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DODGING THE WHODUNNIT:

Broadening an Understanding of Successful Family, School and Community Engagement Strategies

MATH
READING
Singing

Elizabeth Rockett Sullivan | Perry and Associates, Inc.

Acknowledgements

Researching the value of family and community relationships in supporting positive student outcomes makes me truly appreciative of the innumerable relationships that have contributed to my own growth and development over the years. I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to my family, friends, and all the people in my life who have helped shape me into the person that I am today, especially my husband Sean. His unconditional love and support goes beyond anything I could have imagined, and is more than I could have ever asked for. Last but certainly not least, I would like to extend my special thanks to George Perry and Nancy Baez at Perry and Associates without their instrumental guidance and generous support, this publication would not be possible.

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INTRODUCTION

You don't have to look much further than the New York Times' Opinion Pages to understand how divided our nation stands when it comes to issues regarding education policy. Chances are you have heard the all too familiar blame game. Who can we point our fingers at for our students' shortcomings? Our administrators? Teachers? Parents? Students? Politicians?

In one effort to shift blame for low test scores away from teachers and highlight the important role that parents play in their children's education, The New York Times published a controversial editorial on November 19, 2011 entitled, "How about better parents?" According to the editorial, "better parents can make every teacher more effective."¹ While the author makes a valid point in placing greater value on the role of parents in supporting their child's education, the not-so-delicate phrasing of this position alludes to the popular myth that students are failing because their parents are not doing a good job at parenting, or because their families do not care.



Ultimately, the goal of effective family engagement is not to make parents "better," it is to grant them an informed partnership in their child's education and make sure they have the tools and resources they need in order to fully participate in this partnership. It is not about simply telling parents to check their child's homework assignments; it's about building and sustaining relationships among educators, students, parents, and communities that will support student learning. Research shows us that effective parent engagement is multifaceted and complex.² It also shows us that parents generally want what is best for their children and care about their education, and when family engagement programs fail, it is not simply because families lack interest. And ultimately, schools adopting the attitude that parents simply "don't care" about their children's education may find it difficult to cultivate environments that support collaborative and results-driven partnerships between parents, communities, and schools.³

In the wake of new Common Core Standards, attention once again shifts towards teachers and test scores, with an influx of articles such as the one published by the New York Times Editorial Board on June 5, 2013 entitled "Better Teachers for New York City."⁴ Once again, we see a resurgence of blame now shifting towards teachers who, according to popular belief, just don't care about their jobs and are failing our nation's children because they are unqualified and apathetic. Impassioned commenters continue to engage in cyclical debates on the essential roles of

¹ Friedman, T. L. (2011, November 19). How about better parents?. The New York Times. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-about-better-parents.html?_r=2&andsmid=tw-NYTimesFriedman&andseid=auto

² For a comprehensive list of resources and research publications, please visit: <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources>

³ <http://www.adi.org/journal/SS03/Mapp%2035-64.pdf>

⁴ The Editorial Board. (2013, June 5). Better Teachers for New York City. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/opinion/better-teachers-for-new-york-city.html>

teachers and parents in improving student outcomes, without necessarily encouraging solutions that are backed by systemic, sustainable, research-based, and culturally competent family engagement practices.

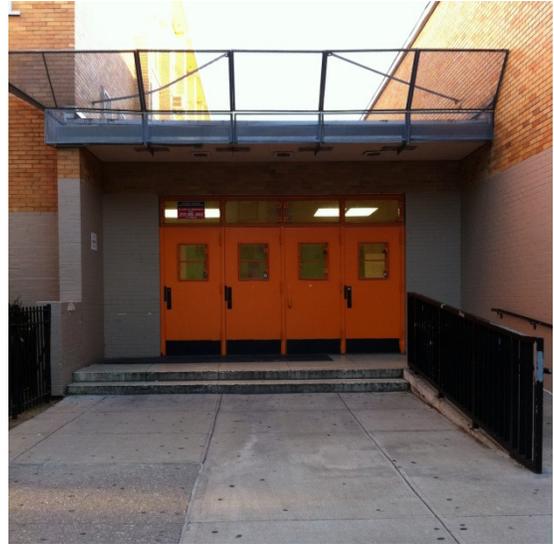
We know that when implemented strategically, these practices are highly effective, and yet there still seems to be a huge disconnect among what the research prescribes, what the policies dictate, and what is happening in our learning communities. Rather than assigning blame, we need to question why certain problems persist and then set goals determine what we, as a community, can do to facilitate the solutions that are grounded in research-based family, school, and community engagement strategies.

Shifting away from a blameful mindset, it is our goal in publishing this report to broaden an understanding of the complex and evolving nature of successful family engagement strategies, advancing a deeper understanding of the critical role such strategies play in supporting positive student outcomes. More specifically, this paper aims to (1) understand what successful family engagement entails; (2) capitalize on current research in an effort to explore the key components and implications of successful high engagement strategies; (3) discuss the effects of increased and restructured parental engagement on the performance of students with disabilities; and (4) address the implications of family engagement as they pertain to New York City Public Schools.

FROM PARTICIPATION TO PARTNERSHIP: DEFINING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Throughout this paper the terms family and parent are used broadly to refer to the enduring relationships, biological or non-biological, chosen or circumstantial, that connect a child/youth and parent/caregiver through culture, tradition, shared experiences, emotional commitment and mutual support. This definition, borrowed from the United Advocates for Children in California, recognizes that a child's primary caregiver may not always be of direct biological relation, in the traditional sense of the word "parent."⁵

The field of family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) has evolved from earlier methods of "parent involvement," which brought parents into the schools to improve their school environment through volunteer work, bake sales, and PTA meetings. Today, a much more complex picture of family and community engagement prevails, one which transforms the roles of families, educators, and community members into shared stakeholders whose central aim is to strengthen student achievement. In other words, according to the 2012 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, "involvement becomes 'engagement' when parents are included as part of the organization and culture of the school, most often with a plan linked to goals for student learning and healthy development."⁶ While there is widespread agreement that students do better in school and in life when their parents are engaged in their education, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement, and the roles of educators and parents in fulfilling this partnership vary from one school to the next.



Leaders and top researchers in the field of FSCE can, however, recommend a general framework for effective engagement strategies, maintaining that successful family engagement is "a *shared responsibility* of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement; it is *continuous* from birth to adulthood; and it *occurs across multiple settings* where children learn."⁷ Unlike previous, limited notions of *parent involvement*, this multifaceted view of family engagement appreciates student achievement as a collaborative effort among various stakeholders and across various settings. Researchers also agree that in order to implement these programs successfully, family engagement practices need to be sustainable, systemic, and integrated⁸:

Sustainable: Operates with sufficient resources, including public-private partnerships, to ensure meaningful and effective strategies that have the power to impact student learning and achievement.

⁵ Definition retrieved from: United Advocates for Children of California (2005). <http://www.uacc4families.org/aboutus/mission.cfm>

⁶ *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents, and the economy.* (2012). Page 45. Retrieved from: <http://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2011.pdf>

⁷ Weiss, H., Lopez, M. E., and Rosenberg, H. (2010). Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform. *National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement*. Retrieved from: http://www.nationalpirc.org/engagement_forum/beyond_random_acts.pdf

⁸ Definitions retrieved from: Weiss, H., Lopez, M. E., and Rosenberg, H. (2010). Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform. *National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement*. Retrieved from: http://www.nationalpirc.org/engagement_forum/beyond_random_acts.pdf

Systemic: Purposefully designed as a core component of educational goals such as school readiness, student achievement, and school turnaround.

Integrated: Embedded into structures and processes designed to meet these goals, including training and professional development, teaching and learning, community collaboration, and the use of data for continuous improvement and accountability.

Under this basic framework, successful engagement strategies are designed to help parents and educators understand their evolving roles across various contexts as their students pass through school and will also guide them to identify and utilize specific supports (in school, at home, and in the community) to help provide positive learning outcomes for students.

WHY IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

On May 16, 2012 Maria Fletcher, President of the New York State PTA (NYS PTA), made a statement before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education. On behalf of both the NYS PTA and the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Dr. Fletcher advocated for the prioritization of family engagement in education, stating: "Without parents at the table, both at school and at home, sustainable reforms that equip all public schools to provide a world-class education will not become a reality."⁹



Dr. Fletcher's advocacy reflects a growing body of over 40 years of cumulative research in the field of FSCE that supports the implementation of systemic, sustainable, research-based, and culturally competent family engagement practices not just in New York, but also in schools across the nation.¹⁰ This research links family engagement as a strong contributing factor to a wide range of positive student outcomes, including improved student achievement, reduced drop-out rates and higher graduation rates, reduced absenteeism, better student attitudes towards learning, decreased disciplinary issues, and improved parent-child and teacher-child relationships.¹¹ In addition to the desired student learning outcomes associated with high levels of parent engagement, studies also reveal added benefits for school, community, and family members. In particular, emerging evidence highlights the benefits of family engagement to the inner-functioning of schools, including school staff having higher expectations for students, more shared trust and ownership among parents, educators, and students, and stronger school performance in general.¹²

Standing out as one of the more significant strands of research in the field of FSCE is a fifteen-year research project in Chicago. Produced by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University Of Chicago (CCSR), this study tracked the effects following the decentralization of Chicago public schools in 1988, collecting seven years of data from 200 low-performing elementary schools.¹³ Over this time frame, researchers identified 100 schools that had improved substantially, and 100 schools had not. For the next several years, they diligently

⁹ Fletcher, M. (2012, May). D Hunter (Chair). *Statement of the record on behalf of the new york state parent teacher association and national parent teacher association*. Statement delivered before Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education "exploring state success in expanding parent and student options". Retrieved from http://edworkforce.house.gov/UploadedFiles/05.16.12_fletcher.pdf

¹⁰ Fege, A. (2006). Getting Ruby a quality public education: Forty-two years of building the demand for quality public schools through parental and public involvement. *Harvard Education Review*, 76(4), 570-586; Henderson, A. and Mapp, K. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Austin, TX: SEDL.

¹¹ Weiss, H., Lopez, M. E., and Rosenberg, H. (2010). Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform. *National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement*; Henderson, A. and Mapp, K. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Austin, TX: SEDL.

¹² Bryk, A. S., and Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

¹³ This decentralization granted Chicago public school parents and their communities' substantial authority and resources to reform their schools.

sought to analyze the disparity in these outcomes, asking the question: what did the successful schools do to accelerate student learning?

Their findings highlight five essential supports that work together as a system to transform low-performing schools: (1) leadership; (2) instructional guidance; (3) teacher professional capacity; (4) school climate; and (5) parent, school, and community ties.¹⁴ An important lesson from the Chicago study is that in particular, low- and under-performing districts can capitalize on these partnerships to turn around their schools and reduce achievement gaps.

Today, in line with these findings, the U.S. Department of Education's Title I School Improvement Grants Fund dedicates more than \$3.5 billion in an effort to transform low-performing schools, operating with the understanding that change in low-performing schools is most likely to occur when it is facilitated and supported by families and their communities.¹⁵ As we will examine in greater detail in section VII of this paper, the policies and the allocation of funding for these programs continue to be highly controversial topics, as they are not necessarily linked to successful student performance ratings or research-based practices.

¹⁴ Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., and Easton, J. Q. (2009). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, A., Bryk, A. S., Easton, J. Q., and Luppescu, S. (2006). The essential supports for school improvement. *Consortium on Chicago School Research*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED498342.pdf>

¹⁵ See <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html> for more information on School Improvement Grants.

KEY COMPONENTS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

This section presents key findings in research that highlight the critical components of successful family engagement strategies. These components emphasize leadership, capacity building, training, and professional development; parent outreach in the schools; the continuous application of family engagement from birth to young adulthood; the evaluation of methods of homework and/or afterschool assistance; and parents being aware of/having access to community and school resources. It is also important to note that throughout this section, excerpts from various case studies, interviews, and examples of current practices are used to exemplify some of these components (or barriers) to family engagement. These examples express each institution/person's own beliefs, opinions, and strategies and are not intended to be generalized towards FSCE practices, but rather, they serve as individualized illustrations of some of the greater concepts addressed in this paper.

“ I am a teacher and made more than 60 calls in October alone to parents of children who are having difficulty. Less than a third responded. Sad! On conference night, parents who come to speak to me are the ones whose kids are doing well. The parents I need to talk to are the ones who don't get back to me. That speaks volumes. ”

Rick M., a commenter from the New York Times¹⁶

Leadership, capacity building, training, and professional development are imperative to fostering successful school-family relationships.

It is well known that school leaders play instrumental roles in effecting school change and family engagement is no exception; principals and teachers play central roles in engaging families, influencing if and how parents choose to be involved. In high engagement learning communities, the commitment, support, and active involvement of school leadership is essential to cultivating and sustaining relational trust among parents, students, community organizations, and educators.

As Rick can attest to by his comment above, this is no easy task. Nationally, both principals and teachers rate the biggest challenge of their work - above disciplinary action, getting sufficient resources, and preparing students for testing - as communicating with parents. Despite this challenge, school staff are not always given adequate professional development or preparation about their roles and effective strategies for family engagement.¹⁷

In order to capitalize on effective family engagement strategies, school leaders need to develop a plan for parent and community engagement that is linked to specific goals for improving student learning and healthy

¹⁶ Statement gathered from the New York Times letter to the editor: To Teach a Child: The Parents' Role. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/opinion/to-teach-a-child-the-parents-role.html?_r=0

¹⁷ Harris Interactive, Inc. (2005). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Transitions and the role of supportive relationships*. New York: The MetLife Foundation. Retrieved from: http://www.metlife.com/about/corporate-profile/citizenship/metlife-foundation/metlife-survey-of-the-american-teacher.html?WT.mc_id=vu1101

development.¹⁸ According to the March, 2012 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* teachers and parents are not always on the same page when it comes to understanding this plan; nine in ten teachers say that their school has such a plan, while four in ten parents are not sure this plan exists.¹⁹

Addressing this communication gap, Karen Mapp, a leading researcher in the field of family, school, and community engagement, emphasizes the need for parents to understand their roles and what is expected of them from schools. She highlights the importance of school leadership in the integration of successful FSCE initiatives, stating that, “too often schools pay lip service to the importance of family involvement and make half-hearted attempts to involve families. Some schools hire a lone parent or family coordinator to organize the entire family involvement initiative. Programs of this nature often disintegrate without the support and involvement of the leadership and school staff.”²⁰

Creating and sustaining a school culture that places high value on family engagement is no easy task, but having strong leadership really pays off. High engagement schools are associated with higher levels of teacher job satisfaction (57% for high engagement vs. 25% for low engagement), which leads to greater job retention over time. Teachers in high engagement schools also feel that the community treats them more like professionals, and they receive more preparation and support from their schools to effectively engage parents. Teachers in schools with high levels of parent engagement are more likely to give high ratings to their professional development and to their pre-service training for preparing and supporting them to engage parents effectively.²¹

“ My mother and father, they never really made major time to be involved. You know what I really think it was, I think they were afraid to come into the school. I really do. Maybe their parents didn’t come into their school when they were coming up either. There was no reason why neither one of them couldn’t take forty-five minutes, an hour, or two hours to come in and see how we were progressing. They never did that.

I really feel like they were intimidated or they felt afraid to approach the teachers, because the teachers had a degree. “They are teaching our children how to read and write and so who are [we] to come and look over their shoulders?” I really feel like my parents had that kind of attitude. ”

Alma D., Boston Public School Parent ²²

¹⁸ Epstein, J. L. (2010, November). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(3), 81-96. Retrieved from <http://www.kappanmagazine.org/content/92/3/81.full.pdf.html?sid=28d91179-eb8f-4479-a949-c4cba812090f>

¹⁹ Harris Interactive, Inc. (2012). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents, and the economy*. New York: The MetLife Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2011.pdf>

²⁰Mapp, K. (2002). Having Their Say: Parents Describe Why and How They are Engaged in Their Children’s Learning. Retrieved from: <http://www.adi.org/journal/SS03/Mapp%2035-64.pdf>

²¹ Harris Interactive, Inc. (2012). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents, and the economy*. New York: The MetLife Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2011.pdf>

Schools must provide outreach to make parents feel welcome, included, and respected.

Oftentimes, a parent's absence from the classroom or failure to attend school meetings is attributed to their dismissive attitudes about their children's education. Schools expect parents to be involved but don't always give them the right tools and signals to welcome their partnership in the learning process. Alma's testimonial highlights the reality that some parents are reluctant to approach the schools because they are intimidated, or they feel alienated by their past negative experiences. Other parents may have differences in cultural norms and values when it comes to their levels of involvement, or they could face multiple job, home, or child responsibilities that take precedence.



In order for communication to be open and reciprocal between parents and schools, parents must feel welcome and comfortable enough to engage in dialogue with educators and ask questions about their student's learning. In assessing the challenges to family engagement, schools need to understand their role in cultivating family engagement, and recognize various forms of involvement. They also need to understand how variations in cultural norms and expectations for their roles in the schools may affect their level of participation.

The story of Angela highlights the important role in open communication:²³

Angela was so tired of teachers telling her to read to her child and assuming that she knew how to do it. She felt like no one at the school would listen to her or understand her frustration. Donaldsonville Elementary School had been recognized for its "good curriculum," even though teachers were disappointed with the progress of their students. Eighty percent of the student population was African-American, and 20% was white; most were members of low-income families. Teachers felt that they were doing all they could to help these children at school. Without parental assistance at home, the children at Donaldsonville were going to fail.

The teachers' solution was to expect and demand that parents be involved in their children's education by reading to them at home. The teachers felt that this was not an unreasonable request. There is good evidence of positive gains made by "disadvantaged" elementary students when parents and children work together at home on homework or simply read together. What the teachers did not take into account was that 40% of the school's parents were illiterate or semi-literate. When the parents didn't seem willing to engage in reading at home, teachers mistook parents' behavior as a lack of interest in their children's

²² Mapp, K. (2002). Having Their Say: Parents Describe Why and How They are Engaged in Their Children's Learning. Retrieved from: <http://www.adi.org/journal/SS03/Mapp%2035-64.pdf>

²³ Excerpt from the Handbook on Family and Community Engagement: <http://www.families-schools.org/downloads/FACEHandbook.pdf>

education. The school continued to demand that parents read to their children at home, which had a particular meaning in teachers' minds. This sparked hostility and racial tensions between teachers and parents. Each group blamed the other for the children's failures; each felt victimized by the interactions.

Once Donaldson Elementary School provided parents with the tools and classes to help them read to their children at home, the task of reading to their children at home produced very different outcomes. Setting aside their blame, teachers and parents were able to work together to improve student (and parent) literacy. Both stories also demonstrate how power differentials often play a role in inhibiting open communication between parents and teachers; Angela was ashamed of her illiteracy and did not feel comfortable confronting the school with this problem and Alma's parents were afraid to talk to the teachers because they didn't share the same educational background. Being able to overcome notable power differentials and feeling welcome to voice ideas and questions in the context of collaborative and meaningful school-family interactions is an essential component to successful family engagement strategies.

Another barrier to parent involvement also exists because of the higher demands placed on both parents and educators in under-performing schools. Any number of factors may be contributing to lower levels of engagement; less housing options, less available time, less resources. In these scenarios, both the schools and the parents may already feel like they are not getting enough from each other, which in turn can result in greater levels of frustration and breakdown in communication. Families struggling with financial security may feel overburdened by requests that stretch their time and money (which may already be strained) thin via bake sales, school fees, and fund-raising efforts. At the same time, educators may also feel overburdened trying to communicate effectively with non-responsive parents while dealing with low achievement rates and higher levels of performance pressure from their administration.

This mission of facilitating open, two-way communication seems at times, a daunting and impossible task for parents and educators. Community outreach programs can provide tremendous relief by helping to balance the communication gap, mediating school-family relationships, and providing necessary access to a range of resources and supports for families, such as providing adult literacy programs. In the example above, Angela's school was able to provide direct support and literacy training to their parents, however, not all schools are equipped to manage additional learning programs for parents. Many community-based organizations provide free adult literacy programs, such as Inwood Community Services, Inc. Serving the particular interests of the Inwood-Washington Heights community, this organization provides extensive programming for community members, not just in adult literacy, but also in counseling, youth services, and prevention methods.²⁴ Family-focused, grassroots organizations like Inwood play important roles in addressing serious health, education, and safety concerns that afflict their particular communities, which also may be inhibiting a parent's willingness and/or ability to engage in their child's education.

Professor William Jeynes, a researcher and educator in the field of FSCE, acknowledges that offering a little something back is a great way to stimulate family engagement. Many families who are struggling to make ends meet will be attracted by the opportunity to get a free meal, or use free facilities in the school. According to Jeynes, "working with low-income parents has proven to me that the best ways for schools to encourage parents to be involved with schooling is for schools to be involved with helping families, not just helping students."²⁵ He explains that these measures for family assistance do not need to be overly sophisticated or pricey, they just need to be sincere. Possible actions might include providing free access to school athletic facilities; offering a once-a-week parents day; incorporating community outreach; and recognizing existing forms of involvement.

²⁴ Inwood Community Services, Inc. www.inwoodcommunityservices.org/home.htm

²⁵ Jeynes, W. (2011, November). Help families by fostering parental involvement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(3), 38-39. Retrieved from <http://www.kappanmagazine.org/content/93/3/38.full.pdf.html?sid=466cde44-bd01-4c82-a839-40b7ada31251>

This notion of giving back can have a tremendous impact on family engagement, especially for groups of parents who may feel alienated or disconnected from the school. In one such school, researchers found success through a special room that was set up for parents where the principal had placed donated sewing machines and fabric, asking parents to help by making uniforms, curtains and other items for them. The parents were also invited to use the material for their own personal needs. According to the report, “the parent room was always full, and this school had extremely high parent involvement for all events.”²⁶ Repainting an image of schools as “givers” is not just a great way to welcome families into the schools, it can also lead families and schools towards building a system of mutual trust and respect for one another.

In addition to welcoming and respecting parents, keeping parents connected is essential to maintaining this relationship. Parents need support and guidance, and also appreciation for the ways in which they are already supporting their students, which may not always be recognized by the schools. Being able to establish and maintain open, two-way communication between families and schools, and actively seeking out questions, concerns, and ideas from parents is an integral component to successful FSCE initiatives.

More support is needed to encourage FSCE through critical middle-high school years.

Although often associated with early childhood and elementary school practices, family engagement needs to be *continuous from birth through young adulthood*, taking place not just in the schools, but everywhere that children learn.²⁷ Despite growing evidence of its importance for adolescents’ school success, research shows that parent participation drops off during critical middle-high school years, and that high-engagement schools are much more likely to be elementary schools and less likely to be high schools. Several explanations for declining engagement include parent, teacher, and school beliefs challenging the relevance and benefits of family engagement beyond elementary school; competing home demands and parents’ decreased feelings of efficacy; teenagers’ preferences for greater autonomy; and larger, more complex school buildings and schedules.²⁸

“ Growing up, [the best place to turn to for support] would have to be our church. It was an hour train ride away from where we lived but it was always worth the trip. We found sanctuary there in the true sense of the word. I felt more at home and part of a community within those four walls than anywhere else. ”

Maurice C., a student from New York City³¹

For many students, being faced with greater academic demands and more peer pressure and dangers from the outside world, middle and high school can be tough transitional periods in their lives. For this reason, keeping families informed and engaged is extremely important because it can help guide students towards making good life choices, both in an academic and in a social sense. School outreach activities that address the particular needs of teenagers and their families include workshops on teen health and development, effective communication

²⁶ FACE Handbook: <http://www.families-schools.org/downloads/FACEHandbook.pdf>

²⁷ National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2010

²⁸ Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005; Eccles and Harold, 1993; Ramirez, 2002; Xu, 2002; Epstein and Sanders, 2002; Eccles and Harold, 1996; Halsey, 2005

²⁹ Statement recorded from an interview conducted by Perry and Associates, 2012.

strategies for parents and teens, and college and career planning. These activities can help support adolescents and their families as they transition from childhood to adulthood.³⁰ Community outreach programs can carry out vital roles in mentoring and supporting families and their children through transitions.

In 2003, New York City began an intensive restructuring of its high schools and a group of parents in the Bronx recognized that they and their neighbors needed information about all the new educational options that were available to their middle-school children. In response to this need, staff from the Bronx Institute gathered a group of parents who had successfully navigated their children's transition from middle to high school, and began developing a guide for families. This guide gave parents an overview of the city's high school admissions process, research findings about what Bronx families want in a high school, and information about the new high schools.³¹

The Bronx Institute took an active role in identifying a problem in the community and facilitating a solution for families. Especially in areas where schools may be lacking the resources or the leadership capacity, community-based organizations outside of the school can mediate school-family partnerships, helping to bridge communication gaps, providing much needed resources, and serving not just as advocates for parents, but also as safe havens for students and their families.

Whether through the schools, homes, churches, community centers, or other youth programs, children need a place where they can feel safe and supported.

Schools need to evaluate methods of homework and/or afterschool assistance and provide outreach to parents as necessary.

A 2007 National Household Education Survey (NHES) measured the percentage of students in grades K through 12 whose parents reported that students did homework outside of school and an adult checked that homework was done, by frequency and selected student, school, and family characteristics. 94.4% of all households surveyed had students who did homework outside of school, and 85.4% had an adult checking that homework was done.³³ On the surface, these statistics project a strong sense of learning support at home, and one might also presume that time spent on homework would have a positive effect on student achievement. Surprisingly, homework has emerged as one conflicting area of family engagement where both

“ Some things they do at school, I forgot how to do. That’s why I’m going back to school. Sometimes I write the teacher a note, but the parts of the work I don’t know, I ask her. Other times, I call the teacher and ask her, ‘How do I do this, because my son is stuck, and my memory is gone. ’I tell you the truth, sometimes I just look it over and I’m like, ‘Okay, I’ll check it,’ but truthfully, I never have time to check and there’s nobody to really help me out on that. ”

Jean H., Boston Public School Parent ³²

³⁰ Crosnoe, 2009; DeCastro and Catsambis, 2009; Epstein, 2007; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, and Weiss, 2007; Simon; 2004; Stone, 2006

³¹ ENLACE Family-to-Family Guide: Schools of Hope in the Bronx <http://www.thebronxinstitute.org/>

³² Mapp, K. (2002). Having Their Say: Parents Describe Why and How They are Engaged in Their Children's Learning. Retrieved from: <http://www.adi.org/journal/SS03/Mapp%2035-64.pdf>

³³ 2007 NHES Survey

positive and negative effects on student achievement can be observed.

Researchers from the Flamboyan Foundation graphed findings across four major meta-analyses³⁴ that investigated the impact of various forms of family engagement.³⁵ Two out of the three meta-analyses that investigated the impact of families helping their children with homework revealed a negative relationship between this practice and student achievement (see graph on page 15). Two possible explanations, according to the researchers, are that: 1) the quality of homework is poor and could potentially harm student achievement³⁶ and/or 2) families use improper help strategies that interfere with the effectiveness of the homework. Researchers found that, above homework assistance, parental aspirations and expectations had the greatest effect size across all of the categories they investigated.

In corroboration with these findings, professor John Hattie also compared a multitude of studies and meta-analyses to map the effects across seven categories of contributions from the home on student achievement.³⁷ These categories explored socioeconomic status, welfare policies, family structures (single and two-parent families, resident and non-resident fathers, divorce, adoption), home environment (play materials, punishment, involvement), television, parental involvement in learning, and home visits from school staff. Hattie also found that across all home variables, parental aspirations and expectations³⁸ for educational achievement were actually the strongest indicators of student success. Communication (interest in homework and school work, homework assistance, and discussing school progress) was found to have a moderate size effect, and parental supervision (e.g., home rules for watching television, home surroundings conducive to doing school work) had the weakest size effect.

While Hattie's findings reveal that parents have major effects in terms of the encouragement and expectations that they transmit to their children, they also suggest that parents often struggle to comprehend the "language of learning" and "thus are disadvantaged in the methods they use to encourage their children to attain their expectations." This highlights a significant need for schools to offer more guidance for families on how to support achievement beyond simply assisting with homework.

In recognizing a need to equip families with additional skills, knowledge, and resources in order to increase effective parent engagement, Philadelphia launched a central program for parent learning and advocacy called Parent University. Parent University offers classes that provide training in life skills, providing families with tools, both academic and non-academic, that they can use to encourage their children to become successful. This program works in collaboration with a variety of programs including adult literacy programs, academic institutions, internal district departments, community and faith-based organizations and other city agencies.³⁹ Addressing a range of problems that are specific to various learning communities in Philadelphia, Parent University is able to provide parents with everything they need to navigate a complex language of learning, communicate effectively with their

³⁴ Meta-analyses combine the results of several independent studies that revolve around a similar topic/hypothesis, synthesizing summaries and conclusions across multiple findings.

³⁵ The Flamboyan Foundation. (2011). *Family engagement matters*. Retrieved from: http://flamboyanfoundation.org/resources_and_publications/family-engagement-matter/

³⁶ The 2007 publication of *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: The homework experience*, also found that while most teachers, parents, and students agreed that doing homework is important and has value for learning, a large number of parents and students viewed homework as just busywork and not related to what students are learning in school. *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: The homework experience*. (2007). Retrieved from: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED500012.pdf>

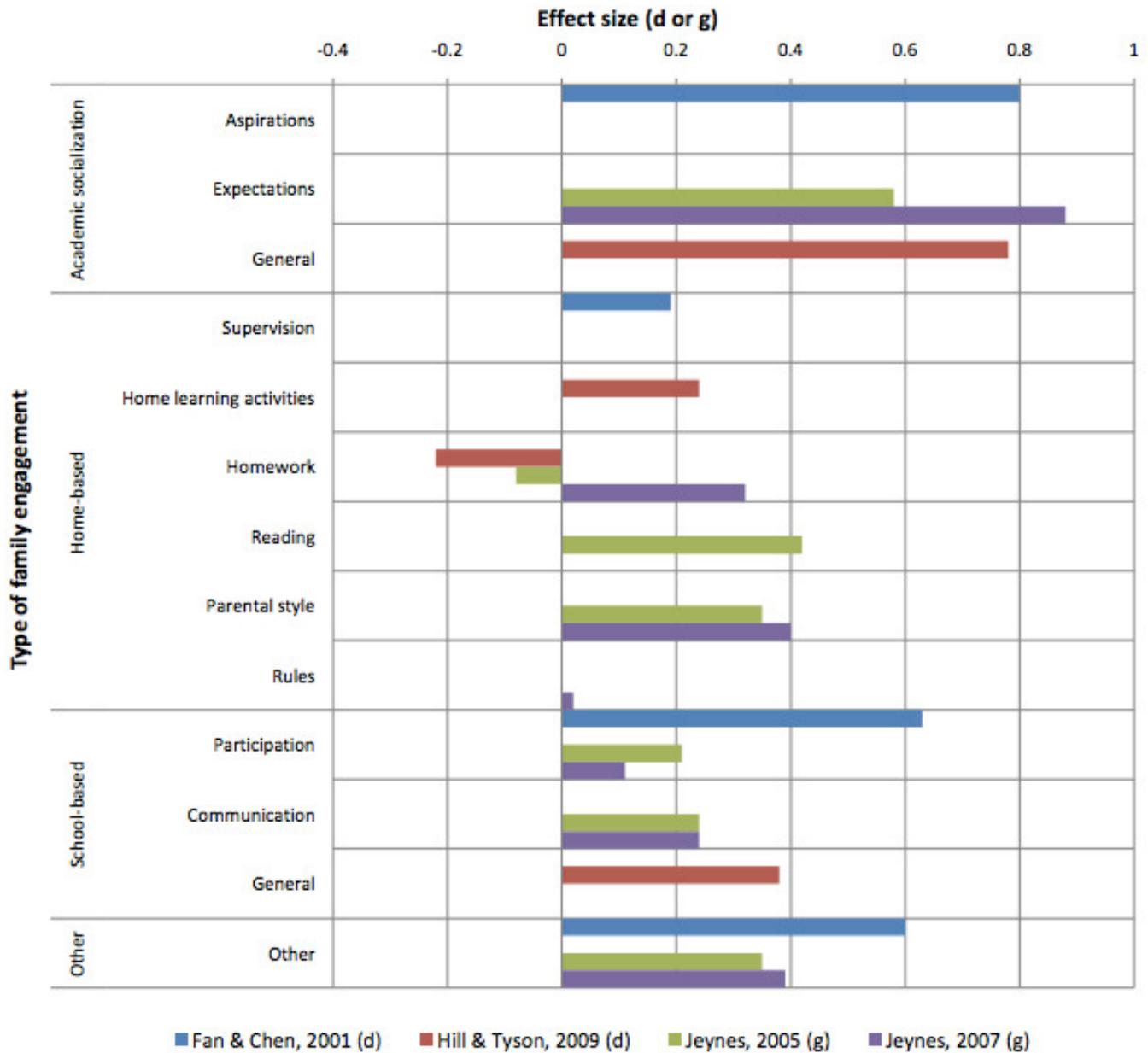
³⁷ Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

³⁸ Parental expectations can be defined as the degree to which a student's parents believe that their child has great promise of achieving at high levels, are found to have the strongest relationship with student academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2010).

³⁹ For more information on Parent University, visit: <http://www.philasd-parentuniversity.org/>

schools, and build essential self-efficacy skills, which ultimately allows parents to provide the best support for their students possible.

Impact of different forms of family engagement on student achievement from meta-analyses



Parent University exemplifies the crucial role of community programs in supporting families and providing them with the tools and resources they need in order to meet the high expectations of school officials for FSCE.

Parents need to know where to turn to in the school and/or in the community for help and support, not just to support their children’s education, but also to meet their own personal needs.

During a time when both schools and families are facing decreased budgets and increased hardships, understanding this important role in parent engagement is more important than ever. Parents cannot provide a stable learning environment for their children at home unless their own personal needs for health and safety are being met, and more parents and students than ever need programs such as integrated health or social services. Yet despite an increased need during trying times, school budgets are decreasing, which in turn can have a negative impact on parent and community engagement efforts.⁴¹

Geoffrey Canada is one whose work recognizes the significance of integrated social and educational services in low-income neighborhoods. Mr. Canada founded the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) in 1997, seeking innovative programs “that are aimed at doing nothing less than breaking the cycle of generational poverty for the thousands of children and families it serves.”⁴² Programs like Mr. Canada’s understand that until the very most basic needs of a family are met, parents cannot wholly satisfy the role of an active partner in their child’s education.

Meeting these most basic needs goes beyond just passing out cans of food. As the old proverb goes, give a person a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a person to fish and you feed her for a lifetime. While passing out food may respond to an immediate problem, empowering parents to access community/school resources will help sustain them from being hungry in the future. The ability for parents to access supports and approach problems is fundamental to building confident levels of what researchers call “parental efficacy.” According to the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI), “parental efficacy is a belief in one’s skills, abilities and resources to parent effectively, including the ability to protect children from negative influences and improve the family’s school and community.”⁴³

Research suggests that there are two principal beliefs that are central to a person’s self-efficacy beliefs: (1) the person has a certain level of control over decisions about the activities he or she will take part in and (2) they will be

“ My parents played a major role in my education. They were always encouraging me and if I needed help they were always able to answer my questions. I was very lucky in that regard because I know not everyone had that. To be fair, it’s not that parents don’t want to be there for their children. For most part they just didn’t have the means to help them (free time, knowledge of the subjects, money for tutors, etc). At least that was the impression I had. ”

Sherise R., a student from New York City ⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Statement recorded from an interview conducted by Perry and Associates, 2012.

⁴¹ Harris Interactive, Inc. (2012). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents, and the economy*. New York: The MetLife Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2011.pdf>

⁴² Harlem Children’s Zone: <http://hcz.org/about-us/history>

⁴³ National Institute of Urban School Improvement: http://www.niusi.org/pdf/parent_efficacy.pdf?v_document_name=Increase%20Parental%20Efficacy

successful to some extent in those activities.⁴⁴ These principles suggest that parents are most likely to be motivated to actively engage themselves in their student's learning when they believe that they have some degree of control and influence over their children's learning, and that their actions will impact their students' learning. Thus, creating an environment where parents' voices, ideas, and questions are sought out, heard, and respected in the context of collaborative community-school-family interactions is key to establishing and maintaining high levels of parental efficacy.

⁴⁴ Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Christenson and Reschly, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, 2005; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies, 2007

FSCE AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

We know that effective FSCE strategies promote successful outcomes for all students, but it is important to highlight how particularly beneficial these strategies are for students with disabilities, who often require a much greater degree of parental engagement and advocacy than the general education students. This section briefly outlines the critical role that FSCE plays in providing successful outcomes for students with disabilities. For a more in-depth look, both the Harvard Family Research Project and the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities have published helpful resource guides that are great starting points in guiding learning communities towards current research, information, and resources on this topic.⁴⁶

A previous section on the key components of FSCE outlined the importance of (1) leadership, capacity building, training, and professional development in our learning communities; (2) welcoming families and creating and sustaining open and trusting relationships with two-way communication; (3) providing continual FSCE support for students and families beyond the elementary school years; (4) evaluating methods of after school assistance; and (5) building on parental self-efficacy skills to ensure they have all the resources and tools they need to fulfill their roles in FSCE. These components are especially critical for families of students with disabilities, as they are given special legal rights that encourage them to take on roles beyond just being partners in student learning, transforming them into highly specialized advocates and analysts in measures of assessment and intervention for their children.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legally requires schools to provide parents with the opportunity to participate on many different levels (school selection decisions, IEP team meetings, evaluation meetings, etc.). Parents' rights under IDEA are summarized by the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities as follows:

“ There are rarely any simple answers to balancing the needs of each individual child with disabilities with others' needs, with competing structural, bureaucratic, pedagogical, and emotional factors often adding extra layers of effort and complexity for everyone involved. But when families and educators work together as partners, it enhances the likelihood that children with disabilities will have positive and successful learning experiences.

”

Written by Jamie Ferrel ⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ferrel, Jamie (2012). Family engagement and children with disabilities: A resource guide for educators and parents. *Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter*, 4(3).

Retrieved from: <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-engagement-and-children-with-disabilities-a-resource-guide-for-educators-and-parents>

⁴⁶ Harvard Family Research Project: <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-engagement-and-children-with-disabilities-a-resource-guide-for-educators-and-parents>; National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: <http://nichcy.org/families-community>

- Parents have the right to participate in meetings related to the evaluation, identification, and educational placement of their child.
- Parents have the right to participate in meetings related to the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to their child.
- Parents are entitled to be members of any group that decides whether their child is a "child with a disability" and meets eligibility criteria for special education and related services.
- Parents are entitled to be members of the team that develops, reviews, and revises the individualized education program (IEP) for their child. If neither parent can attend the IEP meeting, the school must use other methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference calls.
- Parents are entitled to be members of any group that makes placement decisions for their child. If neither parent can attend the meeting where placement is decided, the school must use other methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference calls, or video conferencing.⁴⁷

Parents of students with disabilities are in an entitled position that demands a high understanding of the specialized laws, language, and supports governing Special Education. Navigating these meetings and advocating for the rights of a child with a disability can be difficult and frustrating at times, especially when parents feel that the schools are not making recommendations or provisions in the best interest of their child.

This New York City parent describes the emotional strain and hardship experienced while struggling to advocate for the special needs of their child; notice how often the word "fight" appears above. Fights often result from a breakdown in communication and an inability to come to terms on an appropriate education plan. When this happens, parents and educators act less like partners and more like adversaries, often moving towards separate goals for the child. FSCE aims to help our families and educators join together to address and overcome many of the multifaceted and complex challenges they face in fulfilling the particular needs of their students with disabilities. Even though disagreements may still occur, the expectation is that parents can feel that their recommendations are being listened to, they have a voice in what kind of decisions are being made on behalf of their child, and they are provided with the resources and skills they need to make the best possible decisions for their child.

“ It’s emotionally draining. You’re fighting City Hall for your services sometimes. They’re not just given to you. You are really fighting for them. You go into these IEP meetings dreading it. You’re fighting for your child as much as you feel like you’re fighting for your life sometimes...because your child is your life. And if you feel your child needs these services you need your documentation, you need your doctors’ letters, you need letters from your teachers, you need everything.

A New York City parent ⁴⁸

When this happens, parents and educators act less like partners and more like adversaries, often moving towards separate goals for the child. FSCE aims to help our families and educators join together to address and overcome many of the multifaceted and complex challenges they face in fulfilling the particular needs of their students with disabilities. Even though disagreements may still occur, the expectation is that parents can feel that their recommendations are being listened to, they have a voice in what kind of decisions are being made on behalf of their child, and they are provided with the resources and skills they need to make the best possible decisions for their child.

Published in April 2013, Achievement for All (AfA) is one of the research studies with findings in support of the particular benefits of family engagement strategies for children with disabilities. AfA’s research design comprised

⁴⁷ <http://nichcy.org/families-community>; the original legal document can be accessed from IDEA Sec. 300.501: *Opportunity to examine* records; parent participation in meetings. Retrieved from: <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/pl,root,regs,300,E,300%252E501>,

⁴⁸ Statement recorded from an interview conducted by Perry and Associates, 2013

both quantitative and qualitative strands through longitudinal assessments, case studies, parent/teacher surveys, academic attainment data, and interviews relating to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The AfA pilot was found to have a significant impact in Mathematics and English progress, as well as significant improvements in positive relationships, and reductions in bullying and behavior problems.

In regards to family-school relationships, AfA found:

- Success was seen where a collaborative relationship – involving a two-way exchange of information, ideas, aspirations, and concerns – was formed. According to the study, “schools expressed determination to involve the most ‘hard to reach’ parents, and were extremely creative and flexible in the approaches they used in this regard. Finally, in relation to developing provision for wider outcomes, schools implemented an extraordinary range of approaches and strategies. A recurrent theme was that the nature of the work undertaken was determined very much by local contexts and circumstances and the needs of pupils within each school.”
- In several schools it was felt that the additional information and knowledge about pupils that emerged from the structured conversations with parents enabled teachers to change their expectations and recognize the full potential of their pupils. This resulted in more personalized teaching and learning approaches.
- A greater range of methods of communicating information to parents about pupils’ progress were used.
- Schools characterized by higher attendance and achievement, stronger home-school relations prior to the start of AfA, and smaller pupil populations tended to achieve better outcomes.⁴⁹

These findings stress the value of strong communication skills and collaborative partnerships between educators and parents while working towards providing successful outcomes for students with disabilities. And once again, we must highlight the importance of interaction with the community. Families can find support in their communities to help them obtain the resources, skills, and knowledge they need in fulfilling these critical roles as partners, advocates, and analysts in Special Education. Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) is just one example of a group that works to promote access to the best possible education by helping parents to become successful advocates for their children.⁵⁰ Many other groups work at the local level to ensure that parents have the resources and the skills they need to fulfill their roles as child advocates. And when communication seems to break down, community-based organizations can also play central roles in helping to mediate conflict resolutions between educators and families.

⁴⁹ Humphrey, Neil and Gary Squires (2011) *Achievement for All National Evaluation: Final Report*. London: Department for Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR176>

⁵⁰ http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/parent/artifacts/AFC-1%20advocacy_skillsApril2011.pdf

ENVISIONING HIGH ENGAGEMENT LEARNING COMMUNITIES

By outlining the key components and barriers to the development of high engagement learning communities, a descriptive picture starts to emerge, one that begins to construct an understanding of how each member can improve their FSCE practices. This image is not free of conflict and disagreement between parents, community members, and schools. These partners do not always agree on everything, rather, the level of trust and open communication maintained by high engagement communities facilitates more respectful boundaries of disagreement and conflict resolution because partners can feel that their ideas are listened to and acknowledged, even if they are not always acted on.

In general, partners in high engagement learning communities (1) are more optimistic about student achievement; (2) describe their interactions as more collaborative and having more positive relations among parents, community organizations, and teachers; (3) use a variety of resources to maintain communication and keep parents connected, including fostering relationships among parents; and (4) have teachers that are treated with more respect as professionals in their community, who are also more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction and retention.⁵¹ Although this picture has been historically contextualized through school-family interactions, it is important to emphasize the integral role of the community in the development and implementation of successful FSCE strategies. Without all the additional supports and resources that are provided by community organizations and parent advocacy groups, a lot of the schools' high expectations for parent engagement could not be realized.

In the end, family engagement means much more than simply passing out monthly newsletters to parents and posting links on a school webpage, particularly in underperforming school districts. It involves strategic and reciprocal partnerships between schools, community organizations, and parents that aim at supporting successful student outcomes, and in order to assess the challenges to family engagement, each partner needs to understand their unique role in cultivating family engagement, and recognize various forms of involvement. As participants in assessing these roles and challenges, you are expected to (1) know your community: can you identify some of the present barriers to parent engagement in your school/community? What resources are available to parents, students, and teachers (at home, at school, and in the community) that can help overcome these barriers and support effective FSCE? (2) Know your families: what languages and cultures do your families bring to the table? Are all these languages/cultures welcomed, respected, and honored at your school? How does your school communicate effectively with all its families? And (3) examine the roles of parents in your schools: what role(s) are parents expected take on at your school? Do parents understand these roles? What resources are available to parents in order to help them achieve the goals set forth by the school, and how accessible are they?

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this engagement process; school leaders must know their communities and tailor their family engagement strategies to meet their own specific challenges. Regardless of the path that each school takes to pursue effective family engagement strategies, the outcomes should look the same: systemic, sustainable, and integrated programs that include parents as part of the organization and culture of the school, linking families to goals that promote student learning and healthy development across various settings from birth to adulthood.

⁵¹ Harris Interactive, Inc. (2012). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents, and the economy*. New York: The MetLife Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2011.pdf>

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STATUS IN NYC

Knowing that parents are so important for children’s success, many states and school districts have formulated some sort of plan that involves parents in their children’s education. Whether through parent associations, coordinators, unions, school leadership teams, community councils, or any other organization, these affiliates seek to capitalize on the value of effective parent-school relationships. Underlining the important role of communication in establishing these relationships, New York State mandates the creation of community councils that oversee community school districts, declaring that “the council, community superintendent, and the principal of each school shall have regular communication with all parents associations and parent-teachers’ associations within the community district, and meet with their elected officers at least quarterly during the school year, to that end, the associations are provided with full factual information pertaining to matters of pupil achievement.”⁵²

In an effort to evaluate the implementation of these family engagement strategies, New York City released the results of their 2012 citywide school survey. Weighing the evaluations of over 476,000 parents (53% of the target population), this survey examined categories of school-parent communication, academic expectations, engagement, and safety and respect.⁵³ To gauge whether parents feel engaged in an active and vibrant partnership to promote student learning, the survey asked some of the following questions:



Engagement: *Do parents feel engaged in an active and vibrant partnership to promote student learning?*

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child’s school?	Percent %				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does Not Apply
I feel welcome in my child’s school. (8.3)	52	45	2	1	0
My child’s school makes it easy for parents to attend meetings by holding them at different times of day, providing an interpreter, or in other ways. (8.0)	46	48	4	1	1

⁵² National PTA Reference guide: http://www.pta.org/State_Laws_Report.pdf

⁵³ NYC Survey: <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/survey/default.htm>

	More than once a month	About once a month	Once every few months	Once or twice this school year	Never
How often during this school year have you: been invited to a workshop, program, performance, or other event at your child's school? (8.4)	39	33	16	7	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? My child's school offers a wide enough variety of courses and activities to keep my child interested in school. (7.4)	35	49	9	2	4
Students with disabilities are included in all school activities. (7.7)	24	33	3	1	40

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
How satisfied are you with the following things about your child's school? Your opportunities to be involved in your child's education. (7.8)	43	51	5	1
How well your child's school helps you understand what you can do to support your child's learning needs. (7.8)	43	50	7	1

According to the survey, 97% of the parents strongly agreed or agreed that they feel welcome in their child's school, and 94% strongly agreed or agreed that their child's school makes it easy for parents to attend meetings. Questions like these, however, can inflate the success of parent engagement policies without necessarily reflecting on the quality of FSCE interactions as framed by the research community. For example, according to the survey, 93% of parents feel very satisfied or satisfied with how well their child's school helps them understand what they can do to support their child's learning needs. However,



understanding what you need to do and actually being empowered to do it are two entirely different things. While questions of this survey's nature can help schools gain a deeper understanding of how effective their roles are in communicating information, being flexible enough to meet with working parents, and holding workshops and conferences for parent involvement, they don't necessarily dissect the quality of these partnerships. And even if these quality indicators were in place, parents are often given very little, if any, power to affect change in the current system. As mentioned earlier, this often negatively impacts their desire to participate, so even though parents may be provided with newsletters, opportunities to volunteer, memos, phone calls, and a list of strategies to help their children with homework, they may still decline to participate.

It is also important to note that despite these statistics, troubling gaps persist between the high levels of engagement portrayed by the surveys and the low student performance results. On June 11, 2012, the State Department of Education released data showing that overall graduation rates for New York State have improved slightly, but are still too low for students to be competitive, and college and career readiness measures remain low

(60.9% four year graduation rate for New York City)⁵⁴. In a July 17, 2012 press release, Board of Regents Chancellor Merryl H. Tisch agreed that, “too many of our students, especially students of color, English Language Learners and special education students, are currently not on a course for college and career readiness. That’s why we are continuing to press forward with critical reforms to ensure all of our kids are ready for college and careers.”⁵⁵ In the past year, the situation has not improved and it is evident that troubling achievement gaps still persist (see the chart below).⁵⁶ Under the new, more rigorous test, 29.6% of students met proficiency standards in math and 26.5% of students met the standards in English.⁵⁷

On August 7, 2013, the New York State Commissioner of Education John King introduced a change to the Common Core State Standards, explaining some of the changes in curriculum standards that may be contributing to the

⁵⁴ New York State Education Department Press Release. Retrieved from:
<http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/GraduationRates2012OverallImproveSlightlyButStillTooLow.html>

⁵⁵ New York State Education Department Press Release. Retrieved from:
<http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/3-8MathELATestScores.2012.html>

⁵⁶ As first appeared in Education Week August 19, 2013. Reprinted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education: Ujifusa, Andrew. “N.Y. Test-Score Plunge Adds Fuel to Common-Core Debate” (August 19, 2013). Retrieved from: www.edweek.org

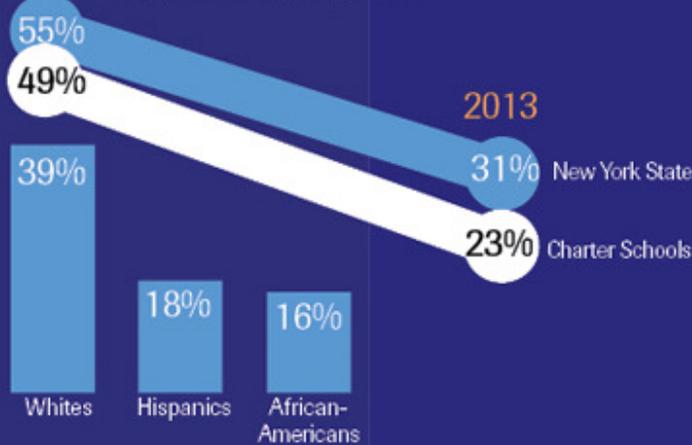
⁵⁷ Press Release, August 7, 2013. Retrieved from:
http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pagelD=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2013b%2Fpr270-13.html&rc=1194&ndi=1

GRADES 3-8 PROFICIENCY RATES

Storm Warnings

New York state saw proficiency scores on statewide English/language arts and math tests plunge by more than 20 percentage points from 2012 to 2013, with state officials attributing the decline to new assessments that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

2012 English language Arts



2012 Math



EDUCATION WEEK

SOURCE: New York State Education Department
iStock photo

lower student performance results (the test this year had more rigorous performance standards than in previous years, See Appendix B for the full letter to parents and families). These changes are explained in even greater detail by accessing the website www.engageNY.org. Here, parents are instructed on how they can help to their students overcome any challenges. According to the website, “as a parent, you can help and learn more by talking with your child about what they are learning. Ask open-ended questions about what they learned in school each day, read their homework and attend school events to learn about what their teachers expect.”⁵⁸ The website goes on to tabulate three categories across each of the twelve shifts: one explaining what the shift is, another explaining what students will have to do, and a third prescribing what parents can do to help (See Appendix A).

Moving forward with these changes, parents will be expected to (1) supply books and other materials at home; (2) supervise, maintain, and encourage high levels reading, writing, and math skills (and any additional skills needed to complete homework assignments); and (3) navigate a strong language of learning in order to encourage students, analyze their progress at school, and act as advocates when they require additional supports.

In continuing our discussion of effective FSCE, we ask that you think about your own communities: are parents prepared to meet these expectations? How will their roles help to facilitate an open partnership between parents, schools, and their communities? How can this prescriptive list of home help strategies for parents be transformed into a functional approach to FSCE? And what are some supports available to parents in order to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill these roles? Ideally schools in New York City need to take personal, local responsibility for successful FSCE and the central office needs to encourage schools to do so.

The current discrepancies concerning the high family engagement ratings and low student performance indicators point to some level of disconnection among the research, the policies, and the actual approaches to FSCE that are being carried out at local levels, and officials, policy makers, and parent advocate groups all recognize a need for improvement. Efforts are currently underway to continue to revise and improve family engagement policies, not just in New York City, but all across the country. In his final remarks to the Mom Congress⁵⁹ on May 3, 2010, Secretary Arne Duncan addresses these problems, which three years later, continue to persist:

Part of the problem has been the parade of parental involvement policies in the last half-century. At various times, Congress and the department have promoted parent advisory council meetings, volunteering in school, school-parent compacts, and helping children learn at home. Yet these and other policies have rarely been shown to move the needle on student achievement.⁶⁰

Officials in New York are working to advance the New York State’s Board of Regents statewide family engagement policies, specific areas of focus include:⁶¹

- Approval of family engagement quality indicators and assessment tool for Local Educational Agencies;
- Teacher and school leader professional development in family engagement practices;
- Implementation and replication of research-based strategies to engage diverse families; and Inclusion of culturally-competent family engagement in higher education and professional certification programs.

⁵⁸ Retrieved from: www.engageNY.org

⁵⁹ Parenting magazine launched the Mom Congress initiative in March 2009 to celebrate and connect moms fighting for better schools. For more information please visit: <http://www.parenting.com/article/about-mom-congress>

⁶⁰ Final remarks of Secretary Arne Duncan to the Mom Congress. May 3, 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/05/05032010.html>

⁶¹ Weiss, H. & Sandler, H. (2009). “From periphery to center: A new vision for family, school, and community partnerships.” In Christianson, S. & Reschly, A. (Eds). *Handbook of school-family partnerships*. New York: Routledge.

These are exciting times for policy makers and reform activists, and in moving forward parents, teachers, and community stakeholders are actively questioning how these changes will satisfy the vision of family engagement that is being pursued. Which research-based strategies will be executed, and how will their implementation work to establish a partnership, welcoming, honoring, and connecting *all* parents? How will schools define their culturally-competent practices? And what types of indicators will be used to assess the quality of these engagement strategies? In order to capitalize on effective family engagement strategies in New York City and beyond, we must even the playing field and create informed partnerships which provide all parties with the proper resources and support mechanisms before they can begin to understand these questions and fulfill these vital roles in FSCE.

CONCLUSION

There is no shortage of prescriptive literature in the field of FSCE: mountains of frameworks, checklists, strategies, methodologies, and suggestions on how to include parents in more meaningful ways, but ultimately, U.S. Department of Education recognizes that, “under current law, family engagement is too often focused on a checklist of activities rather than on driving results, funding isn’t always targeted to the most effective practices, and family engagement is treated as a discrete activity that should have a place across multiple programs.”⁶²

Overall, research reveals that in order to foster successful school-family partnerships: (1) more outreach and training is needed for school staff to facilitate strong leadership, capacity building, and professional development in order to create and sustain trusting and open relationships between families and educators; (2) more support is needed to encourage parent engagement through critical middle-high school years; (3) schools need to evaluate methods of homework and/or afterschool assistance and provide outreach to parents as necessary; and (4) parents need to know where to turn to in the school and/or in the community for help and support, not just to support their children’s education, but also to meet their own personal needs for safety and health. Ultimately, parents, educators, and community members need to all work together to provide a safe, stable environment that supports students’ healthy growth and development, and these findings highlight the overall necessity of more effective strategies for school outreach, training, and parental empowerment in fostering more successful family engagement outcomes.

In order to assess the challenges to family engagement, each partner needs to understand their unique role in cultivating family engagement, and recognize various forms of involvement by knowing their families, their communities, and by examining the roles of parents in their schools. In reflecting on the information presented in this publication, we ask readers to picture the vision of family engagement that emerges from each of their own school districts. Each of the images that prevail will be complete with different challenges and support systems, yet the outcomes should all look the same: systemic, sustainable, and integrated programs that include parents as part of the organization and culture of the school, linking families to goals that promote student learning and healthy development across various settings from cradle to career. If a piece of this picture seems to be missing, we hope that the information presented in our paper will become a jumping off point, guiding you towards a tangible solution. What is missing? How can you repair the picture? And where can you turn to in your community to access the supports and resources you need in order to do so?

⁶² U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Supporting families and communities: Reauthorizing the elementary and secondary education act*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/faq/supporting-family.pdf>



Working with the "Shifts"

What Parents Can Do to Help their Children Learn

The Common Core State Standards ask teachers to make 12 major “shifts” or (changes) in their classrooms – six shifts in English language arts and six shifts in Mathematics. These changes may be tough at first as students and teachers adjust to higher expectations.

As a parent, you can help and learn more by talking with your child about what they are learning. Ask open-ended questions about what they learned in school each day, read their homework and attend school events to learn about what their teachers expect.

This document explains some of the ways that your child’s classroom is changing and how you can help; for more information, check out www.engageny.org.

THE 12 SHIFTS

English Language Arts/Literacy	Mathematics
• Read as much non-fiction as fiction	• Build skills across grade levels
• Learn about the world by reading	• Learn more about less
• Read more challenging material	• Use math facts easily
• Talk about reading using "evidence"	• Think fast AND solve problems
• Write about texts using "evidence"	• Really know it, really do it
• Know more vocab words	• Use math in the real world

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS/LITERACY: EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS & IDEAS FOR PARENTS

What's the shift?	What will students have to do?	What can parents do to help?
Read as much fiction as non-fiction	Read more non-fiction	Supply more non-fiction texts
	Understand how non-fiction is written and put together	Read non-fiction books aloud or with your child
	Enjoy and discuss the details of non-fiction	Have fun with non-fiction in front of your child
Learn about the world by reading	Learn more about science and social studies through reading	Supply series of texts on topics that interest your child
	Use "primary source" documents	Find books that explain how things work and why
	Get smarter through the use of texts	Discuss non-fiction texts and their ideas
Read more challenging material	Re-read until they understand	Know what is <i>grade-level</i> appropriate
	Read books both at and above their comfort level	Provide challenging texts as well as books they can read easily
	Handle frustration	Read challenging books with your child
	Keep pushing to improve	Show that challenging books are worth reading
Talk about reading using evidence	Find evidence to support their arguments	Talk about texts
	Form judgments and opinions	Demand evidence in everyday discussions and disagreements
	Discuss what the author is thinking	Read aloud or read the same book as your child and discuss
	Make predictions about what will happen next	Discuss predictions
Write about text using evidence	Make arguments in writing using evidence	Encourage writing at home
	Compare multiple texts in writing	Write "books" together using evidence and detail
	Learn to write well	Review samples of exemplar student writing
Know more vocab words	Learn the words they will need to use in college and career	Read often and constantly with young children
	Get smarter at using the "language of power"	Read multiple books on the same topic
		Talk to your children, read to them, listen to them, sing with them, make up silly rhymes and word games

MATHEMATICS: EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS & IDEAS FOR PARENTS

What's the shift?	What will students have to do?	What can parents do to help?
Build skills across grade levels	Keep building on learning year after year	Be aware of what your child struggled with last year and how that will effect ongoing learning
		Advocate for your child
		Ensure that support is given for "gap" skills, such as negative numbers, fractions, etc.
Learn more about less	Spend more time on fewer concepts	Know what the priority work is for your child at their grade level
Use math facts easily	Go more in-depth on each concept	Spend time with your child on priority work
		Ask your child's teacher for reports on your child's progress on priority work
Think fast AND solve problems	Spend time practicing by doing lots of problems on the same idea	Push children to know, understand and memorize basic math facts
		Know all of the fluencies your child should have
		Prioritize learning the fluencies your child finds most difficult
Really know it, really do it	Make the math work, and understand why it does	Ask questions and review homework to see whether your child understands <i>why</i> as well as <i>what</i> the answer is.
	Talk about why the math works	Advocate for the time your child needs to learn key math skills
	Prove that they know why and how the math works	Provide time for your child to work on math skills at home
Use math in the real world	Apply math in real world situations	Ask your child to do the math that comes up in daily life
	Know which math skills to use for which situation	



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August 7, 2013

Dear New York State Parents and Families,

Today, we are releasing our 2013 test results. You will notice that more students struggled on this year's test than in previous years. This is because we changed the expectations for New York State students when we adopted the Common Core State Standards. The Board of Regents adopted these standards in 2010 and teachers and principals have been working to make important changes in student learning over the last 3 years. It is exciting that these changes have already begun, but our test results tell us that we have a long way to go.

We are making this change to the Common Core State Standards because we want every single one of our students to be on track for college and careers by the time they graduate from high school. Our former standards did not prepare all of our students for 21st century college and careers. The Common Core State Standards will:

- help students gain the knowledge and skills that they need to think and work at that deeper level
- create opportunities for all students to excel at reading, writing, speaking, listening, language and math
- support students to think critically about what they read and the math that they do
- allow teachers and students to focus on fewer critical concepts in mathematics more deeply
- build students' abilities to apply what they have learned to the real world
- ensure that all students can communicate strong ideas and arguments in writing and react powerfully to what they read

The Common Core State Standards are new, challenging standards and we know that students won't be able to meet these standards without the support of teachers, parents and communities. In particular, we have been working with teachers and principals to understand how instruction should change to get students where they need to be. Teachers and principals have been working to make these important changes to help their students to achieve at higher levels.

You have likely seen and will continue to experience noticeable changes in what and how your child is learning in school. This could include what you see in classrooms, finished work that comes home, or even homework assigned to your child. We have created a *Parents Backpack Guide to Common Core Standards* to help you look for these changes and many other resources to help support your children’s learning (see <http://www.engageny.org/parent-and-family-resources>). For a better sense of what the Common Core looks like in action in classrooms across the state, see the short video entitled “Teaching is the Core” at: <http://www.engageny.org/resource/teaching-is-the-core>.

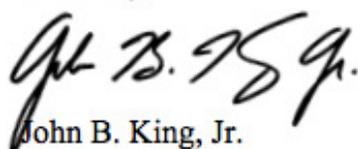
I want to make it very clear that the change in test scores (including, possibly, one in your child's score) does not mean that students are learning less or that teachers and schools are performing worse than last year. Proficiency rates – the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards – on the new Common Core assessments cannot be compared with last year’s proficiency results since the old scores are from an old test based on the former standards. This is a new beginning and starting point that will provide better, clearer information to parents, teachers, and principals about what our children know and are able to do. The results from these assessments will help you and your school directly address the learning needs of your child so that he or she gets and/or stays on track for college and career success.

Parent reports are currently being prepared and will be sent to you near the start of the school year. With these reports, we will provide you with detailed information on how best to understand the results and resources that you can use to help support next steps for your child.

We all want the same thing: for all of our children to succeed in 21st century college and careers, to be good citizens, and to contribute to their community. The changes that we are making now provide us a new opportunity to make sure that every single New York State student graduates from high school prepared and able to make choices about his or her own future in a dynamic and competitive economy. Seeing a change in scores can be challenging for any parent, school, community, or state, but we know that where we are now only marks a beginning.

It is my great honor to work for you and your child every day.

Sincerely,



John B. King, Jr.
Commissioner of Education

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