Engaging Families in Education

BY MATT WEYER

Family engagement promotes school readiness, social-emotional growth, positive attitudes toward school and academic success. It centers on culturally-relevant and sustained relationships between family and school staff in the shared responsibility of a child's well-being. Family engagement differs from parental involvement, which typically refers to parents' participation in the systems and activities that promote a child's well-being. The term family engagement implies that this responsibility falls on more than just the parents; in an era of evolving family compositions, siblings, relatives and even friends play an important role. Acknowledging that students are with their teachers an average of only six hours per instructional day, family and community support in a child's education and maturation is vital to his or her success.

States are breaking ground in creating policies regarding family engagement. In 20 states, prekindergarten programs must include a family engagement component and are strongly encouraged in another 15 states.[1] Federal funding has supported programs in nine states (California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island and Washington). Massachusetts has been working to support organizations that deal directly with families, train professionals locally and statewide in family engagement and promote statewide public awareness campaigns. North Carolina is working to strengthen program standards for engaging and supporting families by using Head Start grantees as hubs for professional development.

Why Family Engagement?

Family engagement means much more than attendance at and participation in school activities; it refers to the conscious effort on the part of parents and others to engage in a child's education and development by promoting positive behaviors and ensuring well-being. An analysis of 37 studies of family engagement research demonstrated that attendance at and participation in school activities, while important, have substantially less impact than parental expectations for their children, communicating about school activities and developing reading habits.[2] Family engagement also can increase motivation, reduce behavioral problems and improve social-emotional adjustment.[3] Further, impulse control, attention, memory and planning skills play a critical role in school readiness,[4] all fostered through family engagement.[5]

Across diverse backgrounds, family participation in elementary and secondary school is associated with enhanced student success, and strong family engagement practices begin early in a child's education.[6] Targeted support for increasing access to early education and family engagement is important, as only 65 percent of African-American and 52 percent of Latino 3- to 6-year-olds participate in center-based early care and education.[7] Several programs exist that are designed for these groups, which provide culturally responsive programming and resources for English language learner (ELL) families.[8]

Policy Options

This brief examines four potential policy options for engaging families in education: two-generation strategies, capacity-building systemic school practices, technology-supported strategies and home-visiting services.

1. Two-Generation Strategies

The role of parents and family members as co-educators for their children is critical; however, parents, especially those living in poverty, may need support structures to thrive. Two-generation strategies (2-Gen) aim to eradicate intergenerational poverty by targeting early childhood education and providing economic and educational services to parents. However, to be clear, some 2-Gen strategies do not necessarily engage families as direct support for their child's education; educational support is provided by preschools and other organizations. In rural St. Clair County, Ala., a partnership between the local Head Start organization and

**Enacted Legislation Related to Family Engagement
(2012-2015)**

Legend:
- 2-Generation Strategies
- Community Schools
- Capacity-Building School Practices
- Technology
- Laws cover two or more of the above categories

Source: NCSL, 2015.
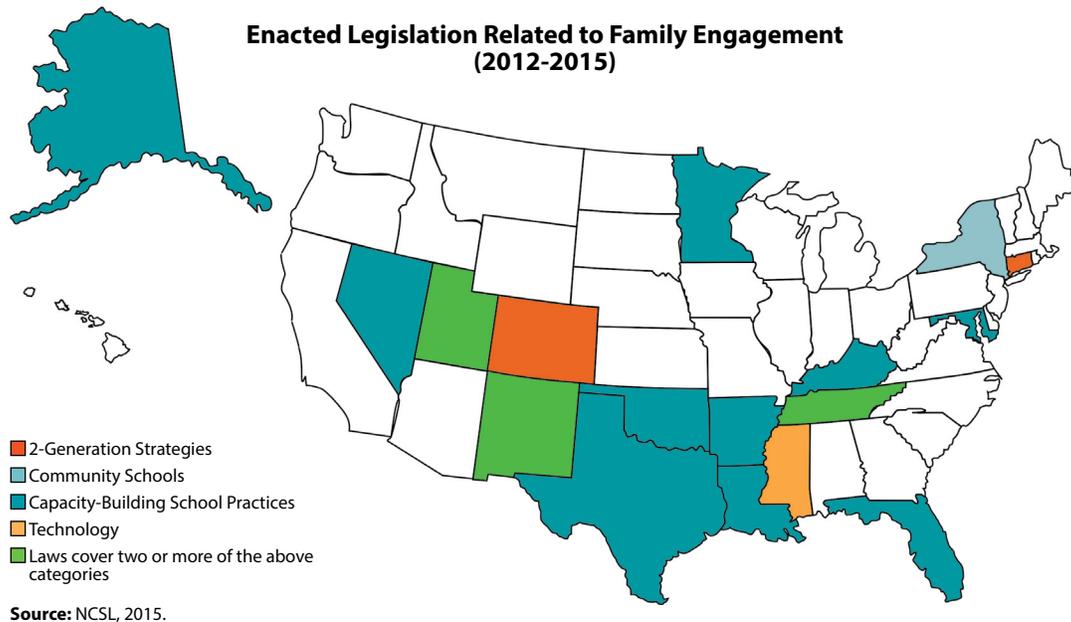
Jefferson State Community College provides low-income single mothers with technical training at the Head Start center to become pharmacy technicians while their children attend educational programs. In interviews with teachers, program evaluators found evidence of improved attendance for the children and increased motivation for both mother and child. Evaluators also discovered a strong informal social network between mothers that led to a 100 percent completion rate of the pharmacy technician training program.[9] Examples of 2-Gen legislation are presented below.

- **Oregon SB 114 (Pending):** Requires the Oregon Education Investment Board, the Early Learning Council and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to evaluate methods for providing the components of a two-generation strategy to address poverty. This includes enrolling children in poverty in high-quality prekindergarten programs and enrolling parents of children in poverty in post-secondary education to earn certificates or degrees.

- **Utah SB 37 (Enacted in 2012):** Created the Intergenerational Poverty Mitigation Act, requiring the Department of Workforce Services to establish and maintain a system of poverty-related data and to help study and develop plans and programs to help families break the cycle of poverty.

2. Capacity-Building Systemic School Practices

Capacity-building, an essential element of family engagement, refers to developing relationships among schools, community organizations, businesses and higher education institutions to collaborate, develop and implement family engagement programming. For example, community schools provide family engagement programming by offering comprehensive services such as health screening, parenting education, job training and English classes at the school site. Other systemic school practices include providing parents with access to relevant educational data about the school and their child; engaging parents with school boards and committees; translating educational documents into parents' home languages; and professional development for teachers about effective family engagement strategies, such as engaging and communicating with English language learner (ELL) families, culturally responsive training and relationship-building.[10] Examples of policies from 2015 legislative sessions include the following.

- **California SB 403:** Creates and funds community schools to coordinate educational, developmental, and family engagement and support; before- and after-school programs; health services during school and non-school hours for pupils, families and local communities at a public school with the objectives of improving the skills, capacity and well-being of pupils and families; reducing absenteeism; improving academic achievement; and building stronger relationships between schools, pupils, parents and communities.

- **Minnesota SB 1218 (Enacted):** Provides parents of English learners with oral and written information to monitor the effects of programs on their children's Eng-

lish language development so they know whether their children are progressing in developing English proficiency and, where practicable, native language proficiency.

- **Nevada SB 474 (Enacted):** Provides training for teachers and paraprofessionals on working with parent liaisons in public schools to carry out strategies and practices for effective parental involvement and family engagement.

- **New York SB 936:** Conducts training and support programs to increase parents' capacity to participate in and engage with local governance structures such as school leadership teams and parent associations.

3. Technology-Supported Family Engagement Strategies

In an era where everyday use of technology and social networking is commonplace, its use to engage families is relatively unexplored. In Pennsylvania, a program created by former elementary school principal Dr. Joe Mazza, the Electronic-Family and Community Engagement Blog (E-FACE), uses Twitter and a Wikipage to communicate with parents via tweets, pictures and announcements. "Every day, there's a new opportunity for us to be consistent in promoting the vision and the goals that we have for family engagement, and really helping families feel welcome here at the school," said Dr. Mazza.[11] A simpler example in a California district permits teachers to text educational tips to parents of young students to improve academic achievement, which researchers have proven effective at raising student achievement.[12] Examples of technology-supported family engagement strategies include the following.

- **Minnesota HB 2226 (Pending):** Allows a district to voluntarily establish its own digital home visiting program or participate in the Department of Education's digital home visiting project to provide early childhood family education curricula links through text messages, emails and social media to families of young children.

- **Utah HB 403 (Enacted):** Amends provisions related to the pilot online school survey program and includes a survey for parents to evaluate their children's schools and administrators, including whether the school or administrators solicit parent involvement in the school.

4. Home Visiting Programs

Several states have created programs that bring services and resources directly to the family's home. These programs support parents to be their child's first and most influential teacher and caregiver by providing in-home medical services, academic curriculum and materials, and other family support resources. In 2009, a five-year, $1.5 billion investment was made in evidence-based home visiting programs to improve children's health and school readiness. As a result, the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program was created to oversee home visiting programs across the country.[13] On April 15, 2015, this program was given a two-year reauthorization for $400 million each year.[14] For a comprehensive list and map of the enacted policies on home visiting, see NCSL's Home Visiting Legislation database. Pending policy examples from the 2015 session related to home visiting include the following.

- **Oklahoma SB 697:** Creates the Family Support Accountability Act; services include comprehensive home visiting, culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate strategies, and help to connect families to support services.

- **Rhode Island SB 378:** Establishes the Rhode Island Family Home Visiting Act. The Rhode Island Department of Health is to develop and coordinate the system of early childhood visiting services to meet the needs of vulnerable families with young children.

Conclusion

No single approach to family engagement exists. It is interwoven with environmental factors surrounding the child and is highly context- and resource-dependent. One fundamental element of family engagement is the quality of the teacher-parent relationship, centered on shared values. Positive and trusting relationships between educators and parents help to improve the success of the child in school.[15] Although opinions are mixed as to the efficacy of providing liaisons to help foster this relationship, family navigators, advocates and cultural mediators may provide an effective solution.[16,17] Experts recommend examining family engagement programming from a systematic perspective, and aligning the services and goals of early childhood education and programming for parents. Finally, experts say, data related to family engagement should be used systematically and strategically and programs should be intentional.[18]

Resources

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, Building a Better Future through Parent Leadership, http://ap-od.org/

The Aspen Institute, Ascend, http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/

Center for American Progress, The Case for a Two-Generation Approach for Educating English Language Learners, https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Ross-ELL-report.pdf

Child Trends, Our Research-Parenting, http://www.childtrends.org/our-research/parenting/

Colorín Colorado, A Bilingual Site for Families and Educators, http://www.colorincolorado.org/families/

Community Action Project (CAP)-Tulsa, Innovation Lab-Research Initiatives, http://captulsa.org/innovation-lab/research-initiatives/

Harvard Graduate School of Education, The Harvard Family Research Project, http://www.hfrp.org/

MDRC, Families and Children, http://www.mdrc.org/issue/families-children

National Association for the Education of Young Children, Engaging Diverse Families Project, https://www.naeyc.org/ecp/trainings/edf

National Center for Children in Poverty, Parent Engagement from Preschool Through Grade 3, http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1084.pdf

National Center for Children in Poverty, State Policies Through a Two-Generation Lens, http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1092.pdf

National Conference of State Legislatures, Family Engagement, http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/family-engagement.aspx

Northwestern University-Institute for Policy Research, Two-Generation Solutions, http://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/faculty-experts/fellows/two-generation-solutions.html

Office of Head Start, The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family

PEW Center on the States, Engaged Families, Effective Pre-K: State Policies that Bolster Student Success, http://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/legacy/uploaded-files/pcs_assets/2010/PkNFamilyEngagementFINALpdf.pdf

Ready Freddy, Kindergarten Readiness Program, http://www.readyfreddy.org/

University of Minnesota, Chicago Child-Parent Center, http://www.cehd.umn.edu/icd/research/cls/program.html

Utah Intergenerational Poverty Initiative, http://jobs.utah.gov/edo/intergenerational/index.html

The Working Poor Families Project, Considering Two-Generation Strategies in the States, http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/WPFP-Summer-2014-Brief.pdf

Notes

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3. K. Niehaus and J.L. Addelson, "School support, parental involvement, and academic and social-emotional outcomes for English language learners," *American Educational Research Journal* 51, no. 4 (2014): 810-844.

4. C. Blair and R.P. Razza, "Relating effortful control, executive function, and false belief understanding to emerging math and literacy ability in kindergarten," *Child Development* 78, no. 2 (2007): 647-663.

5. The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, *Family Engagement and School Readiness* (Washington, D.C.: NCPFCE, 2015), http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family.

6. Ibid.

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11. J. Mazza, "Connected Educators, Connected Families," *Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter* 5, no.1 (2013), http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/connected-educators-connected-families.

12. B.N. York and S. Loeb, *One Step at a Time: The Effects of an Early Literacy Text Messaging Program for Parents of Preschoolers* (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2014), http://www.nber.org/papers/w20659?utm_campaign=ntw&utm_medium=email&utm_source=ntw.

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18. K.S. Reid, "Parent engagement on rise as priority for districts, schools," *Education Week* (June 3, 2015), http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/06/03/parent-engagement-on-rise-as-priority-for.html?r=668137784.