

National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

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August 14, 2009

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Docket ID: ED-2009-OESE-0006

Attention: Race to the Top Comments from the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

Dear Secretary Duncan,

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (FSCE Working Group) appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Register Notice regarding the Race to the Top Fund's proposed priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria.

The FSCE Working Group is a leadership collaborative whose purpose is to inform the development and implementation of federal policy related to family, school, and community engagement in education. It is dedicated to mobilizing cradle to career pathways and partnerships among families, schools, and communities to promote kindergarten and college readiness, improve schools, and increase student achievement.

Families play critical roles in student success. They support their children's learning, guide them through a complex school system, advocate for more and improved learning opportunities, and collaborate with educators and community organizations to achieve more effective educational opportunities. Families raise their children in multiple settings and across time, in collaboration with many others. Strong family engagement is:

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Continuous across a child's life, spanning from Early Head Start programs to college preparation high schools.
- Carried out everywhere that children learn – at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities.

The Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

The FSCE Working Group recognizes the Department’s inclusion of “family engagement” in portions of this Notice, and strongly urges the Department to continue to deepen its work on family engagement in education. Therefore, we offer a framework for developing effective family engagement to strengthen the impact of the Race to the Top Fund on student achievement and to assist the Department in achieving positive outcomes in its four core assurance areas. Research demonstrates that family engagement in a child’s education raises student achievement, improves behavior and attendance, decreases drop-out rates, and improves the emotional and physical well-being of children.¹ Families are critical determinants of children’s school readiness as well as of students’ decision to pursue higher education. Effective family engagement is critical to closing the achievement gap, contributing to increased academic achievement, regardless of parents’ education level, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. Family engagement is also cost-effective and can raise student academic achievement so substantially that schools would need to increase spending by more than \$1000 per pupil to gain the same results.²

The FSCE Working Group makes the following recommendations to increase systemic family, school, and community engagement to assist States’ efforts to close the achievement gap.

TIMING OF APPLICATIONS AND AWARDS

Recommendation: We recommend that the Department include families under the list of parties in which States are encouraged to engage in planning of the proposals.

PROPOSED PRIORITIES

Proposed Priority 1-Comprehensive Approach to the Four Education Reform Areas

Recommendation: Include effective family engagement as a core component of each of the education reform areas. The FSCE Working Group is in strong support of the four core assurances and believes family engagement would strengthen the outcomes in each reform area: standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, great teachers and leaders, and turning around struggling schools.

Proposed Priority 3- Expansion and Adaptation of State Longitudinal Data Systems

Recommendation: We recommend that the Department expand its description of statewide longitudinal data systems to include robust family engagement data as well as chronic absenteeism, in and out of school suspension, and truancy data that triggers strength-based interventions for students and their families. By collecting this data, States would provide the research community with opportunities to analyze the relationship between family engagement outcomes and student outcomes, creating a rich, new source of information on strategies that contribute to closing the achievement gap.

Proposed Priority 4- P-20 Coordination and Vertical Alignment

Recommendation: Include cradle to career family engagement in each State’s P-20 plan for students. Work with the State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care

¹ Henderson A. and Mapp, K. (2002). A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement. Southwest educational Development Laboratory.

² Houtenville, A. and Conway, K. (2008). Parental Effort, School Resources, and Student Achievement. Journal of Human Resources, XLIII, 2. Pp-437-53.

authorized by the Head Start legislation and the new Early Learning Challenge Fund stakeholders to develop coordination and alignment of programs birth-5 with programs for school-age children. In addition, collaborate with higher education and workforce development to develop pathways to college and work. By developing systemic, cradle to career family engagement programs and policies, states and districts ensure that their students make a seamless transition from early childhood programs, to K-12 schools, to postsecondary schools and the workforce.

Proposed Priority 5-School-level Conditions for Reform and Innovation

Recommendation: Include family engagement as an essential component of comprehensive services to high-need students under subsection (v).

Recommendation: Add subsection (vi) to read “working in partnership with families and the community to design, implement, monitor and evaluate a range of strategies that will increase family engagement in education, build public will for reform and innovation, and improve student achievement.”

SELECTION CRITERIA

Recommendation: Assign greater weight or point values to proposals submitted by States that include a meaningful, systemic family engagement component in each of the selection criteria detailed below.

Data Systems to Support Instruction

(B) (1): Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system

Recommendation: Implement a system to monitor indicators of family and community engagement.

Recommendation: In addition to collecting information on when a student enrolls, transfers, drops out, or graduates from school, as set forth in the April 2009 ARRA Guidelines for State Longitudinal Data Systems, include data on early chronic absenteeism, in and out of school suspensions, and truancy that will trigger strength-based supports and interventions for families. Rather than reporting dropouts after they have occurred, this data allows schools and districts to intervene and prevent students from dropping out or disengaging from school.

(B) (2): Accessing and using State data

Recommendation: The FSCE Working Group would like to expand the term “parents” in the list of key stakeholders to “families” to accommodate the diverse and variegated family structures in communities across the nation. Parents and families are key stakeholders in the education of all children, and they should have data readily available to them in order to make recommendations on and decisions about their children’s education and to hold their schools and districts accountable.

Recommendation: Consistent with ESEA-NCLB, ensure data is in a format and language that all families can access and understand.

Recommendation: Consistent with ESEA-NCLB, ensure assistance to families in understanding data and its uses to monitor children's progress and to hold districts and schools accountable.

Great Teachers and Leaders

(C) (2): Differentiating teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance.

Recommendation: Include family engagement criteria in teacher and principal evaluation systems.

Recommendation: Include input from multiple stakeholders, including family and community members, in the evaluation of teachers and principals.

(C) (4): Reporting the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs

Recommendation: Evaluate teacher and principal preparation programs on their ability to develop capacity in family, school, and community engagement programs and policies.

(C) (5): Providing effective support to teachers and principals

Recommendation: Integrate family, school, and community engagement as part of ongoing professional development offerings aimed at improving teacher and principal quality.

Recommendation: Include language consistent with the ARRA Guidelines issued by the Department in April of 2009 by requiring States to develop school staff capacity to partner with families to improve student learning by:

- Communicating clearly about school programs and individual student progress
- Fostering parent involvement (the FSCE Working Group prefers the term “family engagement”) in school activities and decision making
- Supporting home visits, family nights, and parent trainings that help families make informed decisions about their children's academic program, request needed services, assist with homework, and support learning in other ways.

Turning Around Struggling Schools

(D) (3) Turning around struggling schools

Recommendation: The FSCE Working Group strongly supports the inclusion of family engagement as a strategy for school transformation. Families will be instrumental in designing and holding schools accountable for effective turn-around strategies. In order to strengthen the impact of family engagement on closing the achievement gap, we recommend that the Department insert the language “on-going mechanisms for family and community engagement” between “and” and “community-oriented supports” and include the FSCE Working Group’s definition of family engagement and family engagement mechanisms. Essential family engagement mechanisms include the following: 1) support staffing and professional development focused on family engagement; (2) develop research, evaluation, and accountability systems that promote family engagement; (3) create strong cradle to career pathways for family engagement; (4) engage community-based organizations to increase family engagement; and (5) engage families in planning and governance for shared decision making.

Recommendation: Include families, parent organizations, and community members as equal partners with school and district staff in developing and implementing a plan for school transformation in subsection (ii). Meaningfully engaging families in decision making builds school and district capacity to support school improvement and reform.

Recommendation: Utilize blended funding streams across federal, state, and local programs and agencies to maximize the impact of cradle to career family, school, and community engagement strategies on student learning in high-need schools and districts.

Recommendation: Implement transition structures and mechanisms to support family, school, and community engagement between early childhood education and kindergarten, middle school to high school, and high school to post secondary and workforce development institutions.

Recommendation: Use chronic absenteeism, in and out of school suspension, and truancy data to better monitor students and trigger systems to support families in improving student attendance in high-need schools and LEAs.

Overall Criteria

E (3) Enlisting statewide support and commitment

Recommendation: Include parent organizations in the list of state and local leaders listed under subsection (ii).

Recommendation: Insert “families” after “participation by LEAs, schools,” and add “and families” between “students” and “in poverty” under the list of participants in subsection (iv).

E (5) Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale, and sustain proposed plans

Recommendation: Add subsection (vi) to include families, parent organizations, and community-based organizations in the development, implementation, and evaluation of state plans.

DEFINITIONS

Recommendation: Include a definition of “Family Engagement” as referred to in Selection Criteria D (3) in the definitions section of this Notice. The FSCE Working Group defines family engagement as: *a shared responsibility of families and schools for student success, in which schools and community-based organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and families are committed to actively supporting their children’s learning and development. This shared responsibility is continuous from birth through young adulthood and reinforces learning that takes place in the home, school, and community.*

Recommendation: Include a definition of “Family Engagement Mechanisms” as referred to in Selection Criteria D (3) in the definitions section of this Notice. The FSCE Working Group believes strong family engagement mechanisms include the following: *(1) support staffing and professional development focused on family engagement; (2) develop research, evaluation, and accountability systems that promote family engagement; (3) create strong cradle to career pathways for family engagement; (4) engage community-based organizations to increase family engagement; and (5) engage families in planning and governance for shared decision making. Specific examples under each of the five mechanisms include:*

(1) Support staffing and professional development focused on family engagement

- *Establish an office or hire personnel, such as family engagement coordinators within the LEAs and schools.*
- *Provide professional development on effectively engaging families.*

(2) Develop research, evaluation, and accountability systems that promote family engagement

- *Promote innovation, research, and evaluation of family engagement policies and practices, including implementation, replication, and impact studies.*
- *Establish an accountability system that engages families in developing, implementing, and monitoring family engagement policies and practices.*

(3) Create strong cradle to career pathways for family engagement

- *Partner with and/or establish early childhood, higher education, and workforce development programs to promote school, college and work readiness and support families during transitions.*

- *Strengthen and align family engagement policies and practices along a child's lifespan and in all learning settings.*
- (4) *Engage community-based organizations to increase family engagement*
- *Collaborate with non-profit organizations and community-based organizations to support parent leadership trainings, family literacy programs, home visitation programs, family volunteerism programs, and other innovative programs that meaningfully engage families.*
- (5) *Engage families in planning and governance for shared decision making*
- *Ensure representation of families on school advisory councils or decision making bodies.*

The FSCE Working Group appreciates the opportunity provided by the Secretary and the Department to provide feedback on its key reforms. We believe that by making family, school, and community engagement a critical component of the Race to the Top Fund's proposed requirements, priorities, and selection criteria, States will be able to leverage systemic family engagement efforts to improve educational outcomes. Please feel free to contact Heather Weiss at heather_weiss@harvard.edu or (617) 495-9108 or Mishaela Durán at mduran@pta.org or (202) 289-6790 Ext. 201, if further clarification on the comment is needed.

Sincerely,

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group