

**Written Statement for the Record of the  
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**On behalf of the National Working Group for Family and Community  
Engagement**

**Before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
United States Senate**

**April 22, 2010**

**Statement by Anne T. Henderson, Senior Consultant**  
**Community Organizing and Engagement, Annenberg Institute for School Reform**  
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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, committee members, and my fellow distinguished panelists, I am honored to participate in this important hearing on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

I am here today as a member of the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (FSCE Working Group) to share lessons from the research and the field that demonstrate the urgent need for effective family and community engagement in raising student achievement and driving school reform.

The FSCE Working Group is a group of leading researchers, practitioners, and funders committed to family engagement in education. We offer the diverse expertise of our members to inform the development and implementation of sound federal policy on family and community engagement in education. We are dedicated to mobilizing cradle to career pathways and partnerships among families, schools, and communities to promote readiness from kindergarten to college, improve schools, and increase student achievement.

Over 40 years of research and effective practice demonstrate that families play critical roles in student success. They support their children's learning, guide them through a complex school system, advocate for better learning opportunities, and collaborate with educators and community organizations to push for school improvement. A strong relationship between families and schools is essential to eliminating the achievement gap and preparing *all students* for success in school and in life.

Effective family engagement positions families as agents of change, who from the day their children are born, keep them on track to be successful in school, college and the workforce. The FSCE Working Group has identified three proven components of effective family engagement, which together provide a picture of what robust family engagement in education should look like.

First, family engagement is *a shared responsibility* among schools, communities and families. From their side, schools and other community agencies and organizations must make the effort to engage families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways. And reciprocally, families must actively support their children's learning and development.

Second, family engagement is *continuous* across a child's lifespan. Family engagement is not confined to traditional K-12 schooling, but rather begins from infancy, moves into early

childhood programs, and continues through college and career, to support children during all stages of their development.

Third, family engagement is *carried out everywhere that children learn* – at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities.

## **OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

I have spent the last 30 years tracking the research that links family and community engagement to student success and school improvement, and then identifying effective practice that carries it out.

In my most recent review of research with Dr. Karen Mapp of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we found that family engagement is critical to closing the achievement gap. Specifically, when families are engaged in the education of their children, students' test scores and grades increase, and their attendance, attitudes and behavior improve. In addition, students are more likely to take higher-level classes, graduate from high school and continue to post-secondary education. The positive impact of school practices to engage families is greatest for low-income children, and the disparity in capacity between middle and low-income families to be engaged effectively is an engine of the achievement gap.<sup>1</sup>

A recent study on whole school improvement efforts demonstrates that effective family engagement is essential to turning around struggling schools. In their book synthesizing 15 years of research on school improvement, Anthony Bryk, John Easton and the other distinguished authors identify parent involvement as one of the five “key ingredients” to school improvement in low-income schools.

This study, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, demonstrates that engaging families is not an “add-on” activity, but rather a critical factor in improving academic achievement. Moreover, the study found that parental involvement is necessary to ensure the success of other school improvement efforts, including school leadership and curriculum alignment.<sup>2</sup>

In this difficult economic time, it is important to note that engaging families is a cost-effective way to raise student achievement. Partnering with parents and the community to increase student success leverages local resources and capacity to drive education reform. In 2008, economists Andrew Houtenville and Karen Smith Conway published a study showing that schools would have to increase spending by over \$1000 per pupil to attain the same results that family engagement would yield.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: the Impact of Family, School, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002). H.B. Weiss, S.M. Bouffard, B.L. Bridglall and E.W. Gordon, *Reframing Family Involvement in Education: Supporting Families to Support Educational Equity*. Campaign for Educational Equity(Teachers College, Columbia University, December, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Houtenville, and Karen Smith Conway, “Parental Effort, School Resources, and Student Achievement.” *Journal of Human Resources*. XLIII, (2008), 437-53.

Not only does engaging families improve student achievement, but building the advocacy and leadership capacity of parents drives school reform and improvement. A series of studies by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in Providence, Rhode Island found that organizing and empowering parent leaders contributed to these changes in schools:

- Improved school leadership and staffing;
- Upgraded school facilities;
- New resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum; and
- Higher quality learning programs for students.<sup>4</sup>

Despite strong evidence that family engagement raises student achievement, decreases the dropout rate, and stimulates school improvement, the majority of current family engagement policy and practice is not strategic, sustained, or linked to children’s learning and development. Instead, schools and districts often commit what we call random acts of parent involvement—a back-to-school night, a flyer home about parent-teacher conferences, or a one-hour workshop on bullying practices. These practices do not engage parents in meaningful ways and fall short of achieving the desired effect—to raise student achievement and drive education reform.

The dearth of effective family engagement practices at the local level is does not stem from lack of interest from educators or parents. Both educators and parents want to work together in meaningful ways to increase student success, but they say they need guidance and support on how to form such a partnership. Despite contrary misperceptions, studies show that all parents, regardless of their income level or socioeconomic background, want to be involved in their child’s education and understand the importance of going to college.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent survey by Hart Research and Associates, teachers listed increasing parent involvement as one of the most effective ways to improve public education—ranking it even higher than school discipline and the quality of school resources and facilities.<sup>6</sup> These findings corroborate a 2005 survey of American teachers conducted by the MetLife Foundation. According to the survey, the biggest challenge that new teachers say they face is communicating with and involving parents. New teachers also identified engaging families as the area where they feel least prepared. Not surprisingly, they also reported that their relationship with students’ parents is the area where they are least satisfied.<sup>7</sup>

Congress has always recognized parent involvement as essential to ensuring equity and opportunity for all students. Since its inception in 1965, ESEA has included parents in efforts to improve education in low-income communities and hold schools and districts accountable for raising student achievement. Congress must move this work forward to ensure that parent engagement remains a cornerstone of federal education law.

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<sup>4</sup> Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, & Sara McAlister. *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009)

<sup>5</sup> Henderson and Mapp, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J., Streeter, R. & Mason, J.R. (2008). *One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America’s High Schools*. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

<sup>7</sup> *The MetLife Survey of the American Teachers: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships* (2005). NY: Harris Interactive.

## **NATIONAL FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORK GROUP PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite this historic commitment, schools, districts, and states lack incentives and capacity to develop and scale-up proven, innovative approaches to engaging families. The FSCE Working Group offers five recommendations for the upcoming reauthorization of ESEA:

### **1. Provide incentives and funding for effective family engagement at the school, district, and state level.**

- *Increase mandatory funding for family engagement at the district level and for State Education Agencies (SEAs) to provide technical assistance and professional development on proven, research-based strategies that engage families to improve student learning.*

Increased guidance and incentives for implementing research-based strategies is needed to leverage the federal investment in family engagement to prepare all students for college and career. For example, the collaboration among parents, the community organizing group Austin Interfaith, and the Austin Independent School District, led to significant improvements in school climate, parent engagement, teacher commitment and principal leadership. Schools that were deeply involved in this effort showed gains ranging from 15 to 19 points in the percent of students meeting minimum standards on the state test, compared to only 4 points in schools with lower levels of involvement.<sup>8</sup>

- *Engage families in ensuring all students are prepared for college and career by effectively communicating academic standards and assessment data and requiring that parents play an integral role in all school turnaround strategies.*

By engaging families in the school improvement process, schools and LEAs build capacity for systemic reform that will result in improved student achievement. When families and community members have ready access to the information and resources necessary to support their children's learning, they are in a stronger position to hold schools accountable.

We ask you to leverage the substantial public and private investments in better data systems by ensuring that college- and career-ready standards, assessment, and performance data are communicated to families and communities in a language and variety of formats they can understand. In addition, this information must be disseminated via processes that enable them to play their multiple roles in keeping children on the pathway to college and career.

### **2. Strengthen Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) and focus their role on capacity-building and technical assistance, so that schools, districts, and states can scale up research-based family engagement practices that improve student achievement.**

Schools, districts, and states cannot implement effective family engagement strategies alone, and the PIRCs can help. The PIRCs are the only federal program dedicated to engaging families in their children's education from cradle to career. There are 62 PIRCs across the nation, in all

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<sup>8</sup> Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister. *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin interfaith* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009).

states and territories, and they serve over 16 million parents annually—over 70% of them in Title I and low-income schools. Congress can strengthen this program to provide high-quality capacity building and technical assistance to schools, districts, and other grantees to scale up research-based and innovative approaches that engage families and raise student achievement. Several PIRCs have already moved in this direction and are providing leadership on family engagement in their state—and having a significant impact on student achievement.

For example, Utah PIRC has trained parent liaisons to work in 26 low-performing schools to focus specifically on family literacy and training for parents with limited English proficiency. The parent liaisons work with the district to create a curriculum for parents that offers not only literacy development but also strategies for reinforcing student learning at home and navigating the educational system. Over 90% of parents enrolled in this program report that their children's grades have improved.

California PIRC-1 partners with 18 school districts to conduct parent leadership academies that build parent knowledge and skills on how to navigate the educational system and advocate for school improvement. A quasi-experimental study conducted in 2009 found that students with parents participating in this Project INSPIRE Parent Leadership Academy increased their English language arts score by 12.8 points and their math score by 18.5 points on California's state test.

### **3. Provide high-quality in-service and pre-service professional development to build the capacity of teachers and principals to engage parents in raising student achievement.**

Engaging parents in improving student achievement allows teachers and principals to share the responsibility of preparing all students for college and career. Unfortunately, teachers (especially new teachers) have identified family engagement as the primary area where they feel the most challenged and least prepared.<sup>9</sup> It is critical to provide high-quality, job-embedded professional development to teachers and principals in effective and meaningful ways to engage families. Several districts and PIRCs across the country have already taken leadership on providing this training.

For example, the Iowa PIRC's iSPIN program provides professional development, training, and support to teachers, parents, and administrators on how to partner to increase student academic achievement. The Iowa PIRC is housed within the School Administrators of Iowa to ensure that systemic family engagement is part of the school's core academic program. A recent and rigorous evaluation of the Solid Foundation program, from which iSPIN has been adapted, showed that participating schools had increases in student achievement that were significantly higher than in non-participating schools.

The University of Arizona's math department houses Math and Parent Partners, which trains parent leaders and teachers to facilitate math workshops for parents so that they can support their children's math learning. Originally based in four states in the southwest, MAPPS Programs are now in place in nine states around the country. Results include enhanced teacher quality in math content knowledge, new approaches to teaching and learning math, and knowledge of meaningful ways to work with parents in math. An evaluation in two districts found that students

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<sup>9</sup> The MetLife Survey of the American Teachers: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships (NY: Harris Interactive, 2005)

of participating families improved as much as 80% on their standardized test scores.

The Grow Your Own teacher initiative in Illinois aims to create a pipeline of highly qualified teachers, many of whom are parents from underserved communities, to improve teacher retention in low-income schools and hard-to-fill positions, and to increase the cultural competence and community connections of teachers. As of March 2009, the program has 500 candidates in the pipeline, nearly 90 percent people of color with strong ties to their communities.

#### **4. Build Statewide Capacity for Family Engagement**

For too long, state education agencies have been agents of compliance, rather than creators of innovation. The reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity to build the capacity of states to provide leadership, support and compelling incentives for effective family engagement in education.

- *Provide resources for states to build local capacity and offer incentives family engagement such as creating competitive grant programs for family engagement, hosting parent leadership academies or designing professional development.*

SEAs should create infrastructure to support the development and scaling up of effective practice as well as partner with other agencies and institutions to offer technical assistance and professional development to local schools and districts. Developing statewide data collection and evaluation system on family engagement can identify schools that would benefit from training and support, as well as to identify effective practice

For example, the Connecticut Department of Education has partnered with the CT PIRC to launch a program that has transformed ineffective family-school compacts into dynamic agreements between teachers and families to meet the goals of their school improvement plans. The program consists of professional development for high-need Title I schools in urban districts, on-site technical assistance to school staff and parents as they develop their plans, mini-grants to cover the costs of workshops and meetings, and a formative assessment to guide schools toward increasingly effective practice. The Theory of Change Diagram (attached) documents the strategies used, actions taken, changes in attitudes and practice, and improved outcomes for students, teachers and families.

- *Establish statewide family engagement coordinating councils comprised of parents, educators, the early learning, higher education, and business community, and community and faith-based organizations to coordinate family engagement initiatives across a child's lifespan and in all learning settings.*

Creating statewide councils will engage families and key stakeholders in building state capacity for integrating and coordinating family engagement policies, initiatives, and uses of funds from cradle to career—preventing fragmentation and create a statewide family engagement strategy that is systemic, sustained, and scalable.

The Maryland Department of Education created M-PAC, the Maryland Parent Advisory Council, which works with key educational and community stakeholders to drive educational decision-

making and ensure that family engagement is a core component of all educational programs beginning in early childhood and extending through college graduation.

- *Piloting local family engagement centers that serve the unique needs of families in local communities.*

During the last reauthorization of ESEA, Congress determined a critical need for direct services for families, which would be provided by community-based organizations. In response, Congress added a funding trigger that would establish Local Family Information Centers if PIRC funding reached \$50 million. Because this threshold was never met, these local services have not been implemented to remove barriers to family engagement in education.

The FSCE Working Group recommends that ESEA include a local family engagement demonstration program that provides direct services, such as leadership training and family literacy, to families and removes barriers to family engagement. Community-based organizations know the needs and strengths of local families and can most effectively engage and support parents' involvement in their local school and neighborhood.

- *Codify a research-based definition of and standards for effective family engagement.*

Codifying standards for effective family engagement policy and practice will provide schools and districts with a robust picture of what effective family engagement looks like in practice. Fifteen states have already adopted the National Parent Teacher Association's research-based Standards for Family-School Partnerships into law or state policy as guiding principles for schools and districts to use when developing their strategies for family engagement. These standards describe conditions that should be in place in every school, to provide an essential foundation for a high-achieving learning environment.

- 1—Welcoming All Families into the School Community: Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.
- 2—Communicating Effectively: Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication about student learning.
- 3—Supporting Student Success: Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.
- 4—Speaking Up for Every Child: Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.
- 5—Sharing Power: Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.
- 6—Collaborating with Community: Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> National PTA. *National Standards, Goals and Indicators for Family-School Partnership*, 2008.  
[http://www.pta.org/Documents/National\\_Standards\\_Assessment\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.pta.org/Documents/National_Standards_Assessment_Guide.pdf)



Kentucky is the first state to adopt and codify state standards on family and community engagement. Developed by the Commissioner's Parent Advisory Council (CPAC) these state standards for family engagement align with the state's academic standards, and describe what practice looks like at the novice, apprentice, proficient and distinguished levels. (National PTA drew on these standards to develop their national standards.) Schools and districts in Kentucky use these standards to guide their school improvement plans and link parent involvement strategies to student achievement. When schools fail to improve student test scores two years in a row, they undergo a scholastic audit performed by a team appointed by the state education agency. The audit protocol includes a review of school practices to engage families in improving student achievement, based on the state standards.<sup>11</sup>

## **5. Strengthen federal support and coordination of cradle to career family engagement strategies and initiatives, including a robust federal research agenda.**

- *Support a family engagement research and evaluation agenda*

Develop a research agenda that uses rigorous methodology to identify evidence-based and promising practices that engage families to raise student achievement. In addition, research on promising school reform practices, including school turnarounds, should include metrics for family engagement practices and their effects.

With the United States trailing other industrialized countries in college and career readiness, it is clear that schools and teachers cannot close the achievement gap alone. We must provide resources and leadership for schools, districts, and states to scale-up best practices and build local capacity to partner with parents to raise student achievement.

- *Ensure equity and opportunity for all students by extending family engagement to young people who are Native American, homeless, or in the juvenile justice and foster care system.*

It is critical to extend family engagement to all young people, especially those in high-risk situations such as the juvenile justice and foster care systems where traditionally poor transition and discharge planning leads to lower educational outcomes for students.

- *Engage families in ensuring a positive school climate and phasing out punitive discipline policies such as zero tolerance that keep students out of school and prevent them from learning.*

Engage families in assessing school climate and developing and implementing strategies to improve school climate, school discipline policies, school safety, and student physical and mental health and well-being. This includes providing incentives to phase-out punitive school

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<sup>11</sup> Commissioner's Parent Advisory Council, *The Missing Piece of the Proficiency Puzzle: Recommendations for Involving families and community in improving student achievement* (Frankfurt, KY: Kentucky Department of Education, 2007) [www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/45597738-F31B-4333-9BB9-34255F02BC6D/0/PACtheMissingPiecev2.pdf](http://www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/45597738-F31B-4333-9BB9-34255F02BC6D/0/PACtheMissingPiecev2.pdf)

suspension and zero tolerance policies and to support proven classroom-based behavioral interventions like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Research has shown that school districts' use of "zero tolerance" policies has led to the near doubling of students suspended from school annually, increasing from 1.7 million to 3.1 million per year, between 1974 and 2003.<sup>12</sup> Parents are key stakeholders in determining the comprehensive needs of students and their community, and should be engaged in developing strength-based interventions that improve student achievement, motivation, attendance, safety, and behavior.

- *Encourage the replication of best practices and innovations in the field by requiring the Government Accountability Office to produce a report on the current status, barriers, and successes in state and district implementation of family engagement strategies.*

Over the last several years, many superintendents, principals, and teachers have approached members of the Working Group asking for guidance on how to use funds on strategies that research shows work. Providing them with this information encourages local solutions and flexibility by highlighting a number of successful strategies as well as identifying states, schools, and districts in need of more support.

- *Support the development of research-based metrics for assessing effective family engagement in schools and their impact on improving student achievement.*

Require the Secretary of Education to appoint a committee of leading researchers and expert practitioners to develop metrics that assess the impact of family engagement strategies on student achievement. These metrics should be aligned with state and district assessment systems of educational programs and policies, including surveys for the Safe, Healthy, and Successful Students Program, to provide additional support to districts and schools that demonstrate a need to strengthen family engagement.

- *Reduce duplication and fragmentation, and elevate family engagement in education by establishing dedicated staff for integrating family engagement initiatives within the U.S. Department of Education and across federal agencies.*

Family, school, and community engagement should be a cross-cutting priority for all ESEA programs. A high level of coordination within the Department and across federal agencies could ensure that educators, families, and community organizations have the resources and incentives to develop integrated, systemic, and sustained family and community engagement strategies that drive student achievement and school reform.

Once again, I would like to thank the committee and the other panelists here today for their commitment to our country's children. We owe it to our children to work together—parents, teachers, principals, and community and business leaders—to ensure that all students have every opportunity to be successful in school and through life. Preparing America's students

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<sup>12</sup> Losen, D. and Wald, J. (May 2003). Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline: Framing Paper for the School to Prison Pipeline Research Conference. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard.

for college and career is imperative not only for our own children's future, but also for the future of our nation.

Attachments:

School-Family Collaboration: A Theory of Change (Connecticut Department of Education)  
National Standards, Goals and Indicators for Family-School Partnership (National PTA)