

# Family Involvement

“*The family seems to be the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the child’s development. Without family involvement, intervention is likely to be unsuccessful, and what few effects are achieved are likely to disappear once the intervention is discontinued.*”

—Urie Bronfenbrenner, Harvard Family Research Project, 2006

A growing body of research demonstrates that when families are actively involved in their children’s learning, children arrive at school ready to engage and succeed. Students of involved parents get better grades, score higher on standardized tests, have better attendance records, drop out less often, and have higher aspirations and more positive attitudes toward work and homework. An increase in family participation in pre-kindergarten programs, for example, has been linked to greater student academic motivation and stronger social and emotional skills among all young children, regardless of ethnic and socioeconomic background. As parents and other family members help out in their child’s pre-kindergarten program, they experience firsthand the difference collaboration makes. Such experience often encourages the family to stay involved throughout their child’s school career, providing crucial support for school reform and increasing the chances that their children will succeed (Redding et al., 2011).

And the benefits of family involvement extend to teens as well. Bogenschneider (2004) studied 8,000 high school students in nine high schools in Wisconsin and California. With only a couple of exceptions, when parents were involved in their teen’s school, students reported higher grades in school. What’s more, when either mothers or fathers were involved, it benefited both boys and girls across grades, ethnicity, and education background—and made the most difference for those children who needed it most.

1 Early Literacy

2 Family Involvement

3 Access to Books

4 Expanded Learning

5 Mentoring Partnerships

## Four Levels of Family-School Partnership

Four leading proponents of family-school partnerships, Anne Henderson, Karen Mapp, Vivian Johnson, and Don Davies (2007), offer four levels of family-school partnerships—and a rubric that establishes an achievable standard for partnership. Henderson et al. define the four levels of partnership as:

### Partnership School

All families and communities have something great to offer—we do whatever it takes to work closely together to make sure every single student succeeds.

### Open-Door School

Parents can be involved at our school in many ways—we're working hard to get an even bigger turnout for our activities. When we ask the community to help, people often respond.

### Come-If-We-Call School

Parents are welcome when we ask them, but there's only so much they can offer. The most important thing they can do is help their kids at home. We know where to get help in the community if we need it.

### Fortress School

Parents belong at home, not at school. If students don't do well, it's because their families don't give them enough support. We're already doing all we can. Our school is an oasis in a troubled community. We want to keep it that way.

The importance of families in children's literacy development is also well established. In her seminal text, *Children Who Read Early* (1966), Dolores Durkin investigated children who learned to read before they entered school and discovered that their families—parents and older siblings—often read aloud to them. This practice—known as shared book reading or the interactive read-aloud—is now widely recognized as one of the most important parental activities that fosters a child's literacy development—and carries benefits that last a lifetime. “Early success at reading acquisition is one of the keys that unlocks a lifetime of reading habits” (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

In multiple ways, family members are a child's first and most important teacher, and when they are actively engaged in their children's learning, the children are not only better prepared for school but also continue to achieve at higher levels (Stark, 2010).

## What Is Family Engagement?

Since the 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), parent involvement, later extended to include families, has been a key component of equity, social justice, and quality education (Redding et al., 2011). And while family engagement encompasses a broad range of activities, in general, it can be thought of as anything that better prepares all students to learn and enhances family, school, and community support of that learning (Smith et al., 2007). It also means moving away from checklists of discrete activities and embracing coordinated, comprehensive family engagement that creates open communication and strong collaboration among teachers, families, schools, and community partners to increase student achievement.

## Family Involvement: Four Components and Related Research

Four key components frame family involvement and related research:

- Student Performance
- Cultural Considerations
- Family Beliefs About Academic Success
- Strategies to Promote Success

Let's explore each one in turn and investigate the corresponding research.

# FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

## Student Performance

“**Increasing family involvement at the early grades predicts literacy achievement and, most importantly, is a stronger indicator for literacy development than family income, maternal level of education, and ethnicity.**”

—Eric Dearing, Holly Kreider, Sandra Simpkins, and Heather Weiss,  
Harvard Family Research Project, 2006

Decades of research prove a simple truth: more often than not, strong families yield strong, successful students. All families have dreams for their children and want the very best for them, but, without open communication and collaboration, how to best help families support their children isn't always easy or clear. To this end, a strong school-family partnership can make all the difference as Byrk et al. (2009) demonstrated in their study of Chicago schools. They found that student performance is not only influenced by the home, school, and community environments in which children live, but also by the *relationships* among these settings. When home, school, and community forces come together to lend students both academic and personal support, student motivation and participation increases. Let's examine two case studies.

### **Family Involvement in School and the Literacy Performance of Children in Low-Income Communities**

Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss summarize the 2006 findings of their longitudinal, correlational study of 300 K-5 students and their families in low-income communities. Family involvement activities included open house events, family-teacher conferences and other school meetings, and opportunities to volunteer in the classroom. The researchers' results (summarized by Ferguson, 2011) are both encouraging and convincing:

1. Increasing family involvement at the early grades predicts literacy achievement and, most importantly, is a stronger indicator for literacy development than family income, maternal level of education, and ethnicity.
2. Providing processes and structures to increase family involvement at the early grades matters most for children who are at risk due to factors such as low-income families and mothers with low educational levels.

What does this mean for other schools, particularly those in high-poverty neighborhoods? The authors recommend that all schools find a way to engage families in both school literacy events and in home learning support activities in the early grades. Furthermore, to address the needs of children who are most at risk, schools need

### **Common Core Note: Foundational Reading Skills**

The CCSS outline the early foundational skills that children need to become successful readers, including concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, and fluency. While these skills are not to be regarded as ends in and of themselves, they are “necessary and important components of an effective comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines.”

“Our study adds to an increasing body of evidence that family educational involvement is vital for promoting the life chances of low-income children and provides exceptional benefits for the very same low-income children who face exceptional challenges.”

—Eric Dearing, Holly Krieider, Sandra Simpkins, and Heather Weiss, *Harvard Family Research Project, 2006*

to actively develop long-term strategies to reach out to low-income families and other groups who may hesitate to get involved in their children's education because of language barriers or because of their own negative experiences as students. Families need to feel valued and welcomed before they will enter their child's school.

### **Scholastic, Houston Independent School District, and the Houston Area Urban League Come Together to Support Literacy Development and Academic Performance**

Scholastic's *Read and Rise* partnership with Houston Independent School District (HISD, a diverse district with high poverty) and the Houston Area Urban League (HAUL) provides an inspiring case study of what happens when all stakeholders come together to support children's literacy development and academic performance. *Read and Rise* is a comprehensive literacy solution that unites homes, schools, and communities around the common goal of developing literacy skills in young children. The HISD/HAUL/*Read and Rise* partnership demonstrates that a child's academic success lies in the strength of their *relationships* with significant others in their lives—family members, caregivers, teachers, and community literacy partners. The implementation of *Read and Rise* in Houston Independent School District has raised awareness of the importance of early literacy as it has raised parent participation and bolstered graduation results. *Read and Rise* builds community capacity by supporting and facilitating early language development in young children through educator trainings, parent workshops, and family and community resources. At the heart of *Read and Rise* is the belief that all of the adults in a child's life should know the importance of literacy development and how best to support its growth.

The initiative shows solid and steady signs of growth and evolution and has proved to be an organic and adaptable platform for both short-term and long-term sustainable change. Note the measurable outcomes:

- Graduation rate in HISD is at an all-time district high: for 2010 an improvement of 4.3% on the previous year.
- Dropout rate in HISD is at an all-time district low: 12.6%, a 3.2% decline from 2009.
- Three HISD schools featured on *Newsweek's* 2011 List of “America's Best High Schools.”
- 25 HISD schools on *The Washington Post's* 2011 Challenge Index (a measure of academic rigor)—up from 16 in 2009.

The scope of the implementation is equally impressive:

- The HAUL/*Read and Rise* Partnership worked with more than 25,000 parents.
- 12 elementary schools in this period changed to *recognized* (5) or *exemplary* status (7).



- 120,000 books were distributed.
- 70,200 magazines were distributed.
- 25,000 Parent *Read and Rise* guides were distributed.
- 89% of 500 parent/caregivers surveyed in schools said their weekly family hour now consists of reading books for fun!

In sum, two efficacy studies (Goldenberg et al., 2007 and 2009) found that parents and families, who participated in the *Read and Rise* (formerly known as *Lee y Serás*) workshop series, benefited in the following ways:

- Parents learned that their home environment and community surroundings—as well as their own culture, language, and everyday activities—are valuable resources in helping their children to develop early literacy skills.
- Parents were empowered to take on more purposeful roles in supporting their children’s literacy development by directly engaging their children in activities such as expanding their oral literacy development, reading to them, and teaching them new letters and words.
- The workshops allayed many parents’ concerns around their use of their first language—Spanish—to promote and enrich their children’s literacy.

## Cultural Considerations

Strong relationships with adults who provide support are essential to the healthy development of all children (Zaff & Smerdon, 2008) but building those relationships begins with “respecting and addressing the needs and preferences of unique families and communities.” As urban sociologist and school reformer Pedro Noguera (2011) suggests, it may begin with educators seeing themselves as part of the community in which they are teaching. He outlines the challenge:

... educators need to know the community. They need to see their parents as allies; not as their clients, or as a bother. I would say that’s hard for a lot of educators because they don’t know the communities, they don’t know how to communicate with the parents. And many of the parents come to school with an attitude of suspicion, with hostility, because their experiences in school were not good. And so how do we build trusting relationships with parents? It has to be premised on the understanding that we want the same thing. That we all want to see the kids do well.

Let’s examine a case study that makes the point.

### Granger High School: Family Partnerships

As reported in an Issue Brief published by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009), “Family involvement tends to decrease across the middle and high school levels, yet it remains a strong predictor of adolescents’ academic achievement and social outcomes” (Bouffard & Stephen, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). Adolescents benefit when adults are involved in their daily lives (Ferguson & Rodriguez, 2005).

Granger High School is a case in point. Principal Richard Esparza made 100% parent involvement a school goal—and achieved the goal. How did he do it? In large part by acknowledging and addressing the unique needs of the school community. As summarized by Warger, Eavy, and others (2009), Granger High School serves a primarily rural population in Washington State. Many families make their living as agricultural workers. One-third of the 330 students are children of migrant workers; approximately 82% are Hispanic, 6% Native American, and 10% are Caucasian. The vast majority of students (84%) is eligible for free or reduced price meals.

“**Schools should develop and deliver culturally responsive interventions as early as possible.**”

—Sandra Barrueco, Michael Lopez,  
and J. Miles, 2007

As Esparza reflected on his own academic success, he realized that his own parents had provided the support and encouragement that put him over the top, so he worked hard to reach out to the parents in his school community. Esparza sums up his goal: “At its core, families needed to feel welcome and essential to their children’s education. And they needed to be supported in participating.”

# FAMILY INVOLVEMENT



## The Elements of Success

Esparza and his staff initiated a system that featured the following elements:

- **Teacher Mentors**

Esparza redistributed school resources to teachers so each one could become a mentor to a group of 20 students, whom they championed for four years. Teacher mentors develop individualized educational plans with each of their students that detail goals, objectives, special activities, and various supports—all of which is explained to and discussed with the students' families. The mentor is the liaison between the family and the school.

- **Biannual Individualized Parent Conferences**

Teacher mentors meet individually with parents for 30 to 60 minutes at least twice annually and review all aspects of what they can do to best support their children at home. The meetings are scheduled at convenient times for the parents, and off-site as needed.

“**Schools must learn to embrace and implement different strategies and techniques to reach all members of their school community.**”

—Patricia Edwards, 2009

- **Semimonthly Progress Reports**

The basic tenet is clear to all: no student will fail. Every other Friday, student progress reports are sent home and parents are encouraged to review and monitor. The family’s teaching mentor is standing by to answer questions.

### **Something to Write Home About**

The family-school partnership played a pivotal role in the rise of Granger’s academic achievement and graduation rates. Esparza explains:

Families wanted to be involved in their child’s education. They needed a way to feel welcomed and acknowledged by the school. And they needed specific ways, such as monitoring their child’s progress, to provide support in the home. The 100% attendance rate of our families at the biannual meetings is a testament to the system. As students succeed academically, their behavior improves and morale increases. Success breeds success.

## **Family Beliefs About Academic Success**

Dr. Patricia Edwards (2011, 2009) reminds us that while all parents want their children to succeed academically and beyond, not all parents share the same set of beliefs and skills about how best to support their children to that end. Edwards suggests that schools would do well to apply the principles of differentiated instruction to their work with parents. As she notes, “Parents, like students, are best served when treated individually.” She offers several suggestions for reaching out to parents in ways that recognize not all parents are alike; not all share the same approach to child-rearing.

### **Differentiating Family Supports**

As Patricia Edwards argues, it’s time to “think new” about parent involvement and the ways in which we reach out and welcome *families and communities* into our schools. It’s no longer something a few parents do on their own. Rather, “improving school, family, and community partnerships must be part of every school improvement plan.” And furthermore, we must tailor what we do to fit the unique cultural and linguistic needs and strengths of the communities in which we are working. As Edwards reminds us, thoughtful, sensitive “differentiation” is a must for family and community reach-out, too. To that end, she outlines six steps to sensitive family outreach:

1. Define parent involvement—in this way, everyone then will share a common understanding of what it means at your school: home-only activities or does it include an at-school response, too?

# FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

2. Assess your parent involvement climate—is it warm and welcoming? Parents won't get involved with school matters unless they feel welcome, respected, trusted, heard, and needed.
3. Consider the needs of your parents—consult with a small group of representative parents or consider sending home a survey in order to ascertain their primary needs and concerns.
4. Create a demographic profile—this is a short questionnaire that compiles information about the school's families.
5. Establish goals and share with parents—define your goals and determine how you'll accomplish them, then share with parents so you're all on the same page. As Lisa Delpit notes, make explicit to parents the school's "culture of power," a set of values, beliefs, ways of acting and being that too often serve to unfairly and unevenly elevate certain groups of people—mostly white, upper and middle class, male, and heterosexual—to positions where they have more control over money, people, and societal values than their non-culture-of-power peers. In this way, no one is excluded from participating; everyone is allowed a voice (1986).
6. Raise awareness—once you've identified your school community's needs, get the word out through multiple channels and help parents understand what they can do to help.

## **Dispelling Myths About Latino Parent Participation**

Patricia Edwards's essential message is abundantly evident in the study, *Dispelling Myths About Latino Parent Participation in Schools* (2006), conducted by Quiocho and Daoud, based at two large Southern California schools, both identified by the California Department of Education as underperforming. Between the two schools, the researchers observed and interviewed 70 Latino families and nearly 100 school staff. The researchers held public meetings at each school to disseminate and discuss the data; the split between the teaching staff and families was immediately apparent—a stark example of Delpit's "culture of power." Fortunately, constructive criticism and suggestions emerged. Indeed, the study demonstrates Dr. Edwards's point: not all parents are the same. Schools must learn to embrace and implement different strategies and techniques to reach all members of their school community.

Quiocho and Daoud's data indicated that the teachers believed that the Latino families who attended their schools were "unreliable and refused to volunteer in the classroom, did not support the school's homework policy because they did not help their children with homework, did not care about their child's education, and were unskilled and unprofessional."





The parents, too, were upset; the data revealed that they:

- Wanted their children to receive the same services as other students including curriculum content and instruction
- Were concerned that the curriculum centered only on literacy and learning to speak English; they wanted their children to have science and social studies, too
- Were concerned by the lack of promised follow-up
- Wanted help in understanding their children’s homework
- Wanted to be better informed about instructional goals and better informed in general; they asked for access to Spanish text so they can work more closely with their children and help
- Wanted teachers to respect their children

Ultimately, much of the parents’ concern centered on a lack of communication and a worry that their children weren’t receiving the same content-rich curriculum as their white peers. The parents asked for a friendly, Spanish-speaking parent liaison in the front office so they’d feel comfortable going to school and requesting

# FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

help directly. And they also asked that all school materials and communication be translated to Spanish. On the other side, the school staff were impressed with the family turnout and the extent and quality of the parental concerns as articulated by multiple family members. They immediately re-evaluated their assumption that Latino parents don't care about their children's education.

## **Osmond A. Church School: A Multicultural School With Multicultural Needs**

Helping parents help their children can be somewhat challenging when parents are new to American schools; still, with thoughtful communication and sensitive outreach, every parent in a school community, no matter their background, can become an enthusiastic participant. Valerie Lewis is the principal of Osmond A. Church School, a diverse, high-poverty school in Queens, New York, close to JFK International Airport, with 40% African American, 33% Asian (mostly of Indian and Pakistani descent), and 23% Hispanic students. Lewis explains:

We have a large Asian population. Many of the husbands are very protective of their families and would not allow their wives in the school building. To build trust, we made sure translators were at every meeting. We scheduled meetings at different times to accommodate parent and/or guardian work schedules. We held cultural celebrations and invited not just the families but also members of the extended family to participate. Also, each month we invited families to participate in recognition days at which children and their families would be recognized for their eagerness to learn. Eventually, the husbands decided that our school was safe, and since that time we have had significant family participation (Warger, et al., 2009).

Additionally, the school implemented a number of outreach programs that further informed parents about the curriculum—materials that went home, invitations to come to the school for dissemination workshops, social work assistance, and after-school support that also helped parents learn about the school's curriculum and learning program. The effort has paid off. "Our students are learning and achieving at high rates," Lewis explains. "For example, in 2007, more than 82% of students met or exceeded state standards in English/language arts. Student also matched or exceeded the rate of proficiency posted by all New York State students."

## **Strategies to Promote Success**

Our schools are facing daunting challenges and yet, over time, through focused research, case studies, and on-the-ground experience, educators are learning what works and what doesn't. Here's an inspiring example of what works.

**“ Schools are struggling to raise student achievement, reduce dropout rates, address disparities among children, close racial and ethnic achievement gaps, and increase the level of expectations of—and support for—all children. The call is clear; it is time for major systemic changes.”**

—Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor,  
Center for Mental Health in Schools,  
UCLA

### Chicago Child-Parent Centers

As reported by the Harvard Family Research Project (2006), Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) have been run by the Chicago public schools since 1967. The CPC are widely regarded by both policymakers and researchers as an example of exceptional pre-K that “provides preschool education for low-income children from age three through third grade, as well as a variety of family support services inside and outside the centers.” The CPC aim to bolster family involvement in children’s education both at home and in school. Involvement includes a range of activities: parents volunteer as classroom aides, interact with other parents in the center’s parent resource room, participate in educational workshops and courses, attend school events, accompany classes on field trips, and attend parent-teacher meetings. “This involvement strengthens parenting skills, vocational skills, and social supports.”

The research is promising. CPC has been effective in promoting both family and child development outcomes. CPC preschool participants were compared to a matched control group of children who didn’t attend CPC. The benefits of CPC preschool participation are striking and long term, positively impacting the students’ entire school career. CPC participation has led to:

- Greater parent involvement in and satisfaction with children’s schooling and higher expectations for children’s educational attainment
- Greater school achievement and lower rates of school remediation services for both preschool participation and school-age children
- Higher rates of high school completion and lower rates of official juvenile arrest for violent and nonviolent offenses

## In Sum

Following the work of UCLA researchers Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor (2008), and in partnership with Scholastic, Gainesville City Schools has created a district-wide system of comprehensive learning supports for its students. After just three years, they have seen significant outcomes, including:

- A decrease in discipline referrals to tribunal hearings (91 in 2009 to just 26 in 2012, a 71% decrease)
- An increase in graduation rate (73% graduation rate in 2009 to 85% in 2011)
- An increase in the number of students exceeding expectations on state criterion tests in every group and subgroup

- An increase in community and parent support as indicated on survey ratings and participation rates

Addressing their increase in family involvement and success in implementing *Scholastic Read and Rise* as part of their Learning Supports plan, Gainesville Superintendent Merrienne Dyer and Parent Educator Maria Ramirez, say: “It’s not a program; it is the result of trust and mutual respect built over time. It is a relationship that takes a system of continual care. A healthy relationship is based on empathy and open-minded attitudes” (Light et al., 2012).

And it’s school, family, and community relationships that fuel the *Scholastic Read and Rise*, Houston Independent School District, and Houston Area Urban League partnership. Not only are hundreds of HISD parents showing up for school Literacy Nights, but the districts’ athletic coaches are also playing a leading role in recruiting and motivating families to change the culture of literacy in the community. PTOs and district administrators—superintendents and principals—are involved, as are corporate stakeholders including Walmart, HEB Grocery Stores, State Farm, and the highly-regarded Houston Astros, Texans, and Rockets.

In the end, in addition to the research-based information and quality materials that are used to reach out, educate, and involve families—family literacy nights, information about early literacy development, quality read-aloud books—it always comes down to *relationships*. Recall the most influential factor in the Hoover-Dempsey (2005) study: When asked why they chose to get involved in their child’s school, the majority of parents responded, “Because we felt welcome in the school.”

Again and again, the message is the same: Schools that succeed in engaging families from diverse backgrounds:

- Focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members
- Recognize, respect, and address families’ needs as well as their differences and
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared (Henderson et al., 2007) 🧑

