

Family Engagement Brief

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About This Brief

Today public and private institutions have become more dedicated to improving academic achievement for all students than ever before. A 21st century that necessitates critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity for success has been upon us for more than a decade—yet traditional educational efforts fall short of building these essential skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Results from the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that American students ranked 36th in their overall level of academic achievement, performing below average in math, reading, and science (OECD, 2013). A recent adult skills assessment indicated that many fail to reach their full potential as compared to other countries as well (Perez-Pena, 2013). It is more important now than ever before that educational strategies prepare students to gain the skills necessary for a prosperous life. In response to these and other indicators, thought leaders from multiple sectors have issued a clarion call for public and private education systems to change and adapt in order to foster college and career readiness for both students and adults. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to restore America's educational prowess, a convergence around the power of family engagement as a dual or multi-generational approach to education has occurred.

The family unit is the basic building block of society. Engaging more than one generation in learning together positively impacts the entire family, and

in turn, the larger community. Family engagement activities can range from helping with homework, to going on an adventure together, to becoming the president of the local Parent Teacher Association, to engaging with or supporting the local community, and everything in between. What is important is that the engagement is family led, authentic, and built on a two-way exchange of information, mutual trust, and respect between families and the schools and community groups within which they are engaged. When this most basic social structure is engaged in an effort to make education a joint affair, the potential to improve America's trajectory is greatly enhanced. Research indicates that the inclusion of more than one generation in education increases the likelihood that college and career readiness will be passed on as a shared value.

Today there are more methods of engaging families than ever before. The Internet and the myriad of devices available to access it are becoming more widespread. Polls of parents underlie the importance of including technology in educational efforts (Schoolwires & Project Tomorrow, 2013; Northwestern University, 2013). Family engagement efforts, including those championed by the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), are increasingly inclusive of both online and offline opportunities. Along with the growing accessibility of the Internet is a major opportunity to engage more families where they spend much of their time.

This brief explores some of the evidence supporting approaches to family engagement that are effective methods of improving academic achievement. It also includes an overview of different types of family engagement, including case study examples of promising practices and recommendations for parents, school personnel, program officials, and community members seeking increased family engagement in education. Examples of organizations engaging families included here span public education systems, non-profit organizations, and a public library system.

A Perspective on Multi-Generational Approaches

Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., and the team at the Harvard Center for the Developing Child recently highlighted the importance of a dual or multi-generational approach to building the skills necessary for success in the 21st Century workforce. Shonkoff posits that such skills are articulated in recent evidence about the importance of executive function and self-regulation (2013). Dual or multi-generational educational strategies engage all members of the family in the learning process. In light of discussions about the domain of executive function (i.e., focus and sustain attention, goal setting, planning, rule following, problem solving, action monitoring, delay of gratification) in early childhood education, Shonkoff recognizes the strength of innovative two-generation programs that focus on both the adult and young child in building these skills. He notes two windows of rapid growth for executive function: between the ages of three and five and during adolescence and early adulthood. The breadth of this age range indicates that family engagement initiatives have a high likelihood of

instilling those executive function and self-regulation skills that can support college and career readiness in both children and adults.

This recent burst of information from Harvard University bolsters a large body of research that supports the importance of engaging the entire family in the educational process. The National Center for Families Learning has been collaborating with communities across the nation to engage families for more than two decades. During that time NCFL has witnessed firsthand the power of engaging the entire family in the learning process. Results and case studies from across the nation have affirmed NCFL's collective effort to leverage the family unit as a change agent. A recent example can be found in a study of NCFL-supported family learning programs in seven cities across the United States. Findings indicated that family learning programs had a positive impact on student achievement, attendance, and behavior (NCFL, 2013).

Building Family Capacity

A deliberate focus on building executive function and self-regulation and other college and career readiness skills for young people and their adult caregivers is dependent on effective family engagement practices. The ability of families and their capacity to drive positive community development can vary widely. Nevertheless, community development persists in both online and offline environments. In order to maximize the growth of stronger communities focused on common goods and personal goods, capacity among vulnerable members of society must be enhanced to meet today's needs. Capacity building for families should not be viewed through a deficit lens, but rather

from a more optimistic vista that recognizes unrealized potential (Hendersen, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Epstein, 2001; PTA, 2009). The capacity necessary to move families and communities forward will be fostered through families learning together in online and offline environments. Efforts to improve family learning capacity will include: the formal transmission of intergenerational learning strategies, positive parenting skills, and efforts to empower families to work with other families to improve educational and community outcomes.

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Standing on Solid Ground

Effective family engagement is widely recognized as having several positive effects on children and families. One meta-analytic review found that children whose families are more involved in school by attending parent-teacher conferences, parent meetings, visiting and volunteering in the classroom, and participating in social events display higher levels of achievement than similar children whose families are less involved in school (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005; as cited in Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). Similar findings were confirmed in another large meta-analysis of 716 studies that showed family engagement had a medium to high overall positive impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). While it has been well established that young people whose parents are more engaged in their education do better academically than their peers with less-engaged parents, benefits appear to be more significant when families are actively engaged in learning together (Hattie, 2009). Modeling shared learning activities in the home, school, and community positively impacts student achievement—especially among vulnerable families.

This paints an exciting picture for programs leveraging family engagement as a strategy to help all individuals reach their full potential.

Family engagement also has been shown to improve parental self-efficacy, which promotes literacy performance and augments the overall positive impacts such as increasing graduation rates (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). Moreover, the positive impacts of parent involvement have helped to specifically improve academic achievement for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Increased parent involvement in the home and at school has been particularly effective at promoting low-income student success in early childhood programs (Hindman, Skibbe, Miller, & Zimmerman, 2010). Finally, teachers who involve parents and other volunteers report having more time to teach (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). In other words, family engagement is good for students, families, and school staff.

Do You Believe?

Effective family engagement begins with a core set of attitudes and beliefs about families. In *Beyond the Bake Sale*, Hendersen, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) suggest that school staff must believe the following about families:

- **All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them**
- **All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning**
- **Parents and school staff should be equal partners**
- **The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.**

These powerful beliefs about parents are a prerequisite to engaging the family unit in the educational process. Another meta-analysis of 31 studies about family engagement underscored similar sentiments about the importance of educator attitudes towards parents (Ferguson, 2008). The necessity to hold positive beliefs about all families also is true for organizations other than schools seeking to engage families. Families often depend on community-based organizations to provide basic and educational services. Given that such organizations can serve an important intermediary role between families and the school, positive beliefs about parents by program staff are equally important for effective family engagement. The ability to successfully engage families in educational efforts will depend on the ability of educators, community groups, and policy makers to create an atmosphere that builds trust and mutual understanding between families and the institutions seeking to serve them.

Effective Family Engagement in Action

The implementation of effective family engagement strategies is built on a foundational belief that all families want the best for their children. Once those beliefs are established, the institution attempting to increase family engagement must invest itself fully in those efforts. Well-known parent involvement researcher Joyce Epstein has observed that “parent involvement is on everyone’s list of practices to make schools more effective, to help families create more positive learning environments, to reduce the risk of

student failure, and to increase student success (1987, p. 4),” but that it does not happen automatically. She continued, “Parent involvement is everybody’s job, but nobody’s job until a structure is in place to support it (p. 10).” The following case studies represent examples of effectiveness that NCFL has discovered through its work across the country. In all of these cases, pro-family beliefs and institutional commitment to family engagement are strongly represented among their research-based family engagement practices.

Springdale Public Schools

Springdale, Arkansas

Springdale Public Schools (SPS) in Springdale, Arkansas, is dedicated to the engagement of families to improve academic achievement. Their dedication reached a fever pitch when they devoted an entire goal of their 2013 Race to the Top District (RTT-D) grant award to “developing parents as partners in the educational process.” The RTT-D grant competition is one of the largest competitive grants ever offered by the United States Department of Education and the SPS award is the largest grant ever awarded to the school district. A significant portion of the \$26 million SPS RTT-D award will be expended on family engagement strategies, such as the addition of five new comprehensive family literacy sites, the implementation of student-led conferencing, expansion of parent information nights, additional parent leadership opportunities, and college and career readiness seminars for families.

SPS received Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP) funding from the National Center for Family Literacy (recently renamed National Center for Families Learning) in 2008 to start their first three comprehensive family literacy sites. With the addition of sites over time from various funding sources, including those programs slated to begin with RTT-D funding, the district of 21,000 students will have 18 operating comprehensive family literacy sites. Each family literacy program will operate according to the four-component family literacy model developed by NCFL. This program follows an intensive, family-centered model of education that includes the

following components: parent education classes, parent literacy classes, student literacy classes, and Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time®. These components work together to help families reach their full potential. Springdale Superintendent Jim Rollins observed:

The Springdale School District’s family literacy program has provided the essential link between the district’s ELL parents and our schools through the creation of meaningful partnerships focused on improved learning opportunities for both students and family members. This successful orientation has led to significant increases in ELL parent engagement and advocacy as well as obvious improvement in the academic performance of ELL students.

SPS reports the following successes as a result of their evidence-based family engagement program:

- The percentage of proficient students increased for all Limited English Proficient students.
- Improved self-efficacy among participating parents
- Improved parent attendance at school events
- Parent participants experienced statistically significant increases on the BEST literacy assessment.
- The percentage of parents reading to their children four times and five times per week increased by 39 percent and 42 percent respectively.

Queens Library

New York City, New York

Queens Library serves more than 2.3 million people from 63 locations across the borough. Tracie Hall, Vice President for Queens Library, reports that the average Queens resident lives less than one mile away from a Queens Library location. With that level of reach in the community, libraries are an exceptional location for family engagement activity. The library system uses its proximity to reach families through library and community-based programming in the following four areas:

- School Readiness
- Healthy Development (with an emphasis on Service to Children with Special Needs)
- Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) Learning
- Access to the library as a first and free early learning service provider

According to Hall, one major key to successful family engagement is willingness on the part of staff to reach parents and caregivers where they are and to provide services that support them in gaining the confidence and competence they need to be effective parents. Another important part of the Queens programing is the inclusion of several partners. Attempting to reach millions of residents is not a task that can be completed alone. Family engagement efforts for Queens Library include the following formal partners: Queens Museum, American Museum of Natural History, Isamu Noguchi Museum, Jumpstart, PBS, NY Department of Education, NY Hall of Science,

and Reach Out and Read. Additional partners are participants in the work of the libraries for particular projects.

One of two programs described by Hall as particularly successful is the work carried out by local community-based organization Zone 126, which involves men living in public housing in the lives of their young children. Queens Library also highlighted its adult literacy and English as a Second Language programming and the efforts made to include young children in a truly dual generational approach to education.

The Queens Library family engagement efforts are creating results. Participant outcomes include:

- Children demonstrate improved listening, speaking, and socialization skills.
- Children develop an interest in books and increase their visits to the library.
- Parents/caregivers use “extended talk” with their children at home.
- Parents/caregivers indicate better preparedness to serve as advocates and participants in their child’s education.
- Fathers and other significant males engage in a greater number of pre-literacy classroom and take-home learning activities with their preschool children.
- Through professional development, staff and teachers increase their abilities to guide parents more effectively regarding their child’s development.

“Parent involvement is everybody’s job, but nobody’s job until a structure is in place to support it.”

–Joyce Epstein, Johns Hopkins University

Mesa Public Schools

Mesa, Arizona

Mesa Public Schools (MPS) is the public school district for the city of Mesa, Arizona. The district enrolled more than 69,000 students for the 2013-2014 school year. During a recent strategic planning process, the district identified school-community partnership work as a major priority. As a part of its overall family engagement approach, MPS began its family literacy programs for school-age children in 2007 with Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP) funding and technical assistance from NCFL. Since its initial inclusion of three sites, MPS has expanded the comprehensive family program to 11 sites by leveraging multiple funding sources and partnerships. The Toyota Family Literacy Program started in 2003 and was implemented in 30 cities. The Mesa program has consistently risen to the top of exemplary TFLP programs. Since 2007, the Mesa family literacy program has generated the following key findings:

- Principals observed parents increased their involvement in leadership roles, such as PTO and community involvement.
- Eighty-three percent of parents ended the 2010 program year in the High Intermediate and Advanced ESL levels.
- All principals in TFLP schools reported the greatest benefit of family literacy is parents' increased support of their children's education.
- Kindergarten and first-grade students of families participating in the TFLP demonstrated the strongest results on Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills.
- Teachers began to show parents strategies, such as reading aloud, asking questions, and reviewing homework, to practice at home with their children. Cultural sensitivity and meaningful communication between teachers and parents built new relationships across cultural boundaries.

This MPS program case study represents an intensive, best-practice family literacy program that has resulted in direct academic and life improvement for participants and overall increases in the quality and quantity of family engagement across the district. MPS School Administrator David Christensen explained it best when he observed:

The families have learned how to learn and how to gain more from the world around them. Parents have become more confident in their ability to help their children as well as more confident in their ability to provide for their families' needs. Literacy always lifts people out of poverty and pain, and thus it is for our families. They are happy, smiling people who have much to smile about.

What is important is that the engagement is family led, authentic, and built on a two-way exchange of information, mutual trust, and respect between families and the schools and community groups within which they are engaged.

Orange County Public Schools and City Year

Orlando, Florida

The Orange County Public Schools (OCPS) in Orlando, Florida, is a partner in the Florida Race to the Top grant project. OCPS has identified increasing family engagement as a priority in the major school reform effort. OCPS is a large public school system that enrolls more than 175,000 students. City Year Orlando is a primary partner working with OCPS on efforts to increase family engagement. City Year is a community organization wholly focused on fighting the national dropout crisis. The partnership between City Year and OCPS is a great example of a public/private partnership designed to engage families in educational efforts. The OCPS goal to improve student achievement through more effective family engagement is being addressed through evidence-based strategies from City Year.

City Year members participating in this project understand the importance of building trusting relationships with students and families in order to successfully engage families. As a result, City Year members working in OCPS have implemented the following strategies: phone calls home to families

to celebrate success and to share challenges (e.g., attendance, behavior, and academics), active participation in parent teacher conferences, relationship-building activities with students during school time, participation in school advisory committees, and participation in family engagement nights. Efforts began in earnest during the first part of the 2013-2014 school year. Early anecdotal evidence of success included numerous parent and teacher testimonials to the effectiveness of the City Year members. One mother reported that her children have improved their grades from D's last year to B's this year as a result of the project. OCPS and City Year look forward to more quantitative success as the year continues.

When asked to what practices City Year Orlando members would attribute the largest part of their success, the positive phone calls home and constant communication with families were cited. The City Year Orlando and OCPS partnership is an outstanding example of evidence-based family engagement in action.

Moving Forward

The above case studies are real-world examples of effective family engagement and multi-generational approaches to education. One constant theme in discussions about building family engagement efforts is that the work is most effective when it is carried out by partners from multiple sectors. American society has reached a point where lost potential due in part to inadequate family engagement strategies can no longer be the sole responsibility of school systems. Both the complexity and potential power of the family depends on a holistic engagement approach. Organizations across the country—including school systems, public libraries, businesses, community groups, and faith-based groups—are necessary to implement effective family engagement strategies. Effective family engagement can result in positive social/emotional relationships between parents and

children, improved academic achievement, and the intentional transmission of such values through more than one generation. The generational nature of these family-centered services distinguishes the approach that NCFL has championed for twenty-four years from isolated efforts to serve only PK-12 students or individual adults. Current and future public and private efforts should build on the strong foundation of past research and include both online and offline efforts to engage families in shared learning activities.

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