OVERVIEW

In the past forty years, since the launch of Head Start, parent engagement has undergone a transformation. For close to a century, a parent’s primary function in the elementary school had been in the supportive role of room mother, fund-raiser or teacher’s helper. But in 1966, Head Start equated parent engagement with parent empowerment in program decision-making and that idea planted two poles of parent involvement in the field of debate. In the intervening years, thousands of programs and research studies later, we have a large body of literature, several national centers on parent involvement, and an ERIC Clearinghouse of case studies and program reports that have settled the debate. Parents can and should participate in early education in a variety of ways, limited only by the resources of the program and the will of the parents to make a commitment to their children’s learning.

Why is Family Engagement Important?

Studies conducted over the past few decades have confirmed what is implicitly known: parental involvement in a child’s development and education accelerates his or her progress and increases the child’s chances for success later in life (Desmione, 1999). A report sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education found that, “the research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children’s learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children’s learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects,” (Cotton and Wikelund, 1989). Furthermore, children “have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved,” (Epstein, 1992).

As such, preschool programs that have embraced family engagement as a signature effort have produced dramatic, positive results for their students by helping parents to be aware, knowledgeable, encouraging and involved. An example are the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CCPC), whose inner-city preschool centers use a comprehensive approach to parent involvement, enhancing parent-child interactions, fomenting greater family attachment to schools and offering social supports to parents. Students who attended a CCPC experienced dramatically improved outcomes, with 61% of them graduating from high school, as opposed to 38.5% of their counterparts. Studies of other preschool programs have often shown improved outcomes and societal savings, but the dramatic effects shown in CCPC students indicate that the program’s unique focus on family engagement pays even greater dividends (Reynolds, et al., 2000).

The Need for Increased Family Involvement

Unfortunately, many parents are not sufficiently involved in their children’s education due to social, economic, and/or cultural barriers. In order to successfully reach out to parents, materials should be provided in formats that parents will be comfortable using (e.g., videos, informational brochures, etc.).

This is especially true for parents who are immigrants and speak English as a second language. Nearly one in five Latino and Asian parents have problems communicating with their children’s teachers because of language difficulties. Compounding this problem, many immigrant parents did not attend a preschool or child care center themselves, so their lack of familiarity with the system could make interactions with teachers even more intimidating. Preschool access also varies widely by ethnicity: Only 41% of Asian parents report that their children attend preschool, and only 23% of Latino parents do.
A preponderance of research on preschool implementation points to the need for organizations to provide parent-friendly materials in a variety of modalities, going beyond written information. The family support model is responsive to language differences, social service needs and other issues that interfere with parent involvement with child development, especially in underserved communities. The family support model will often integrate classes and other activities with the children’s program, helping parents to become literate, enter the job market, and learn about early childhood education. The goal is to strengthen parents’ ability to become life-long partners and advocates for their children’s education.

Pathways to Family Engagement

The challenge for preschool programs is to find the right pathway to involvement that works for their parent population as a whole and for individual parents. There is no silver bullet that works for everyone and it takes dedicated resources to coordinate and support a parent engagement element in a preschool program. In fact, in the last decade, parent engagement models have been expanded in breadth to include the concept of creating healthy communities through well-functioning families. These family support programs, typically embedded in children’s learning environments (such as Ed Ziegler’s Schools of the 21st Century) are designed to create multi-generational transformations where parents and children are making advances, and communities are becoming safer, better places to live as a result.

To reach the maximum number of parents, county plans will need to consider meaningful and multiple strategies to reach parents and for parents to reach inside the program to become part of the child’s learning experience. Counties will need to seek or raise funding to support intensive models, such as the family support model, especially for communities with low-decile schools. These communities often have large populations of immigrant parents, and families are dealing with challenges on every front, way beyond the stressors of everyday living that even the middle class often find compromising.

According to the widely cited Joyce Epstein, Executive Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, parents need an array of options that she classifies as “parent involvement types,” (Epstein, et al. 1997). These constitute a scaffold of parent engagement. From Type 1 to Type 6, the resources required and staff engagement increase, but so does the reciprocal engagement and participation of the family (see table below). For each type of involvement, Epstein classifies practices, challenges to implementation, and behavioral results that can be attained by each level of involvement. As she points out, parent engagement is “no longer an optional activity or a matter of public relations.” But it takes time, organization, and effort to develop a good program.

Epstein also describes ten steps to creating a successful school-family-community partnership, which includes dedicated funding. This is a strong indicator that as the state unfolds a gradual expansion of direct service funding, local programs will need to advocate for additional funding or new funding to take their parent involvement models beyond Type 1 or Type 2.

Epstein’s Six Types of Involvement
### Family Engagement

#### Relevant Preschool California Principles:

**Programs Will Recognize that Cultural, Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Are Defining Attributes of California’s Population**

Children of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, first languages, income levels and neighborhoods will be welcomed in inclusive quality programs designed to meet their individual needs.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child development, and setting home conditions that support children as developmental needs change over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Improve the recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers supporting school programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning at Home</td>
<td>Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, from the use of emergent curriculum and everyday routines, to purposeful curriculum based activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making</td>
<td>Include parents as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy for early education that will support and sustain the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with Community</td>
<td>Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies and other groups</td>
</tr>
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</table>

While Epstein and other parent involvement experts do not explicitly emphasize the point, it seems that reciprocity, or two-way action, must be bedrock to the involvement effort. Consistent with any action designed to create change, one party cannot do all the work. This attribute of parent involvement will be critical for California’s preschool programs if the parent commitment to learning is to be sustained beyond the one or two years children are in preschool. Typically, there is a great deal of trust between the provider and the families of preschool children, and this is the foundation for long-term parent engagement. At the micro-level, we want to leverage the parents power as the most influential person in the child’s life, to embrace education and learning in their practice and as an ideal. At the macro-level we want to enable parents to navigate the larger system of education so they can constructively access opportunities and advocate for their children’s future.

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**SAMPLE APPROACHES**
Many child development and preschool programs—in California and other states—have engaged families using a variety of methods, all with the goal of investing parents and caregivers in the development and success of their children. When it comes to long-standing efforts to promote parent engagement, the family literacy centers, the quasi-experimental “New Schools” ventures, and First 5 School Readiness projects are very actively partnering and/or engaging parents in the child’s direct learning experience. First 5, state, and local programs, have leveraged their resources through a wide variety of family literacy, and family support programs. By reviewing the state and individual county websites, it is possible to find examples or modalities that might fit your county’s needs for your preschool planning.

California Approaches:

School Readiness Programs

For a central list of the First 5 California programs go to the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities (www.healthychild.ucla.edu). Neal Halfon, M.D. directs this center for improving societies’ ability to provide children with the best opportunities for health and well-being. The center manages the program listings for the First 5 California School Readiness programs and has published a report, School Readiness (Vol.2): Family and Community Supports for School Readiness which provides an annotated inventory of websites, and other resources on parent engagement. The center also has contracts with First 5 Los Angeles, and First 5 Ventura to provide training and technical assistance and evaluation support to their school readiness initiative projects.

Local Preschool Efforts

Most of the First 5 and First 5 locally funded universal preschool efforts are recent, and parent involvement has focused on outreach and enrollment. A review of PoP programs illustrates the current emphasis on enrollment and linkages to ancillary services. The Santa Clara example has moved closer to the family support model. We do not have data from every county that has initiated preschool and will fill out a template on parent engagement as sites and county-wide programs begin to roll-out.

San Francisco. Outreach to families in San Francisco includes Public Service Announcements in English and Spanish, radio talk shows, ethnic media outlets (print and TV), brochure in multiple languages, presentations at community fairs, inform community-based organizations, and parent-friendly website. First 5 SF contracts with a Provider and Enrollment Agency with a dedicated, multilingual parent-line, and an enrollment specialist that helps families access PFA.

Santa Clara. Santa Clara will offer door-to-door visits, community events, and information referral through other community partners. The role of a F5 Santa Clara County Family Advocate is to partner with the family and early educator to develop a Family Success Plan, which includes identifying strengths and needs, setting goals, accessing information and services, and learning skills that will help the family become self-reliant.

Los Angeles. Families participating in PoP/LAUP who are deemed eligible by preschool staff will be informed about Healthy Kids insurance program and/or First 5 LA Connect, which is a toll-free number that can enroll families into the latter program.

Other Local Experimental Programs
Family Engagement

The following programs are completely articulated with K-12 regular, charter, or experimental programs.

**The Elizabeth Learning Center in East Los Angeles** ([www.eslc.k12.ca.us](http://www.eslc.k12.ca.us)) is one of the Pre-K to 12 sites organized as part of an innovative collaboration of the Los Angeles Unified School District, United Teachers of Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles Educational Partnership with the New American Schools Initiative. The mission of the school is to create a community that supports learning. The school has integrated funding and services on multiple levels and in many domains, providing parents and children with a one-stop service center for linkages to other services, including a health care clinic, psychological services, adult education, and child care, in addition to the Pre-K-12 program.

**The Puente Learning Center** ([www.puente.org](http://www.puente.org)) has two locations, in East and South Los Angeles, and is designed to meet the educational needs of families with children of all ages and backgrounds. The unifying theme for all learning is technology, and parents have access to adult education and job training, while children are attending school in a Pre-K-12 environment.

**The Vaughn Next Century Learning Center** ([www.vaughncharter.com](http://www.vaughncharter.com)) is a leading edge example of blended funding streams, Head Start, Title 5 Child Development Services, Family Literacy Program, and Charter School all in one location.

**The Family-School Partnership Act**
California passed a state law in 1995, which makes it legally allowable for a parent to take up to 40 hours in a year to participate in their children’s school or child care activities. The law (Labor Code Section 230.8) provides that time off is unpaid, so its impact has probably been very low in our target communities. Nevertheless, the concept is an important one, particularly if funding could be raised to cover the time parents spent with engagement activities at the preschool site.

**Approaches from Other States:**
Many innovative approaches to engaging families have been incubated in programs around the country.

**The Chicago, Illinois Child-Parent Centers (CPC)** ([http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/)) developed a groundbreaking framework to motivate parents to volunteer in the classroom and read with their child weekly at home. The sustained parent engagement with the Chicago was a substantial differentiator for the long term gains of children who had been enrolled in the program. This program is the Title 1 funded intervention that led to the resurgence of interest in early learning as an instrument for lifelong achievement. Ironically, the funding for the Parent-Child centers was recently cut-back due to budget constraints.

**The Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ)** ([www.HCZ.org](http://www.HCZ.org)), an outgrowth of the Rheedlen Centers in New York, works to create a comprehensive support network for families, distributing child development resources, providing resource centers and workshops for parent education, health, safety and nutrition. The underlying focus of the HCZ is children’s achievement and many of the programs offered are intended to create a buffer between the children and the influences that will negatively affect their achievement. The HCZ is a distinct geographical area in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City where nearly 88% of the zone’s children are served by one of its offered programs, due to an active outreach program that reaches children and families who would otherwise not participate. This project has received national media coverage and a New York Times Cover Story.
The National Center for Family Literacy (www.famlit.org) based in Louisville Kentucky, focuses on engaging the whole family in literacy development (particularly in English). The organization sees as one of its primary goals to use “families as the transformative structure to improve literacy for adults and for children.” This organization was founded in 1989 with a grant from the William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust and has disseminated the Kenan Literacy Model to partnership programs in the mid-west.

BASIC ISSUES AND INSTRUCTIONS

Below are some of the main issues your County may want to address regarding to parent / family engagement:

1. What outreach techniques and organizational models will you use to engage families in their children’s learning?
2. How will you ensure that your outreach plans account for the cultural diversity and language differences of parents in your community?
3. What will be your parameters for parent engagement (e.g. volunteers and classroom assistance only or to participation in governance?)
4. How can you direct families to the support services and education opportunities they need?
5. How will you promote continued parent involvement in the K-12 system?
6. How will you include parents in the preschool planning and implementation process of your new preschool system?
7. Where can funding be raised locally or statewide to support a sustained parent engagement agenda?

OTHER RESOURCES

Family Partnership Initiative Project (http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pj/444)
The thrust of the Family Partnership Initiative Project (FPI) is to offer resources to California state-funded programs for young children (birth to twelve) to address family partnerships in their trainings and staff development efforts.

California Parent Center (http://parent.sdsu.edu)
A center sponsored by San Diego State University to provide technical assistance to school and districts statewide in the area of parent involvement. Its program includes training to foster family-school partnerships to increase student achievement.

San Juan School District Parental Involvement Programs (http://www.sanjuan.edu/programs/osapp/programs/involvement/)
Family Engagement

A listing of programs parent involvement and family support programs offered by the San Juan Unified School District. It also includes links to many external parenting websites.

Other National Resources:

Below are links to other helpful resources regarding family engagement.

The Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships  
[http://scov.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm](http://scov.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm)
A national parent partnership center, directed by Joyce L. Epstein that serves as an innovator on research, practice, and policy analysis on the ways that families and educators and members of communities can work together to clearinghouse on research.

Parents As Teachers ([http://www.parentsasteachers.org](http://www.parentsasteachers.org)) and Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) ([http://www.hippyusa.org](http://www.hippyusa.org))
These organizations actively promote home-based and family focused learning, providing comprehensive parent education and family support services through local program sites. The websites also provide a wealth of free resources for parents, including FAQ's on parenting, suggested children's books and ideas for teaching at home.

The ERIC Clearninghouse probably houses the nation’s largest compendium of reports, research and case studies of parent involvement projects, including the Head Start library of documents. The Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting ([www.ceep.crc.uic.edu](http://www.ceep.crc.uic.edu)) is a collaborative based at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Head Start is one of the pioneers in developing parent engagement models. Their website includes selected recent journal articles, book titles, video titles, and lists of associations and organizations that specialize in Parent Involvement. A separate guide, Parent Resources: An Internet Pathfinder, identifies Internet sites on Parent Involvement.
References:


