EDUCATION WEEK
2017
SPOTLIGHT

Justin T. Gellerson for Education Week

Jeremy Gabrieo and his daughter Gabriel River browse at the book fair at Mt. Rainier Elementary School in Maryland. Earlier, Gabrieo attended a breakfast and lecture for the Men of Mt. Rainier, a group made up of the parents and guardians of children at the school. The school has been working with a nonprofit to reach out to more parents.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

EDITOR'S NOTE

In order to better serve students, schools are building meaningful relationships with families and their communities. In this Spotlight, learn how home-school connections can benefit English-Language Learners and their parents, how community voices are helping shape state ESSA plans, and how educators can provide parents with actionable information to support student learning.

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Home-School Connections Help ELLs and Their Parents

By Corey Mitchell

San Jose, Calif.

Week after week, Maria Arias Evans has to face her failure.

The 60 to 70 parents who crowd the library here at Washington Elementary School each Thursday morning, chatting in Spanish and snacking on sweets donated by a local bakery, are the product of years of dogged relationship-building led by the veteran principal.

When Arias Evans began the Madre a Madre parent program, five or fewer people would show up for the weekly sessions.

Where others see success, Arias Evans sees a shortcoming: Twelve years ago, she set out with the goal of attracting 100 parents every week. It's all part of a painstaking plan to boost literacy in English and Spanish at Washington Elementary, a 425-student school near the city's downtown. Four out of every five students on campus is an English-language learner.

Arias Evans knows, and research shows, that children whose parents are involved in supporting their learning do better in school. For English-learners, parent involvement is especially important for supporting successful language development.

Parents who speak Spanish or another language should encourage and support their child's development and literacy in the home language, which can benefit their English-learning, research from the Center for Early Education Development at the University of Minnesota has shown.

That's why the school library at Washington Elementary opens 50 minutes before the first bell and stays open 50 minutes after school ends each day. Parents pull Spanish and, if they're comfortable, English books from the shelves to share with their children.

Then, when classes begin, transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms for 4- and 5-year-olds are open for parents to do the same. The open-door policy draws dozens of families each morning.

"We want to send a message: 'We expect you. We invite you,'" Arias Evans said. "We want to build a routine, so that it becomes part of the day."

Not all schools are so welcoming.

"Most schools kick parents out when the bell rings," said Maria Estela Zarate, an associate professor at California State University, Fullerton's College of Education.

A decade ago, Zarate's research on Latino parents found that schools and families have much different perceptions of what constitutes good parental involvement.

Tapping parent focus groups in Los Angeles, Miami, and New York, Zarate reported that communication activities with schools were impersonal and infrequent, and that parents rarely heard from anyone unless their child had an academic or discipline problem.

That approach can be discouraging for parents for whom language is already a barrier to school participation and engagement, San Jose school officials said.

But the disconnect doesn't stop there.

The teachers and school administrators that Zarate met with felt that the more traditional back-to-school nights, open houses, and parent-teacher conferences were important venues to communicate about students' academic progress. The Latino families that took part in the study didn't.

The findings are in sync with prior research findings that, in some Hispanic cultures, parents view teachers as the experts and defer education decision-making to them.

"The biggest challenge is not having the intimate knowledge about these families and their cultural practices and expectations for their children," Zarate said.

Welcoming Latino Parents In Schools

Some schools have found understanding those things more difficult than others.

San Jose school leaders have strived to make their campuses more welcoming

Eriselda Hernandez, right, reads with Fernanda Arana, 6, before school begins at Washington Elementary School in San Jose, Calif. The school's weekly Madre a Madre meetings help bring parents into the school regularly to support children's literacy development.

Preston Gannaway/GRAIN for Education Week

ENGAGE ALL LEARNERS

Meeting the parent notice requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) after July 1 will challenge all states and districts. Partnering with TransACT to prepare for ESSA implementation can alleviate the cost, time, and risk associated with creating or amending over 100 parent notices in English and other languages.

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places, said Jason Willis, the district's assistant superintendent for community engagement and accountability.

"Parents showing up on our campuses should be an invitation to learn," Willis said.

Less than two miles from Washington Elementary, another San Jose school, Olinder Elementary, has garnered attention from the White House for its parent-engagement efforts.

The White House and the U.S. Department of Education honored Christian Rubalcaba, who was a teacher at Olinder, for developing strong parent-school relationships. Since he came to Olinder in 2010, Rubalcaba, now an instructional coach at the school, has visited the homes of all his students during the first month of each school year, as part of a program now known as Mr. R's Home-to-School Connection.

Alejandra Ceja, the executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, visited the school in March to discuss parent engagement and efforts to recruit and retain Latino teachers.

A Chicago native and a product of that city's public schools, Rubalcaba didn't have a Latino teacher until he left for college.

Rubalcaba's ability to speak Spanish has opened doors for him in a community where many families who may be undocumented immigrants can be leery of outsiders and see school and home as distinctly separate entities.

Preston Gannaway/GRAIN for Education Week

Patricia Rodriguez, Vanessa Landeros, and Eva Marron (from left) listen during a weekly gathering of parents at Washington Elementary School in San Jose, Calif. Principal Maria Arias Evans began the Madre a Madre group more than a decade ago to bring parents into the school regularly. The 60 to 70 parents who come each week are helping support the literacy development of students in Spanish and English.

English-Learners' Families Are Diverse

But even among native Spanish-speaking English-learners, Hispanics are a diverse group that defy simple categorization. Factoring in country of origin and citizenship status alone can make it more difficult to develop universal strategies to boost parental involvement, advocates and researchers said.

In Zarate's study, English-speaking parents reported that email and web postings were a convenient way to communicate with teachers.

That's not an option for parents who don't read or write English, many of whom have little or no contact with teachers because reaching them by phone can prove challenging during the school day. Many of the parents also reported that campus security measures discouraged them from visiting classrooms during school hours without appointments.

"We shouldn't be saying, 'Your culture needs to fit exactly what we're doing at school,'" said Tina Durand, an associate professor of human development at Wheelock College in Boston.

Durand's research has focused on the nature of Latino parent involvement in their children's schooling, Latino parents' cultural beliefs about education, and effective partnerships between schools and Latino families. The studies and analyses have shown that parent involvement is a significant predictor of children's literacy skills, and that bonds formed with other parents at the school may help increase school involvement among Latino families.

Research has shown that some Latino parents aim to ensure that their children behave and focus in class, which paves the way for learning in the classroom. While some teachers may simply see their actions as parenting, Zarate's focus group participants considered it "education from the home."

"We have to think about the biases and misperceptions we have of families, and that may include English-learners," Durand said. "We have to want to make those connections and we may have to work harder to do so."

A 2015 report makes the case that communities looking to improve education for school-aged English-language learners should also offer services to their parents.

The study from the Center for American Progress—"The Case for a Two-Generation Approach for Educating English Language Learners"—found that limited English skills for parents and students "can create a poverty trap for families" and argues that engaging them simultaneously improves the academic and educational well-being of both generations. Research has shown that English-learners who do not reach proficiency can often end up illiterate in two languages, effectively unable to read or write in either.

The report author, Tracey Ross, examined how the Oakland, Calif., district prioritizes family engagement at school to help parents become better advocates for their children. Nearly a third of students in that district are English-learners.

"It can't be a one-size-fits-all approach. Each family has a unique situation, unique work schedules, their own children have unique needs," said Ross, the associate director of the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress, a Washington-based policy think tank. "It's a challenge to reach the most marginalized communities to begin with."

It's a struggle that Arias Evans, the principal at Washington Elementary, knows well. Many families arrive at her school because of a lack of education and opportunity in Mexico.

Plenty of parents have little more than a 6th-grade education, and more than 90 percent of families at her school live in poverty. She's visited students and found them living with eight or nine other people in a 500-square-foot apartment.

"No wonder reading is not the priority," she said.

Helping ELLs' Parents Realize Dreams

That's why she opens the library doors, hosts Monday morning coffees, and leads the Madre a Madre sessions, where she honors parents as Las Joyas de Washington, the Jewels of Washington. Regular participants have bejeweled crowns on display on a prominently placed library bulletin board. Parents can earn sapphires, rubies, and other gemstones for volunteering on campus in a host of ways, including reading to children.

Arias Evans understands that parents in her community may need access to health care, food pantries, and other supplemental services, but she also wants them to give back when and where they can. For some, it's a weekend campus cleanup. For others, it's founding an after-school reading program, like Juanita Escamilla did.

As a child, Escamilla wanted to work as a teacher. Though her dreams to do that were dashed, she has helped to build the capacity for future educators in her community, Escamilla said through a translator.

"Even if families don't have the education we do, there are gifts that they can bring," said Durand, the Wheelock College professor.

The school's most earnest volunteers, such as PTA President Adriana Leon, rack up more than 300 service hours per school year. The mother of two children at Washington and a teenager who came up through the school, Leon came to the United States in 1999 to learn English. Seventeen years later, she's still tussling with the language. But she's amazed by her 5-year-old's growing grasp of English and his development in Spanish reading and writing.

"I did not realize my dreams to become fluent in two languages," Leon said through a translator, "but my children will be." ■

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As ESSA Rolls Out, State Officials Vow To Hear Local Voices

By Daarel Burnette II

Pueblo, Colo.

Under the now-replaced No Child Left Behind Act, the Colorado education department pumped in millions of state and federal dollars to improve the Pueblo public schools, almost half of which the state deems failing.

The test scores barely budged over the past several years.

So when a handful of department officials trooped down to this southeastern part of the state last week to ask community members what changes to the state's accountability system they'd like to see under NCLB's replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act, district Superintendent Constance A. Jones was ready for her turn at the microphone.

"I see this as a golden opportunity to rethink our entire accountability system," she said. Speaking from a torn-out sheet of notebook paper, Jones cited a long list of complaints: The department has become too heavy-handed. Its labeling of schools is demoralizing. Its standards are inconsistent.

This is a taste of what state education officials nationwide may hear this spring as they ask parents, teachers, district leaders, and lawmakers to help them design their revamped accountability plans under ESSA, which eventually will be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.

ESSA, the latest version of the nation's main K-12 law, gives states much more authority to design their own school-accountability and teacher-evaluation systems, among other policies. To do that—and to avoid blind-siding local officials and community residents —state education departments are convening task forces, conducting online surveys, and holding town hall meetings, sometimes in far-flung corners of their states.

"From the front end, departments need to be clear about their intentions," said Chris Minnich, the executive direc-

Patrick Chapman leads one of two ESSA meetings held in Pueblo. The session drew about 70 attendees.

Barry Gutierrez for Education Week

tor of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which has released a white paper to help departments frame discussion points and strategize ways to engage hard-to-reach groups, such as low-income and minority parents.

"The broadness of this conversation is critical," he said. "The more transparent we can be about the decisionmaking process, the better."

Lessons From Common Core

It's not easy. The education debate has been especially volatile in recent years, with teachers' unions at loggerheads with administrators over evaluations, and parents frustrated about what they see as too much testing.

State departments are still dealing with the political backlash from the Common Core State Standards, which teachers and parents complained their states had adopted and put into effect without enough discussion with them.

"Without community input, it just makes it incredibly hard to get any implementation with fidelity," said Kathy Cox, a former state superintendent of Georgia and the CEO of the U.S. Education Delivery Institute, which consults with education departments. "Even if people don't always agree with what the state policy or what the decision is, if they feel like they've been well informed and that there's been a very good reflective process on why a decision is being made, people will come around."

This month alone, education officials of states such as Kentucky, Oregon, and Pennsylvania are holding ESSA town hall meetings.

"We're going to task thousands of people to help us develop this plan," said Stephen Pruitt, the education commissioner of Kentucky, who just wrapped up a statewide tour. "I want as many people getting their eyes on our ESSA plan as possible."

Getting Buy-In

The risks of failing to get buy-in from the public are high, as illustrated by Colorado's experience with the common-core rollout. Last year, more than 65,000 students opted out of the state's exams to protest the standards and what many in the public perceived as overtesting.

"It was a nightmare," said Martha Nogare, the principal of Pueblo West High School, who spent the last two months meeting with parents to explain what the common core is and how the aligned tests can be beneficial. While more than 150 of her school's students opted out of the tests last year, just a dozen opted out this year, a sharp drop she attributes to the local outreach effort.

"The state didn't do its part in communicating to parents what in the world is common core," Nogare said. "They were just saying it's a good thing, so there was this mystery around the whole thing."

From the district level on up, Colorado education officials are viewing ESSA as a chance for a new start with greater partnership and communication.

"ESSA puts the onus back on states to say, 'What are you going to do to help these districts, these schools?'" said Richard Crandall, the Colorado commissioner of education. "The listening tour is us saying, 'Hey, guys, we have some flexibility and a lot of responsibility. Let's do this together. This is not going to be a top-down decision. What in the areas of accountability and turnaround would you like to see? Let's have a conversation.'"

After the state department devises its accountability plan in the fall, officials will likely revisit cities to get further feedback. The governor and state lawmakers will also get a chance to look the plan over.

The state's teachers' union, school boards' association, and administrators' organization also are planning a summit in June to gather more opinions and ideas.

Drawing a Crowd

In preparation for their seven-city listening tour, which wraps up next month, state education officials placed ads in local newspapers, posted fliers on community boards, and sent emails to parents' online discussion groups.

The first two sessions took place in Pueblo on May 4 at the city's history museum, one in the afternoon and another in the evening. The audience, around 80 people between the two meetings, was made up mostly of administrators and teachers. Only two parents were registered.

The school district for four years straight has languished at the bottom of Colorado's accountability system, designed five years ago as part of a federal waiver to the state that eased provisions of the No Child Left Behind law. A multimillion-dollar effort to bring in consultants to help the district improve schools didn't bring much success, and morale sank, administrators here say. Compounding the district's academic problems are a drug epidemic and a high unemployment rate.

A more recent effort to give schools additional flexibility, under state laws, to provide tutoring, extra hours of instruction, and more professional development has shown promising results, and Pueblo's superintendent plans to ask the state to expand those efforts this summer.

Seizing an Opportunity

For many educators in the district, the Every Student Succeeds Act is an opportunity to reconfigure the way struggling schools are labeled and supported by the state.

"We have to look at the core values of this state and really look at a more comprehensive system," said Jones, the Pueblo superintendent. "Once we settle on a plan, it's going to be difficult to modify it."

Over chocolate cupcakes, sugar cookies, and pepperoni pizza at the meeting, Patrick Chapman, the executive director of the state education department's federal-programs unit, described the elements of ESSA using a PowerPoint presentation.

The state is bound by its own statutes when it comes to standards, the amount of testing schools can conduct, and courses that must be offered, Chapman said. But ESSA gives the state flexibility to determine how to distribute some federal money and come up with new ways to evaluate schools, he said, and local districts can devise their own ways to turn around schools.

In small-group discussions, department officials took notes as administrators and teachers discussed the city's long list of problems.

Among the complaints: that federal money was being distributed haphazardly and unevenly; that intervention efforts didn't include local input; and that the accountability system didn't consider the role poverty played in the district.

"I think they've listened. I don't think their actions reflect that, though," said Suzanne Ethredge, president of the Pueblo Education Association, about the department. The teachers' union is affiliated with the National Education Association.

Crandall, the state schools chief, who didn't attend the Pueblo event, said state officials are open to hearing other ideas on how to intervene in the worst-performing districts.

"Everybody has a strong opinion about education and what they want," said Crandall. "The ideas are as diverse as the stars in the sky." ■

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ESSA May Offer Megaphone For Parent, Community Voice

Advocates See Chance for Greater Impact Under New K-12 Law

By Andrew Ujifusa & Sarah Tully

Advocates for parent and community engagement see the newly revised federal K-12 law as an opportunity to expand their impact on states' academic goals, plans for school improvement, and other areas of policy.

Requirements in federal education law for parental involvement in public schools are nothing new. But because the new Every Student Succeeds Act shifts significant responsibility over accountability and other matters to states and districts, there's renewed hope that parent, community, civil rights, and other groups will have more sway over what has been, in many cases, a narrower decisionmaking process.

There are some caveats, however.

Since ESSA deals only with authorizations for programs, federal funding for some of these engagement efforts is not guaranteed. And various groups say that it's up to all sides—including policymakers, advocates, and community members—to become more active so that the promise ESSA holds for them is fulfilled.

The new law, like its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act, requires districts to set aside at least 1 percent of their Title I funds, which are aimed at helping disadvantaged children, to involve parents in the school community (although the wording to describe those activities has changed under ESSA). And 90 percent of those dollars must be distributed by each district, with a priority given to "high-need" schools.

Under Title IV of the law—which includes a new flexible block grant for health, safety, technology, well-rounded education, and more—ESSA also authorizes federal grants to Statewide Family Engagement Centers. Those are a new iteration of the Parental Information and Resource Centers that were federally funded under NCLB, but which parent-advocates hope will play a bigger role, even though federal money for them is not guaranteed.

"Our key priority is to make sure parents and families and PTAs are at the table with school districts while they are planning their implementation of the new law—that parents can be there and can be meaningfully involved and not just checking the box," said Jacki Ball, the director of governmental affairs for the National PTA.

And perhaps the biggest policy discussions about where parent and community engagement can have a discrete impact derive from the requirement in ESSA for states to consider at least one indicator of

school quality in their new accountability systems. That could include factors such as school climate, student engagement, and access to advanced coursework.

Public school officials welcome the chance ESSA provides to reset relationships with parents and community groups and start new ones for those and other discussions.

Tony Evers, the Wisconsin superintendent of public instruction, cited the shift away from the federally funded School Improvement Grant program as one such opportunity.

In 2010, when the Milwaukee district began participating in SIG, 46 schools took part. But ESSA got rid of SIG as a federal turnaround program—along with its four prescriptive turnaround methods.

Evers, who is also president of the Council of Chief State School Officers, said he and other officials now will be able to use input from a variety of Milwaukee community groups—from the NAACP to disability advocates—to help create school-improvement models.

"Now we have the opportunity, because there are no requirements or magic formulas, [to] sit down with the Milwaukee school board, parents, and community officials, and say, 'OK, how can we best serve parents and kids without those requirements?'" Evers said. "I think this will be an excellent opportunity."

Broader Input

In many instances, such as with the 1 percent set-aside for Title I dollars, ESSA replaces the term "parental involvement" with "parent and family engagement," which some see as fostering more-collaborative relationships between schools and the wider community.

Schools receiving Title I money under ESSA also have to have written engagement policies. Supporters of community schools, which connect schools' academic mission with healthcare, social services and other wraparound programs, think provisions of ESSA will give their work additional momentum and their partners more say in K-12 policy. And as in other provisions of the law, there's a requirement for districts' parental engagement strategies to be "evidence-based" in terms of their effectiveness.

On a statewide basis, Evers is hoping to use ESSA to expand Wisconsin's "Promoting Excellence for All" initiative, which focuses on family and community engagement and student-teacher rela-

tionships, among other avenues, to highlight and try to close racial achievement gaps in the state.

Expanded family and community engagement opportunities in ESSA also give state chiefs the chance to make shifts in accountability policies both "more robust and understandable to people," said Evers.

Some advocates caution that it would be misguided to draw a bright red line between parents and other organizations in communities that can help schools. That's particularly true because the most effective advocates for low-income children are often their parents, who have also frequently been ignored or marginalized when it comes to the development of school policy, said Liz King, the senior policy analyst and the director of education policy at the Leadership Conference Education Fund, a civil rights group.

"We see a lot of interchanges and relationships between parents writ large and civil rights organizations in states," King said.

Those who work in and advocate for full-service community schools agree that the new law should motivate school leaders to draw on broader sources of input, for decisions, for example, about how local Title I dollars are used.

Community-school advocates say that ESSA will give their work more momentum and allow people to explore new partnerships with local colleges and universities that can provide mentoring and tutoring, groups like United Way, and local community justice organizations.

Under Title IV, ESSA authorizes full service community schools, as well as Promise Neighborhoods, which were originally funded under President Barack Obama's administration and work to create "cradle-to-career" support for students.

"If a school has intentional ways to reach out to partners, teachers can have easier access to museums, art exhibitions, and specific experiences that students can have through local government, and local civil rights groups," said Marty Blank, the director of the Coalition for Community Schools.

Historically, it has been difficult for educators to engage many community members in low-income urban areas in school-improvement efforts, especially over the long term, Blank said. But just as school officials have an obligation under ESSA to listen to community members and not just manipulate them into supporting a pre-cooked plan for how schools work, he stressed, civil rights organizations and community groups have a renewed responsibility to work with schools as well.

"Now is the time to get engaged, because planning is so important to this process," Blank said. "This new law, in devolving power back to the state and local level, should be a clarion call for our folks to step up."

Encouraging Involvement

Those who support schools' parent and community engagement efforts are encouraged by several provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act, even though some of those elements are similar to those in the No Child Left Behind Act, the previous version of the federal education law. Among its key features in this area, ESSA:

- Requires districts to set aside at least 1 percent of their Title I funds for parent and family engagement activities. Of that money, 90 percent must be distributed to schools.
- Creates State Family Engagement Centers, which are the successors to the Parental Information Resource Centers funded under the NCLB law, and authorizes $10 million in annual funding for them.
- Replaces the NCLB law's use of the phrase "parental involvement" with "parent and family engagement" in several provisions.
- Places what advocates for broader engagement in schools say is a new emphasis on school quality in accountability that could provide parents, civic organizations, and other community groups with greater influence in creating new definitions of successful schools.

SOURCE: Every Student Succeeds Act

Challenges on the Ground

However, ESSA's sharper focus on engagement won't automatically translate into help for those who work in the field. Take the Statewide Family Engagement Centers, which would head up parent outreach and professional training in schools.

ESSA only authorizes about $10 million a year for the new centers, compared to approximately $40 million in annual funding their predecessors, the Parental Information and Resource Centers, received over five years from 2006 to 2010 under the NCLB law. And perhaps more importantly, President Obama's fiscal 2017 budget proposal does not include any money for the centers.

Today, only three states—Colorado, Kansas, and Connecticut—have parent resource centers, which now get by with other funding sources, according to the National PTA.

In 1980, Richard Garcia founded the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition to improve parental involvement, starting in his own children's schools. In 2006, the coalition got a federal grant to begin Colorado's Parent Information Resource Center, allowing it to expand its outreach statewide. The main thrust was to create parent leadership teams in schools, focusing on campuses with families of color and low-income children, Garcia said.

But when its grant ended in 2010, the coalition had to cut back about half of its operation, scaling back to serve only the Denver metro area. Now the group survives mostly on philanthropic money.

"It's hard for us to do the work," Garcia said.

Garcia is hoping grants under ESSA will help his coalition expand again, but he knows the funds are limited. He also knows that grant recipients must better demonstrate how parental engagement can directly lead to higher student achievement.

The Kansas Parent Information Resource Center also had to downsize after it lost federal money, reducing its staff from five to three and moving into office space with the state's Parent Teacher Association, said Jane Groff, the center's executive director.

But the center's staff convinced the Kansas department of education to find funds to continue. The center last year received a five-year contract through 2020 to provide professional training and assistance to schools, Groff said.

Groff said she is hopeful that the ESSA grants will come through.

"For me, it's very exciting because it provides an opportunity for us to really scale up our work and build capacity across the state," Groff said. ■

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Schools Enlist Parents to Bridge Cultural Barriers

By Caralee J. Adams

Maxine Nguyen used to think getting her four children to school and making sure they finished their homework was enough.

"From my culture, we usually leave it to the teachers to deal with education," said Nguyen, of Kent, Wash., who came from South Vietnam at age 4 as a refugee and had painful memories of being treated differently by teachers because of her ethnicity.

But her attitude changed once she got to know teachers, administrators, and other parents though a process in which her local school district was redesigning strategies to engage parents. Nguyen said she began to see teachers as fellow human beings who were approachable. The experience made her feel more confident asking questions, allowed her to better understand what was happening in her children's classrooms, and prompted her to volunteer at the school.

Increasingly, schools are working to bridge the cultural differences to get families engaged more deeply in their children's education. This means welcoming families, visiting their homes, listening to their experiences, and explaining the educational system so that families can recognize when biases are hurting their children's learning and work to overcome them.

"Teachers go into the classroom and they are confronted with kids who are a rainbow of colors and backgrounds, and [teachers] are just woefully underprepared," said Anne T. Henderson, a senior consultant for the Community Organizing and Engagement program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. "I'm convinced the inequitable practice of engaging families is very much behind the disparate outcomes that we see for our more-vulnerable children."

Not Out to 'Fix Parents'

Henderson said that instead of traditional, one-way activities that aim to "fix parents," such as lecturing parents at Back-to-School Nights, schools need to reach out to families and help them navigate schools. "Parents know when a school looks down on them," she said.

The key is to change the relationship from one of distrust to one of respect and collaboration. "We are moving from thinking of parents as the problem to parents as partners," said Henderson, a co-author of the 2007 book *Beyond the Bake Sale*.

Take Mt. Rainier Elementary School in Maryland, composed mostly of Hispanic and African-American students, about half of whom are English-language learners. Principal Shawn Hintz wanted to do more than hold a social event, such as the annual barbecue, to engage families in the education of their children and the decisions of the school.

In partnership with Teaching for Change, a nonprofit that helps schools and parents build positive connections, Mt. Rainier last year invited parents into the classroom, with translators who could help educators explain how lessons were taught so they could replicate the methods at home. Hintz also hosts regular parent-principal "chit-chats" where parents are encouraged to raise issues.

"Before, the parents would do a lot of talking amongst themselves," Hintz said. "Now they feel more empowered to come talk to me about their concerns."

Creating a Story Quilt

This year Mt. Rainier will begin a six-week story-quilt activity where parents are given different prompts (such as to talk about their first paycheck or a time when they got in trouble) and then share their experiences as they make a quilt together. They also discuss challenges in the school and begin to do some community organizing, finding power working in a collective.

"It's based on the idea that we build meaningful relationships by sharing our stories," said Allyson Criner Brown, an associate director of Teaching for Change, in Washington. Teachers and principals are also encouraged to take part. "We are trying to address the power dynamics in the room and looking for where there may be differences, and biases and structures that may be putting up barriers."

In the Central Falls, R.I., district, drop-in "family rooms" have been set up in schools to provide a warm, welcoming space, along with computers and a staff member who is bilingual to connect with parents before, during, and after school.

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>
> CONSULTANT, ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM

"With so many minority families, especially if they don't speak the language, there is this big wall in front of the school," said Joshua Wizer-Vecchi, the coordinator of a federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, grant through Children's Friend, a Providence nonprofit that works with the district on family engagement. "Maybe you had a terrible experience or feel that you don't have a place here. We have tried to break that down and say, 'No, no, come in.'"

Sometimes school staff members mistakenly believe parents are not interested in their children's educations because they don't show up at school events. But it can be a matter of tuning into what works for the school's diverse community.

"We are guilty of scheduling for a time that works for us," said Wizer-Vecchi, who has switched events to evenings to accommodate working families. The district has also begun to replace pizza and pasta with rice, beans, and empanadas to appeal to Latino families.

Expanding Teacher Awareness

In Kent, Nguyen was among the parents who designed and developed a family-engagement curriculum in collaboration with teachers, administrators, and researchers from the University of Washington. The process gave parents

a chance to share their experiences, create bonds, and develop priorities for improving the school together with educators, said Ann Ishimaru, an assistant professor of education at the University of Washington in Seattle, who facilitated the work.

In turn, the process raised a level of awareness for these educators about how social, cultural, and racial dynamics influence their ongoing interactions with children and families, in and out of the classroom, Ishimaru said.

Being part of the collaborative design team was "enlightening," said Teresa Wocken-Linders, a 5th grade teacher who is white and works at Panther Lake Elementary School in Kent, which has become increasingly diverse through influxes of refugees.

"It was interesting to hear what was most important to parents—it's not always the same thing as what seems important to staff," said Wocken-Linders.

For instance, parents were concerned about safety and wanted training on how to prevent bullying. They also thought it was important that their children develop a positive racial identity within the school system, she said.

Wocken-Linders began to ask parents about their priorities going into conferences so they had more of a shared agenda.

"As a teacher, I feel I have an increased awareness and respect for what parents know about their child and the needs of their child," she said. Now she translates more of her correspondence with parents—into Spanish or Vietnamese, as needed—using Google Translate. "I'm trying to be more sensitive." ■

Coverage of issues related to creating opportunities for all American students and their families to choose a quality school is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation, at waltonk12.org. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.

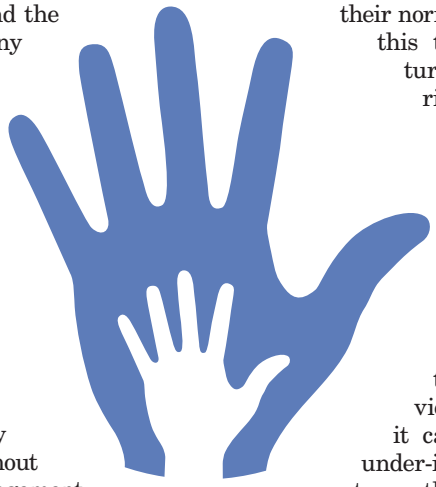
COMMENTARY

Published October 26, 2016, in Education Week's EdTech Researcher Blog

Parents Are Partners (Even if They Miss Back-to-School Night)

By Todd Rogers and Susanna Loeb

It's that time of the fall. Parents are being invited to back-to-school nights to learn about educators' goals for their children and share their own hopes for the school year. Parents and teachers will create personal connections at these events that can help their children make the most of what their school has to offer. Yet, despite educators' best efforts and the benefits of attending, many parents will not show up. Our research shows that it would be a costly mistake to interpret parent absences as signals of their unwillingness or inability to be essential partners this school year.



No-shows can be disheartening. Enthusiastic educators who prepared for the night may become discouraged. Without intention, this discouragement can cascade to a belief that parents don't care about their children's education. A simple absence from an evening event may be interpreted as an indication of deeper deficits. This view can lead some to think that if parents do not show up at school they must have low expectations for their children, a lack of interest in the school, or an inability to create a strong home learning environment so that their children can complete homework and develop in other positive ways. Educators can come to think of families as obstacles to student success rather than as assets to be invested in as education partners.

Interpreting not showing up to school events as signaling that parents don't care about their children's education is a mistake. It is a mistake for two reasons.

First, parents have legitimate reasons for not attending these events. Some of these reasons are structural. Some parents have nontraditional work schedules, others have difficult childcare situations, and others have transportation challenges. Some of these reasons are behavioral. Parents can feel uncomfortable in the school setting or have difficulty deviating from their normal routines to attend this type of event. Structural and behavioral barriers are both common reasons that adults don't do things that an outside observer might think that they should. They are not a reflection of adult goals or beliefs.

Second, it's a mistake to take a deficit view of families because it can lead educators to under-invest in the best partners they have for helping students succeed. Our research, and that of our colleagues, shows that empowering parents with timely, actionable information is among the most cost-effective and scalable ways to improve student success. Investing in parents works, and when considering the many possible strategies for improving student success, it is a relatively easy one.

Families overwhelmingly share educators' goals of nurturing and supporting their children to succeed in school and beyond. Successful educators harness parents' hopes and dreams for their children and honor the reality that parents are the experts on their children. An asset perspective of families leads to investing in parents so they can be more effective educational resources during

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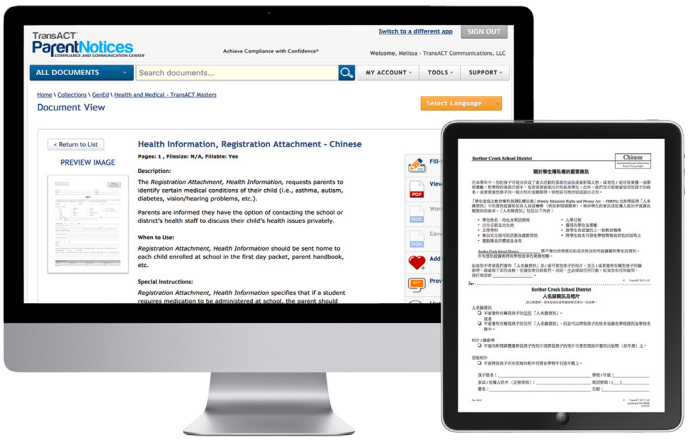

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— Kim Miller, Federal Systems & Education Program Specialist

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children's outside-of-school hours (which, by the way, are the vast majority of students' waking hours).

Schools that approach families as assets solicit and act on parent feedback; communicate in parent-preferred languages; try to understand and adapt to the challenges families face from homelessness to joblessness to chronic illness. This approach sometimes means scheduling events in the late morning to accommodate 2nd and 3rd shift workers or being mindful that information needs to be actionable, timely, concise, and regular, not a morass of difficult-to-implement directions.

We are researchers who develop and study tools to empower parents and support student learning. In addition to generating scalable innovations, our research underscores a more important point. The automated interventions that we work on are relatively weak when compared to educators and families directly communicating back and forth, yet despite this, our interventions illustrate how potent parents can be when treated as education partners.

The READY4K! program created by Loeb (one of us) and Ben York sends text messages to parents three times per week with small, easy-to-achieve steps to support their young children's development. A study of the program found that the program increased parental engagement in at-home literacy activities with their students and that this increased parental activity was reflected in student gains in early literacy. Furthermore, parents in the program were more likely to ask their students' teachers about their students' progress and for additional ways to support learning at home.

The Parent Engagement Project (PEP) conducted by Rogers (one of us), Raj Chande, and Simon Burgess sends parents of secondary school students simple, timely, student-specific information, including notifications about upcoming exams and whether students submitted homework assignments. Parents also receive reminders to encourage their children to study or catch up on incomplete work, and they receive conversation starters related to what the student learned in class that day. By packaging pre-existing administrative data to be useful for parents, this intervention increased students' attendance and math performance, and the vast majority of parents wanted the communications to continue.

These interventions are examples of a growing body of work showing that when you provide parents with timely and actionable information, parents act on it. They improve student achievement, and they want more of it. Parents are hungry for ways they can help their children succeed - regardless of whether parents show up to back-to-school night. ■

Todd Rogers is associate professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and leads the Student Social Support R&D Lab. Susanna Loeb is the Barnett Family Professor of Education at Stanford University.

COMMENTARY

Published September 15, 2016, in Education Week's Education Futures: Emerging Trends in K-12 Blog

What Communication Apps Got Wrong About Parental Engagement

By Vlada Lotkina

Educators know that family support is vital to a student's success. Studies show a strong and powerful correlation between parent involvement and their child's GPA, graduation rate, test scores, and social skills. Teachers themselves rate family support in education as the most important factor in a student's success, ahead of their own teaching skill, according to our recent survey.

To create effective family support in education, parents and teachers need trust and a real person-to-person connection. Unfortunately, most of the purpose-built communication tools that have recently emerged do not enhance and support the parent-teacher relationship. While they are effective at replacing piles of paper flyers and email communications with real-time digital options, they don't address the heart of the issue – building strong relationships between parents and teachers.

Parent Engagement

The U.S Department of Education released a framework, "A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships", suggesting we need programs that meet several opportunity conditions to establish effective family-school partnerships. One of these conditions is the opportunity to build trusting relationships. The SEDL report says, "No meaningful family engagement can be established until relationships of trust and respect are established between home and school."

Despite growing adoption of communication tools, parent engagement appears to be going in the wrong direction in recent years. According to data compiled from various sources by Child Trends DataBank, "Parental involvement in school, as measured by attendance at a general meeting, a meeting with a teacher, or a school event, or by volunteering or serving on a committee, rose significantly between 1999 and 2007, but fell on most measures in 2012." Have we been limiting the personal connection with the adoption of technology versus trying to find ways to enhance it instead?

Improving parent engagement requires a deeper person-to-person connection. Tools that offer parent-teacher communication can help keep parents better informed, but they don't provide the needed connectivity to get parents engaged in their child's education. These applications serve as a news feed or bulletin board of events rather than a platform for building sustainable relationships.

Schools need to fully engage parents by showing they care and building relationships based on the parents' interests and needs. Parents want to feel that they have opportunities to contribute that are meaningful to them. They want to know that there is a real person behind the app that cares about their child's education as much as they do.

People to People Connections

Real world education requires real world interaction between teachers and parents. That is why programs such as "The Parent Teacher Home Visit Project" have been so successful. They are building trust and respect, instilling cultural competency and increasing personal and professional capacity for all involved.

Technology does have a powerful role to play if it can contribute to building a deeper relationship between parents and teachers. For example at ClassTag, parents can share their interests and skills, helping teachers learn more about them and invite them to the classroom to share their stories with the students.

Ewelina, a 1st-grade parent, shared her frustration of being called upon to participate in her daughter's school activities. "It was never anything I had an interest in or that fit my talents, so I begrudgingly participated or skipped altogether," says Ewelina. After sharing her interests, Ewelina was asked to visit his daughter's class one morning to discuss her occupation. Ewelina is a brand manager and was delighted to participate and talk about the power of storytelling. Ordinarily, parents are asked to participate in activities that are out of their area of knowledge or comfort zone. But when teachers know a parent's interests, they have the opportunity to involve them in a way that benefits the children and is meaningful to the parents as well. Every parent has something unique to contribute, opening new realms of possibilities and role models to the children.

At its core, effective parent engagement is about helping children learn and grow in the classroom and at home. It is about bringing everyone closer together by making it easy for parents to know what the child is learning and opening up meaningful opportunities for parents to participate. It is about building a warm and caring environment where parents and teachers are partners. Isn't that what we all want for the children. ■

Vlada Lotkina is the CEO of ClassTag, a simple and powerful communication and scheduling platform that brings research-based practices to help teachers turn parents into partners and improve the quality of family support in education.

COMMENTARY

Published June 12, 2016, in Education Week Teacher's Capturing the Spark: Energizing Teaching and Schools Blog

Parenting as a Teacher, Teaching as a Parent

By David B. Cohen

Not even two weeks past the end of the prior school year, I'm giving plenty of thought to next year. One particular change on my mind is that my oldest child will now be the same age as my students. It's been 15 years in the making, this convergence in my life, with sophomores in my classroom and a sophomore at home. As a result, I've been thinking about what I've learned as a teacher that helps me as the parent of teenagers, and what I've learned as a parent that has helped me teach.

My teaching experience has helped me take the long view with my children. I started teaching in the mid-1990s, and have had the pleasure of keeping in touch with former students now well into their adulthood, into careers (including teaching) and parenthood. I've developed some sense of how many different paths there are, and I'm comfortable with the uncertainty and ambiguity at this point, confident that young people tend to find their way, with or without parental help, or approval. I've seen many former students go directly to college and then graduate schools or work, what many of us consider the typical or expected route. Some former students have gone in different directions, following their own vision and ambition to other productive and rewarding experiences. Some of these young adults get lost for a while, some deal with illnesses and addictions. Don't get me wrong: there are reasons to be scared. There are also reasons to be excited. And there's no way of being certain what's coming. I'm going to continue giving advice and support, sharing my values and expectations, but I'm under no illusion

that I can choose a path for my children, solve their problems, or protect them from the world.

My teaching experience has also helped me put my children in charge of their education as much as possible. When they need to work something out with their teachers, I expect them to handle it without me. As a teacher, I enjoy meeting with parents in most cases, but at the same time, I try to avoid it. The reason is that when parents are involved in a meeting, the student's sense of self-determination and accountability will always be compromised. When parents ask to meet with me about school work, I generally respond by suggesting a student-teacher meeting first, unless there's some special circumstances or unique background information that requires parental input and involvement. (Keep in mind, this is high school). If my meeting with a student doesn't lead to a viable plan or otherwise satisfactory conclusions, we'll involve the parents. Usually, the meeting with the student is sufficient. So, as a parent, I've never asked for a meeting with a teacher or counselor, though I've asked my children to seek extra support when necessary, without involving me directly. Of course, if my children's teachers or counselors request a parent meeting, I'm there.

My parenting experience has also helped me understand and respect the challenges of time management and divided attention that families deal with. I still think there are many overextended, overscheduled children and families, and I think that many of them are fooling themselves if they think it's possible to do everything they want, do it well, sustainably, and not feel the negative effects in the near or long term. In my family, we have a quite limited number of extracurricular and family activities that we prioritize, and we still run into scheduling conflicts. Our family calendar looks like a mosaic. Our email inboxes fill up with messages from teachers, schools, the school district, parent organizations, other groups and activities. True confession: I don't even read all the emails! Shocking, I'm sure. So, I realize now that even when the overall time commitments are reasonable, the potential for confusion and overload is there. Need an extension on that assignment? How long? As long as it doesn't affect other people's work, and as long as it's requested before the due date, I'll generally say yes. And if students are going to miss a few days of school to go to a family event or spend time with relatives who came to visit, fine. I'll help them figure out how to make up work that's necessary, and even let the little things slide.

David B. Cohen

José Rivas confers with a student at Lennox Mathematics, Science & Technology Academy.

My parenting experience has helped me respect that children and teens are always becoming, always a work in progress. When they arrive in your classroom with their particular strengths and weaknesses, there's a backstory you don't know. What appears to be a deficit may be an emerging strength. This year's minor problems may have been prior years' huge struggles. What you see as the results of good or bad parenting are often a matter of individuality and even luck, as children from the same family vary significantly. And sometimes, failure is part of becoming who they are. Failure is part of life, and the opportunity to learn from failure may be a gift more vital than any particular lesson plans or assessments. We shouldn't set kids up for failure, but we shouldn't move heaven and earth to spare them from the consequences of (non-dangerous) failures. ■

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