



## FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

During their elementary school years, children undergo important developmental changes. Their reasoning becomes more logical, their attention gets more adaptable, their perspective taking grows more sophisticated, and their reading and math skills blossom. With entry into formal schooling, children spend more time away from their families. Often, this time

Act mandates that elementary schools give parents the tools they need to support their children's learning in the home, communicate regularly with families about children's academic progress, provide opportunities for family workshops, and offer parents chances to engage in parent leadership activities at the school site.<sup>2</sup>

In carrying out these mandates, both policymakers and elementary schools need to be aware of and encourage the

to show what works to promote family involvement in the elementary school years. The brief concludes with implications for policy, practice, and research.

### FAMILY INVOLVEMENT PROCESSES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Substantial research supports the importance of family involvement in the elementary school years, and a growing body of intervention evaluations demonstrates that family involvement can be strengthened with positive results for children and their school success. To achieve these results, it is necessary to match the child's developmental needs, the parent's attitudes and practices, and the school's expectations and support of family involvement. Three family involvement processes for creating this match emerge from the evidence base (see Figure 1):

The No Child Left Behind Act mandates that elementary schools give parents the tools they need to support their children's learning in the home, communicate regularly with families about children's academic progress, provide opportunities for family workshops, and offer parents chances to engage in parent leadership activities at the school site.

includes many hours spent in schools and out-of-school time programs.<sup>1</sup> Throughout elementary school, children begin to integrate knowledge from their interactions with teachers, peers, and families in order to construct identities based on their understanding of what they are good at and capable of doing.

As in the period of early childhood, family involvement processes are critical for elementary-school-age children's learning and development. However, in elementary school, the specific activities and nature of these processes change. For the first time in a child's development, the federal government affords the child and family specific rights and responsibilities—and holds the school accountable for providing them. The No Child Left Behind

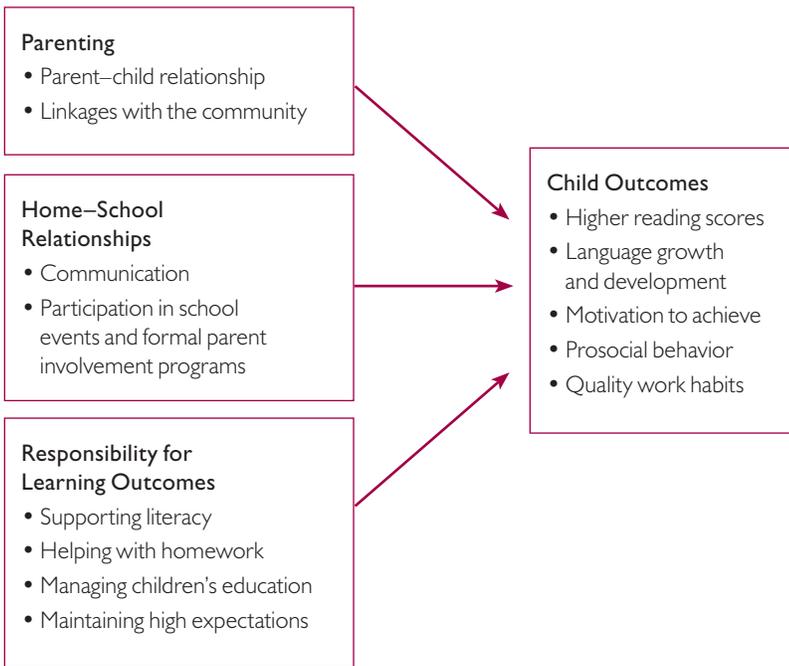
family involvement processes that research has shown to be effective in advancing school-age children's learning and socio-emotional development. Schools must also distinguish the different child outcomes to which family involvement processes relate and understand the needs and assets of the diverse communities that make up their student populations.

This research brief, the second in a series of papers highlighting the importance of family involvement for children's outcomes, addresses these issues. The brief summarizes the latest evidence base on effective involvement for elementary school children—that is, the studies that link family involvement in elementary schools to children's outcomes. It also profiles programs that have been evaluated

- *Parenting* consists of the attitudes, values, and practices of parents in raising young children.
- *Home-school relationships* are the formal and informal connections between the family and educational setting.
- *Responsibility for learning* is the aspect of parenting that places emphasis on activities in the home and community that promote learning skills in the young child.

While the three processes described above provide a framework in which to organize the research, readers must keep in mind that family involvement includes other processes beyond those described in this series of briefs. For example, parent leadership, community organizing, and

**Figure 1.**  
Processes of family involvement and elementary school children's outcomes



participation in school decision making are not represented in this review. This is not because these forms of family involvement lack value. Instead, their omission reflects the shortage of empirical research linking these activities to children's outcomes. This review focuses deliberately on those processes that have been shown empirically to relate to or cause student academic and social growth. As such, the studies included had research designs that allowed for the testing of relationships between family involvement processes and children's outcomes. The sources of this research brief come primarily from the field of human development and psychology. A detailed explanation of the methods for this brief can be found in Appendix I.

### **PARENTING CHILDREN OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE**

The quality of the parent-child relationship influences how well children do in school. Child development experts characterize a positive parent-child relationship in terms of *support*, whereby the parent conveys warmth, sensitivity, and encouragement; *appropriate instruction* based on the child's development and characteristics;

and *respect* for the child's growing autonomy.<sup>3</sup> Through interactions with parents and other caregivers, children learn to develop social skills that they transfer from the home to the school context. One study of kindergarteners found that a positive mother-child interaction—one that is sensitive and elicits prosocial behavior—is associated with children's social and academic performance in middle school.<sup>4</sup>

Parents impart the self-regulation skills that have a lasting effect on their children's ability to relate positively with their peers and to attend to and participate in class activities. In a different study with ethnically diverse kindergartners and their mothers from low-income families, child outcomes associated with family educational involvement in the school varied based on the warm and positive nature of the mother-child relationship.<sup>5</sup> Higher maternal school involvement was related to higher mathematics and literacy achievement when the mother and child shared a warm, positive relationship.

Furthermore, parents who explain educational tasks at an age-appropriate level and in an emotionally supportive manner have children who are more likely to participate in class, seek help from the teacher when needed, and monitor their own

work.<sup>6</sup> When parents dedicate time, offer praise, show affection, and develop close relationships with their children of varying school ages, their children are less likely to require discipline at school or treatment for social or emotional problems.<sup>7</sup> Among low-income African Americans, one study reported that children were better able to conduct themselves appropriately in the classroom, interact with peers, and anticipate the consequences of their behavior when they had supportive and involved mothers.<sup>8</sup> When some of these students were placed in unruly and disorganized classroom environments, they demonstrated more self-regulation than children whose parents did not provide such supportive and involved relationships at home. In this way, parent involvement helps children navigate challenging classroom environments.

Moreover, the linkages between parents and their communities have a bearing on parenting practices. Parents' social networks of families, friends, and neighbors can serve as a resource for children. A study of urban first through fourth graders with diverse ethnic backgrounds found that parents with more varied (i.e., less kin-based) social networks received greater emotional support.<sup>9</sup> They felt more effective as parents, provided home environments with greater cognitive stimulation, and showed more warmth and responsiveness to their children. These parenting characteristics were associated with children who had fewer behavior problems and better social skills. In addition, children performed better in school when their parents had varied networks, in which adults exposed children to different socially and cognitively stimulating activities.

### **HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS**

For the purpose of this brief, home-school relationships refer to the formal and informal connections between the family and elementary school setting. Home-school relationships in elementary school—including parents communicating with the teacher, helping in the child's classroom, and participating in school activities—have positive benefits for children. For example, parent participation in school activities in grades K-3 is associated with children's educational engagement, which includes

high-quality work habits and task orientation.<sup>12</sup> Although most studies indicate the important role of mothers, fathers' involvement is equally important. Fathers who observe children in the classroom, attend conferences, and meet with counselors have children who experience educational success more often than their peers whose mothers are the only involved parents.<sup>13</sup>

Home-school relationships in elementary school have long-term benefits. In one study, when low-income African American families maintained continually high rates of parent participation in elementary school, children were more likely to complete high school.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, when these same parents participated in schools continually for a period of 3 years or more, their children completed more years of schooling than children of parents with less consistent involvement.<sup>15</sup> The study suggests that continuous and consistent parent involvement in elementary school shields and protects children from the negative influences of poverty and may be one approach to reducing the achievement gap between White and non-White students.<sup>16</sup>

Consistent involvement also reaps benefits. In a study of ethnically diverse low-income children and their families, high levels of family involvement between grades K–5—including attending parent-teacher conferences; visiting the classroom; attending school performances, social events, and field trips; and volunteering—was predictive of gains in child literacy performance.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this, changes in individual families' involvement over time were associated with children's improved literacy performance. In other words, as parents became increasingly involved in their children's education from kindergarten to fifth grade, children's literacy performance improved as well. This suggests that it is never too late for families to get involved.

Family involvement is more likely to occur when schools are committed to it. Schools with formal parent involvement programs report higher academic achievement—especially in urban elementary schools.<sup>18</sup> Higher levels of Latino parent representation on Local School Councils in Chicago were associated with a substantial increase in the number of Latino students meeting academic standards.<sup>19</sup> Students also achieve higher scores on elementary

school standardized tests when school involvement programs make an effort to communicate with and reach out to parents. For example, student standardized scores increase when school-based programs make an effort to accommodate parents' English reading skills; communicate with parents who do not attend meetings; encourage parent input, volunteerism, and offer interactive homework; ensure that school leadership and parent committees represent the ethnic and racial composition of the population; and help school, families, students, and community share resources.<sup>20</sup> Thus, a well-designed,

sible that middle class parents volunteer when children are experiencing problems in school but that low-income parents' participation signals monitoring and reinforces expectations for good behavior.

To take another example, parents' attendance at school functions is associated with higher academic achievement for African Americans but not for other ethnic groups.<sup>22</sup> Among socioeconomically comparable African American and White families, African Americans parents' school involvement improves kindergarteners' academic behavior skills, social abilities, and emotional control, which in

### FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING

The conceptual framework guiding this research review is *complementary learning*. Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) believes that for children and youth to be successful from birth through adolescence, there must be an array of linked learning supports around them. These learning supports include families, early childhood programs, schools, out-of-school time programs and activities, higher education, health and social service agencies, businesses, libraries, museums, and other community-based institutions. HFRP calls this network of supports complementary learning. Complementary learning is characterized by discrete linkages that work together to encourage consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children. These linkages should be continuously in place from birth through adolescence, but the composition and functions of the network will change over time as children mature.

*Family Involvement Makes a Difference* is a series of research briefs that examines one set of complementary learning linkages: family involvement in the home and school. As the second in the series, this brief focuses on the linkages among families, elementary schools, and communities. The previous paper investigated family involvement in early childhood settings, and the next will examine family involvement in adolescence. Taken together, these briefs make the case that family involvement predicts academic achievement and social development as children progress from early childhood programs through the K–12 schools and into higher education.

For more information about complementary learning and HFRP's other projects, see the resource box on page 10 or visit [www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org). To learn more about this series of publications, email [fine@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:fine@gse.harvard.edu). To be notified when future HFRP publications become available, subscribe to our e-news email at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html).

inclusive, and comprehensive approach to family involvement matters for student success.

Family involvement is linked broadly with school achievement across different socioeconomic and ethnic groups; however, the results of the home-school relationship in particular vary by class and culture. Volunteering in the school is associated with a small increase in behavioral problems among middle class children but a great reduction in behavioral problems among low-income children.<sup>21</sup> It is pos-

turn raise math scores; for Whites, math scores decrease with more involvement, which may indicate that this group of parents is more likely to become involved when their children are not doing well.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, African American kindergarteners whose parents participate in school activities are more prepared in math, while the same does not necessarily hold true for children of White parents. Instead, among White children, parent involvement at home and teachers' perceptions of families' value of education are linked to

math outcomes.<sup>24</sup> These findings suggest that the home–school relationship varies among ethnic groups.

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES

Responsibility for learning outcomes in the elementary school years falls into four main processes: supporting literacy, helping with homework, managing children’s education, and maintaining high expectations.<sup>25</sup>

*Supporting literacy:* Parent involvement in reading-related activities with their children outside of school is strongly related to children’s reading performance.<sup>26</sup> Schools often encourage parents to read with their children so that children can directly improve their reading skills and develop a love of reading. Parents influ-

texts affects children’s vocabulary scores. Maternal use of relatively rare words (e.g., “government” or “vitamins”) is related to children’s vocabulary scores in kindergarten and second grade.<sup>28</sup> Third, emotional relationships during shared storybook reading affect children’s reading activity.<sup>29</sup> Positive feelings during shared reading are associated with talk that is related to the content of the story of and that extends beyond it. This type of talk is valuable in promoting vocabulary and comprehension. Furthermore, the emotional climate during picture-book reading is important because it encourages children to read more challenging material, such as chapter books; such reading enhances children’s reading achievement.

*Helping with homework:* Parents’ involvement in their children’s homework can make a difference. When parents guide

control and self-discipline and that effective parent involvement in homework requires an understanding of the mechanisms that affect parents’ ability to promote children’s learning.<sup>32</sup> When teachers provide interactive reading assignments and explicitly instruct parents on how to help their children, parent involvement significantly improves students’ reading scores.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, at-home activities focused on mathematics, including homework assignments requiring parents and children to talk about mathematics or engage with math materials, are linked to higher scores on mathematics achievement tests.<sup>34</sup> If parents are to be effective sources of help to their children, schools need to provide parents with the skills to assist their children and solicit parents’ ideas to make assignments interesting to both parents and students.<sup>35</sup>

The home environment, including the types of materials and resources parents provide, also affects children’s educational outcomes. For example, when middle class parents purchase math- or science-related items for their elementary school children or share math or science activities with them, those children participate more often in math or science activities and maintain an interest in math over time.<sup>36</sup>

*Managing children’s education:* Parents manage and coordinate the different environments—home, school, and community—in which their children learn and develop. When parents manage their children’s education by being involved both at home and in school, they affect children’s literacy achievement over time through children’s feelings about literacy.<sup>37</sup> High levels of family involvement in kindergarten promote children’s positive feelings about literacy, which in turn leads to better literacy performance throughout elementary school. This positive change pattern is significantly notable for low-income children whose mothers are less educated.

African American children from poor families benefit from parental management strategies that are similar to those used by middle class families.<sup>38</sup> Parents of high-achieving African American students tutor their children with practice lessons at home and encourage their children to do their best to achieve their goals. These parents initiate contact with teachers and

## PARENTING PROGRAMS THAT WORK

**Fast Track** is a multisite, multicomponent preventive intervention for behaviorally disruptive children from kindergarten through 10th grade and their parents. The Fast Track project design is derived from developmental theory and longitudinal research by the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. The intervention includes a universal-level classroom program and selective interventions including parent groups, child social skills training groups, parent–child sharing time, home visiting, child peer pairing, and academic tutoring.

Children who participated in the program showed increased emotional understanding, self control, empathy, emotion regulation, and problem-solving skills over the elementary school years. Warm relationships between parents and children, characterized by high instances of playing games, laughter, and praise, were related to decreases in oppositional, aggressive, hyperactive, and internalizing behavior.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, first grade parental involvement, defined as a complex of components including parenting and relationships with school, was associated with fifth grade reading achievement. This relationship was explained in part by parental involvement helping to reduce disruptive behavior and attention problems in second grade that, in turn, linked to literacy outcomes.<sup>11</sup> [www.fasttrackproject.org](http://www.fasttrackproject.org)

ence children’s reading performance in a variety of ways. First, reading storybooks together has an effect distinct from that of teaching children to read and write words. The former is related to young children’s literacy development, while the latter has an impact on language development. Both forms of parent involvement in literacy activities influence children’s reading performance at the end of third and fourth grade.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the type of words children hear from parents in conversational con-

their children’s homework with helpful and appropriate support, children perform better in the classroom.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, when parents have a positive attitude toward homework and use homework as an opportunity to teach study skills and time management, children are more likely to believe that homework will help them learn.<sup>31</sup> Parent involvement in homework has also been shown to prevent children’s behavioral problems rather than to support achievement—a finding that suggests that parents socialize their children to exercise

counselors, use their contacts with the school to ensure their children's progress, and acknowledge the joint responsibility of home and school in children's education. They also engage their children in academic, religious, or art-related extra-curricular activities in the community so that they can succeed in society.<sup>39</sup>

Immigrant Latino families tend to manage their children's education by stressing its importance, providing non-verbal support, and allowing their children to seek mentors in the community.<sup>40</sup> Despite minimal direct involvement with the school and homework assignments, parents of high-achieving Latino children stress the importance of education by asking their children about school projects and events and by showing nonverbal support—for example, by excusing them from domestic chores and family obligations to allow them to concentrate on schoolwork. Moreover, these parents encourage their children to participate in after school activities and turn to adults in the community who are knowledgeable in particular fields—especially teachers—as role models.

*Maintaining high expectations:* As children progress through the elementary school years, the educational expectations that parents hold for them become increasingly important. Individual and specific components of parental involvement, such as reading to children and checking homework, are linked to educational outcomes; yet, the general and more subtle expectations parents have for their children are even more powerful.<sup>41</sup> Students' perceptions of their parents' values about achievement are strongly related to motivation and competence. In other words, when students perceive that parents place an importance on effort and academic success, students have higher academic competence and place a higher priority on their academic ability, effort, and grades.<sup>42</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS

This review demonstrates that the three family involvement processes of parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes are important for elementary school children's academic achievement and social develop-

## FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND SCHOOLS

**Families and Schools Together (FAST)** is a collaborative prevention and parent involvement program designed to build relationships within families and between families and schools to address childhood problems such as school failure, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, delinquency, and child abuse. FAST brings entire families together to participate in an 8-week program that is based on theories of behavioral change. For 2 hours each week, families engage in parent–child quality time, eat dinner together, and attend separate child play and parent discussion sessions. After a family graduates from the initial program, family members are encouraged to continue to participate for an additional 2 years in monthly activities.

As a result of this program, children increased their ability to manage stress and anxiety, improved their attention span, resisted negative peer influence, and increased their academic competence. Evaluations have also shown improvements in family closeness, parent–child communication, home–school relationships, and leadership in the community. [www.wcer.wisc.edu/fast/](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/fast/)

## HELPING PARENTS GET TO KNOW THE SCHOOL

**Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)** focuses on low-income families from ethnically diverse backgrounds and strives to increase and support parents' involvement in their children's education. The program offers classes aimed at prekindergarten, elementary, and middle and high school involvement practices; parents attend these classes, taught by credentialed teachers, in the mornings or afternoons. At the beginning of each session, parents help plan the curriculum around topics of interest—such as home–school collaboration, understanding the school system, creating a home learning environment, and college preparation. At the end of the 9-week session, parents graduate in a ceremony attended by their children and can choose to enroll in a follow-up program.

Evaluations show that parents who have graduated from PIQE are more likely to be involved in their children's school, communicate with teachers, understand their role in their children's education, help their children with homework, and expect that their children want to go to college. Children whose parents participated in PIQE have fewer disciplinary and attendance problems than their peers. [www.piqe.org](http://www.piqe.org)

ment. Accordingly, several implications emerge for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers as they endeavor to create systematic, developmental, and comprehensive approaches to family involvement. These implications show promise for advancing the practice of family involvement and strengthening the linkages among elementary schools, early childhood settings, community-based organizations, and families.

### For policy

- *Invest in family involvement in elementary school through comprehensive district policies.* Elementary schools need systemic and comprehensive support to effectively carry out family involvement. District policies should make available the necessary resources for schools and

community-based organizations to create, evaluate, and be held accountable for effective family involvement processes. Moreover, to promote policies that foster successful family involvement practices, it is necessary to provide a corresponding investment of resources and funding.

For example, Boston Public Schools (BPS) recognizes that home–school collaboration is an important component of its goal of improving teaching and learning. The district has a policy that clearly describes the expectations for school outreach and communication and for families' involvement, as well as the central administration's role in holding schools accountable for setting goals and developing strategies to engage families and communities. To implement the policy, BPS created a Deputy Superintendent

for Family and Community Engagement position and established family resource centers to provide technical assistance to schools to develop and implement their family engagement plans.<sup>46</sup>

New York City School regions have a policy that places a parent coordinator in every school in the city with the sole purpose of facilitating family involvement processes. Districts can also provide funds and opportunities for in-service hours toward training teachers to become aware of the value of parental involvement and to develop the skills necessary to involve families effectively.

• *Integrate family involvement as part of the elementary school instructional strategy.* Elementary school administrators and teachers often perceive family involvement as an “add on” to school activities rather than part of a key instructional strategy. However, family involvement is one way to make teaching more effective.<sup>47</sup> For example, students are more motivated to learn and develop more positive attitudes about schooling when their parents are involved in their education. Teachers are also better equipped to create the learning-centered environments that are critical to student success when they come to know

about students, their interests, learning styles, and learning histories from their parents.

Elementary schools can begin to establish systematic ways to ensure that family involvement is an ongoing, embedded part of the school’s instructional strategy. For example, No Child Left Behind mandates School Site Councils or School Improvement Teams, which should consist of teachers, parents, and community members. The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University builds capacity for school councils by ensuring that they have the tools to assess family involvement practices, write plans for family and community involvement, implement family involvement activities, evaluate next steps, and continually improve and coordinate involvement at the school site level.<sup>48</sup> Districts can then establish guidelines and provide support for these infrastructures. For example, the South Carolina Department of Education reviews school and district family involvement action plans based on rubrics and standards developed by the National PTA.

• *Invest in evaluations of family involvement in elementary school that have the potential to influence legislators and policymakers.* A recent meta-analysis of experimentally designed family involvement evaluations revealed that family involvement in elementary school has a positive and significant effect on children’s overall academic performance and that the effect is large enough to have practical implications for parents, practitioners, and policymakers.<sup>49</sup> However, of the 19 studies included in the report, only one was published after the year 1999, and most studies only evaluated programs that were short term and isolated to one program in one school.

It is time for policymakers and researchers to invest in large-scale experimental evaluations of systematic, developmental, and comprehensive approaches to family involvement. By opening the “black box” of program operations and connecting these data to information about families, teachers, and children’s achievement, researchers and policymakers will begin to learn in a more comprehensive way how certain approaches to family involvement matter for children from different backgrounds and how to tailor specific programs for parents.

### DEVELOPING AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS TO PROMOTE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND STUDENT SUCCESS

**Generación Diez (G-10)** is a school-based after school program that promotes academic and social-emotional competence of Mexican immigrant children and youth by providing quality after school programming and increasing constructive interactions between parents and schools. The G-10 after school program is staffed by a bilingual program director and two head teachers who lead children in homework help, group activities, and supplemental academic and social-emotional curricula. In addition to the programming for children, a parent home education component is employed to link Latino families, schools, and other support services. Trained home educators acting as liaisons between Latino parents and teachers explain to parents the expectations of the school, communicate children’s educational needs, and apprise parents of their children’s educational progress. Workshops are held at the school site, and home visits are made once a month or on an as-needed basis.<sup>43</sup>

Parents whose children had higher after school program attendance rates reported significantly greater increases in the quality of the relationship with their children’s school, frequency of parent–teacher contact, and engagement in school activities over a 2-year period.<sup>44</sup> Children participating in the program made significant gains in their reading, spelling, and math achievement, and those with higher rates of attendance showed greater decreases in problem behavior and greater gains in social competence.<sup>45</sup> [www.prevention.psu.edu/projects/Generacion\\_Diez.html](http://www.prevention.psu.edu/projects/Generacion_Diez.html)

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN’S MATHEMATICS LEARNING BY DEVELOPING PARENTS’ BELIEFS, KNOWLEDGE, AND SKILLS

The **Math and Parent Partnership (MAPPS)** is designed to increase parental awareness of what children learn in math class, encourage parents to become school leaders, and offer positive math experiences for both parents and children. MAPPS is based on a “funds of knowledge” approach to children’s learning that places the resources, experiences, and knowledge of the family and community in the foreground of children’s school and educational experiences. The program offers regular 2-hour math awareness workshops, in which parents learn math along with their children and other families; semester-long minicourses for parents on topics such as fractions or geometry; and leadership development sessions, in which parents learn to promote and facilitate the workshops themselves. The program is sustained by recruiting parent graduates to become parent leaders the following year. According to evaluations, families involved in MAPPS are more likely to do math together at home, and children’s attitudes toward math improve when their parents are involved in MAPPS. [math.arizona.edu/~mapps/](http://math.arizona.edu/~mapps/)

Moreover, there are no cost effectiveness analyses on family involvement. Such research can help policymakers and the public understand how the benefits of family involvement accrue to savings in student services and, over the long term, to the income earnings of students who succeed in school. This type of analysis can potentially help increase both public and private investments in this under-resourced field.

- *Provide incentives for business and community to support family involvement processes.* Research in this review points to the importance of three family involvement processes. Nevertheless, families' busy work schedules are the number one challenge to involvement. Policymakers, businesses, and schools can come together to write legislation and find ways to support working families so that they have more time to be involved. For example, 15 states currently offer tax incentives to business that encourage, urge, expect, or direct employers to enable parents to attend school activities such as parent-teacher conferences.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, business and schools can find ways to help parents use the workplace as an opportunity for involvement. For example, families can utilize their workspace as the main location for communicating with schools (e.g., through phone and email), and businesses can offer locations at the worksite where children can engage in homework support. Businesses can invite schools to hold parent-teacher conferences onsite or ask educators to provide educational workshops at the business location.<sup>51</sup>

### For practice

- *Create mechanisms for continuous family involvement from prekindergarten through elementary school.* As children transition across early childhood, kindergarten, and elementary school settings, educators have a responsibility to align and coordinate supports for families over time. Teachers in elementary schools and community-based programs can create warm and welcoming climates for families and actively reach out to them throughout childhood to share information about the ways in which family involvement processes evolve. For example, programs like PIQE and FAST involve parents in an

intensive series of workshops to explain how parenting, home-school relationships, and responsibility for learning are important, yet continuously changing over children's development. They also offer tips for how parents can become involved in their children's school, regardless of the child's grade level.

Moreover, family involvement is more likely to be sustained when a community reinforces it. A community of peers is particularly valuable as a source of parenting support. Family involvement efforts can create opportunities for parent-to-parent sharing and learning about workable strategies for family involvement. Programs like FAST and MAPPS promote parent networking and extend the opportunities for involvement in the school and community through organized meetings and leadership development. In this way, multiple connections form among various complementary learning resources: home, school, and community.

- *Support parents' ability to take responsibility for their children's learning in elementary school.* Perhaps the greatest change in family involvement processes in the elementary school years relates to the ways in which parents must take responsibility for children's learning. Whereas, in early childhood, unstructured reading and play in the home is critical for children's growth and development, this review points to new parent responsibilities that emerge in elementary school—including supporting literacy, helping with homework, managing education, and maintaining high expectations. These responsibilities stem from the fact that elementary-school-age children are developing more concrete and specific cognitive skills and are beginning to spend increasing amounts of time in settings other than the home.

To strengthen parents' responsibility for learning outcomes, schools and out-of-school time programs can communicate with parents about children's performance and share children's successes and challenges over an array of settings in a timely fashion. Furthermore, schools, after school programs, and other community-based services can develop training activities to involve parents in reading and math. Parents can learn to expose children to books, use more sophisticated vocabulary in conversations, and also read to children

with a level of comfort and warmth that makes reading a pleasurable experience and will encourage children to read on their own. As mathematics teaching and learning have changed over the years, parents also need content-specific knowledge. The MAPPS program, for example, has developed creative ways to help parents understand mathematical concepts in relation to their own and their children's learning styles and lives by using games and real-world problem-solving exercises.

- *Form linkages between out-of-school time programs, families, and elementary schools.* For the first time in their development, children in elementary school are beginning to participate in a variety of settings outside of the home and often beyond the school. Out-of-school time programs and schools can work together to ensure that they provide information and tools to help families manage these diverse settings effectively.

For example, *Generación Diez* (G-10) offers, in addition to after school programming, a parent home education component to link Latino families, schools, and other support services. Trained home educators acting as liaisons between Latino parents and teachers explain to parents the expectations of the school, communicate children's educational needs, and apprise parents of their children's educational progress. Workshops are held on the school site, and home visits are made once a month or on an as needed basis.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, out-of-school time programs and schools can learn from effective family involvement programs and join together to offer interactive family-based activities, giving both parents and children opportunities to learn together in an informal, fun setting before or after school or on weekends.

- *Respect the diversity of parents in elementary schools.* This review has shown that family involvement continues to make a difference in children's learning and development across different socioeconomic and cultural groups throughout the developmental continuum.<sup>53</sup> However, family involvement is not a "one size fits all" model. Instead, family involvement practices and beliefs vary by culture as well as by economic status. For example,

African American kindergarteners whose parents participate in school activities are more prepared in math, while the same does not necessarily hold true for children of White parents. By comparison, among White children, parent involvement at home and teacher's perceptions of families' value of education are linked to math outcomes.<sup>54</sup>

Programs such as FAST, PIQE, and MAPPS, which serve low-income families from ethnically diverse backgrounds, acknowledge and value cultural diversity by hiring staff of backgrounds similar to those of participants, by including parents in the process of planning curriculum and by facilitating workshops on topics that reflect parents' interests rather than those predetermined by the school. Family involvement initiatives can also make efforts to accommodate parents' English reading skills, communicate with parents who do not attend meetings, and ensure that school leadership and parent committees represent the ethnic and racial composition of the population. In this way, parents' knowledge and needs are at the forefront.

### For research

The research implications offered for family involvement in the elementary school period are consistent with those proposed for early childhood.<sup>55</sup> Despite the constancy of the research needs throughout childhood, the content of family involvement research in elementary school must be modified to match the specific activities and nature of the family involvement processes identified in this brief.

- *Connect research to policy and practice.* Researchers can begin to adapt complex research into quick and easy-to-read summaries for practitioners and policymakers and disseminate them through online networks, listservs, conferences, and/or practitioner publications. Researchers might also begin to develop a community of practice around family involvement in elementary school to share findings and new ideas for how to translate well-designed research into practice.

- *Invest in longitudinal research and evaluations that examine the impact of*

*family involvement in the elementary school years and beyond.* As described in the implications for policy section above, studies can continue to examine how family involvement processes that begin in early childhood evolve in elementary school and change again in high school. This research must link how these transformations relate to specific child outcomes across the developmental continuum. For example, the FAST Track intervention followed children and their parents from kindergarten through 10th grade and continues to define and illuminate how family involvement processes matter for children's social and academic success, even though the nature of those processes changes over time.

- *Build a culturally responsive knowledge base for family involvement processes in elementary school.* Researchers must acquire an understanding of family involvement in elementary school that is authentic and parent generated. Research can articulate terms for involvement processes that surface from parents' own words and ideas and, as a result, become less school-centric.<sup>56</sup> For example, PIQE builds its curricula and evaluation around parent's needs and interests. MAPPS adopts a "funds of knowledge" approach, by which families' strengths become the foundation for curriculum and instruction.

- *Trace the relationships between transition practices and child outcomes.* Studies can begin to associate how the relationships among elementary schools, early childhood programs, and families at points of transition relate to children's outcomes both in kindergarten and later in their elementary school education. Researchers can consider how kindergarten teachers connect to early childhood programs and families before the beginning of the year and how these initial connections relate to student learning and development throughout elementary school.

In addition, three of the programs highlighted in this review—PIQE, FAST, and MAPPS—suggest a fifth research recommendation:

- *Investigate outcomes related to coconstructed forms of home–school relationships.* Recent initiatives to reconceptualize

the definition of home–school relationships underscore the importance of coconstruction. Coconstruction refers to the idea that home–school relationships are defined by reciprocal activities and trust in which parents' agency and sense of efficacy are placed at the forefront.<sup>57</sup> Dimensions of coconstruction include responding to family interests and needs, engaging in dialogue with families, building on family funds of knowledge, training parents for leadership, and facilitating connections across children's learning contexts.

For example, PIQE builds trust and mutual respect by engaging families in dialogue about the lived experiences of participants. FAST remains responsive to families' needs by offering parents subtle incentives, such as respect and social support as well as convenient scheduling, transportation, and meals. MAPPS, as described previously, draws on the school's expertise but also builds on the wealth of information and ideas families impart to their children. Both research and evaluation can begin to identify how coconstructed home–school relationships lead to student outcomes in the elementary years.

### CONCLUSION

Over the elementary school years, children become more autonomous than in early childhood and develop relationships with a wider array of people, including peers and teachers. Children also begin to establish competence in a variety of domains. The three family involvement processes of parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning are critical to these developmental milestones. Elementary schools have responsibilities to encourage these family involvement processes, and when they do, schools can benefit from their outcomes.

For example, parenting that is warm and supported by diverse social networks promotes children's social skills and appropriate classroom behaviors. Home–school relationships characterized by bilateral communication and opportunities for participation in school events and formal parent involvement programs are predictive of children's interest in reading and math, as well as improvements in reading and math achievement. Lastly, when

parents take responsibility for children's learning outcomes—including by supporting literacy and homework, managing children's education, and maintaining high expectations—children's motivation and academic competence improves.

This review underscores the importance of considering these three family involvement processes as policymakers, practitioners, and researchers endeavor to create systematic, developmental, and comprehensive programs for family involvement. With family involvement processes in place during the elementary school years, children will be poised for smooth transitions to middle and high school and for success in these even more complex educational settings.

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**Harvard Family Research Project**

## APPENDIX I: METHOD

This research brief examines the family involvement processes related to children's academic achievement and positive social development. It synthesizes the outcome-based empirical research published over the last 6 years (1999–2006) catalogued in the Family Involvement Network of Educators bibliographies ([www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/bibliography](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/bibliography)). Outcome-based investigations were defined as those that measured family involvement and then linked family involvement to outcomes considered representative of young children's positive growth and development. The FINE bibliographies compile family involvement research using the following electronic databases: Academic Search Premier, Dissertation and Masters Abstracts International (ProQuest), Education Abstracts, ERIC, PsychINFO, Science Citation Index Expanded (ISI Web of Science), Sociological Abstracts, and WorldCat. Articles were searched using combinations of the keywords "parent," "family," "home," "teacher," and "school." We further revised our searches using specific terms such as "family school relationships," "parent teacher cooperation," "teacher training," and "family involvement." A researcher read the abstracts from

the resulting citations lists and selected empirical research articles directly relating to family involvement in education, from early childhood through 12th grade. This review culled only the articles from the FINE bibliographies that focused on family involvement as it relates to child outcomes.

The articles in this review were published in peer-reviewed journals. The majority of them used quantitative analyses on data yielded from sound research designs. Some qualitative studies that described the family involvement practices associated with children's school achievement were included, as were seminal articles and books published prior to 1999. All journal articles and books were summarized and

## PRIORITY AREAS OF INVESTIGATION

In 2005, a group of researchers and evaluators came together to outline priority areas for investigations of family involvement in elementary school.<sup>58</sup> From these conversations, the following recommendations emerged:

- *Investigate factors motivating parents' decisions to become involved, how involvement influences outcomes, and how to help schools encourage involvement.* Research continues to show that parents get involved in their children's education for a variety of reasons but that they do so especially when schools reach out to them and invite their participation.<sup>59</sup> Research can continue to investigate best practices for outreach and the specific mechanisms through which school outreach relates to family involvement processes and, in turn, child outcomes.
- *Explore home–school communication and parental expectations for children's academic success.* Research is beginning to show that some of the more nuanced processes of family involvement, especially parental expectations, are strongly related to children's outcomes. Research can continue to investigate the nature of these more diffuse practices and how they influence children's academic and social growth.
- *Research and evaluate school-based programs of school, family, and community partnerships and the roles of districts and states in guiding these programs.* It is especially important to evaluate family involvement efforts and to use the evaluation findings for learning and improvement. With limited exceptions,<sup>60</sup> there are very few rigorously evaluated family involvement programs that show outcomes for children. Many family involvement evaluations are plagued by poor design and implementation.<sup>61</sup> Research can also take on the responsibility of understanding how local and statewide initiatives support and guide these programs.
- *Understand community organizing as a means of involving low-income and ethnically diverse parents and community members in improving low-performing schools and in children's learning and development.* Community organizing is one fruitful yet largely underinvestigated area of the family involvement field. Even though there are a growing number of parent leadership and community organizing groups taking on the work of strengthening relationships between families and schools for student change, very few of these programs have been studied empirically. Researchers can begin to study systematically the nature and processes of family organizing and how it relates to changes in the school and community and for student outcomes.

coded for methodology, family involvement practices, and children's outcomes. In addition, evaluation reports of the four programs featured in this review were examined. These reports came from various sources including journals, the internet and unpublished manuscripts from HFRP's evaluation database.

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### MORE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT RESOURCES FROM HFRP

For more information to help you design, implement, and evaluate family involvement work, consider making use of the following resources:

#### **Taking a Closer Look: A Guide to Online Resources on Family Involvement**

This comprehensive resource guide compiles and categorizes the large body of information on family involvement in children's education. It contains Web links to research, information, programs, and tools from over 100 national organizations. It provides information about parenting practices to support children's learning and development, home-school relationships, parent leadership development, and collective engagement for school improvement and reform.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/guide/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/guide/index.html)

#### **Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education**

The first research brief in the *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* series makes the case for involving families in young children's learning and development. It includes profiles of programs that have been evaluated to show what works.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/earlychildhood.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/earlychildhood.html)

#### **Parental Involvement in Homework: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications for Teachers, After School Program Staff, and Parent Leaders**

Researchers from the Family-School Partnership Lab at Vanderbilt University review the literature on parental involvement in homework to understand why parents become involved in their children's homework, how they are involved, and how these activities contribute to students learning. The authors suggest ways in which schools can invite parents to be involved in homework.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/homework.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/homework.html)

#### **Preparing Educators to Involve Families: From Theory to Practice**

This book, edited by Harvard Family Research Project, prepares educators to partner effectively with the families of children in elementary school. It includes perspectives on child development and teaching cases that reflect critical dilemmas in family-school-community relations.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/index.html)

#### **The Evaluation Exchange: Evaluating Family Involvement Programs**

This issue of *The Evaluation Exchange* addresses the challenges of evaluating family programs, such as the need for conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, accountability, and contextual responsiveness.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue28/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue28/index.html)

#### **Join the Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)**

Our Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a national network of over 7,000 people who are interested in promoting strong partnerships between children's educators, their families, and their communities. There is no cost to become a FINE member. Once you become a member, you'll receive our monthly email announcements of current ideas in family involvement and new resources that have been added to the FINE website.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html)

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## COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING RESOURCES FROM HFRP

Family involvement in children's education is one part of Harvard Family Research Project's theory of complementary learning. To learn more about complementary learning, see the box on page 3 or check out the following HFRP resources:

### **The Evaluation Exchange: Complementary Learning**

Learn more about complementary learning and the kinds of mechanisms that can facilitate these linkages and sustain their effectiveness in the spring 2005 issue of our evaluation periodical, *The Evaluation Exchange*.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue29/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue29/index.html)

### **The Evaluation Exchange: Building Out-of-School Time Connections**

This fall 2006 double issue of *The Evaluation Exchange* focuses on creating and evaluating connections between out-of-school time programs and the other settings, including families, in which children and youth live, learn, and play.

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue33/index.html>

### **Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School**

We partnered with United Way of Massachusetts Bay and BOSTnet to produce this guide for after school providers looking to connect with families. The comprehensive, easy-to-read guide is a critical resource for any after school provider looking to create or expand an existing family engagement program.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families/index.html)

### **Beyond the Head Count: Evaluating Family Involvement in Out-of-School Time**

Brief 4 in our *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation* series offers an overview of how out-of-school time programs can evaluate their family involvement strategies and practices. It draws on findings from our Out-of-School Time Program Research and Evaluation Database, interviews, and email correspondence.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief4.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief4.html)

### **Family Involvement Storybook Corner**

The Storybook Corner section of our website is a unique source for information on using children's storybooks with family involvement themes to engage families in their children's education and encourage family–school–community partnerships, all while supporting literacy. Launched in partnership with Reading Is Fundamental, the Storybook Corner offers resources to help educators, families, and those who work with children and families promote the awareness, discussion, and practice of family involvement in children's education in a wide range of settings.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/storybook/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/storybook/index.html)

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Founded in 1983, HFRP's mission is to promote more effective educational practices, programs, and policies for disadvantaged children and youth by generating, publishing, and disseminating our and others' research. We believe that complementary learning is essential for all children to be successful from birth through adolescence. Complementary learning occurs when two or more institutions intentionally link with each other to improve learning and developmental outcomes for children and youth.



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