edu/transformingeducation/researchreviewteams.php) The Research Review Teams from University of Indianapolis.

## About this Publication

This research review is the product of a Research Review Team, conducted by The Indiana Partnerships Center and the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis. The primary text for this document was created by Anne T. Henderson and adapted for this publication by Dottie Hutcherson of The Indiana Partnerships Center. The following individuals were part of the Research Review Team: Anne T. Henderson, Annenberg Institute for School Reform; Sue Blackwell & Allison Howland, Indiana University Purdue University-Indianapolis; Jerrell Cassady, Ball State University; Mary Lee Ewald, Madison County CAPE; Julie Havill-Weems, Indiana State Improvement Grant; Joyce Johnstone, University of Notre Dame; Dee Jones, Indiana PTA; Shana Ritter, Indiana University; Cathy Stephen, Randolph Eastern School Corporation; Larry Stillson, Mishawaka Board of School Trustees; Mary Jo Ratterman, Brian Reid, & Azure Smiley, University of Indianapolis; and Jackie Garvey, The Indiana Partnerships Center.

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