

National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

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February 9, 2011

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

Docket ID:**Attention: Proposed Waiver and Extension of Project Period 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 proposed waiver and extension of project period for Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs).

The FSCE Working Group applauds the Department's recognition of the importance of family and community engagement in education, as evidenced by the proposed waiver and extension of project period for PIRCs. Additionally, the Working Group appreciates the Department's investment in much-needed research and development for educational improvement achieved through rigorous evaluation and data collection of research-based programs such as the PIRCs. More than forty years of research has proven that when parents are involved in their child's education, student achievement increases.¹ Recent research published by the University of Chicago points to parent and family engagement as one of five essential ingredients of sustainable reform in turning around low-performing schools - as vital as school leadership and curriculum alignment.²

About the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group:

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement 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.

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

² Byrk, A., P.B. Sebring, E. Allensworth, and J.Q. Easton. *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

It is dedicated to mobilizing cradle to career pathways and partnerships among families, school, and communities to promote kindergarten and college readiness, improve schools, and increase student achievement.

The FSCE Working Group believes families play critical roles in student success. Families 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; and
- Carried out everywhere that children learn – at home, in pre-kindergarten and early learning programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities.

Why the Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) Program:

Many districts struggle with identifying and implementing effective, research-based practices to systemically engage parents and families. The PIRC program is the only source of federal funding intended to exclusively help schools and communities meaningfully engage parents for continuous student improvement. In recognition of the need for increased statewide technical assistance and dissemination of best practices, PIRCS underwent reorganization at the Department of Education, moving the program beyond implementing individual programs toward providing statewide leadership and capacity-building for state educational agencies and local educational agencies on parental engagement. This vital program is at the forefront of innovation, spurring learning communities in higher education to effectively train teachers in family engagement (KS); expansion of district data systems to share student performance data with families in an effort to boost high school graduation and college-readiness (NV); develop statewide collaborations to meaningfully engage families of ELL students (MD); and creating community-wide pathways for family engagement from birth through young adulthood (NE).

These centers build statewide capacity to implement research-based programs and practices to meaningfully engage families in education, driving student academic achievement. PIRCS provide SEAs and LEAs with comprehensive training, information, and support for effective parental engagement, to improve student academic achievement and to strengthen partnerships for meeting the educational needs of children in high-need areas. Furthermore, because PIRCS must serve rural and urban areas, use at least half of their federal grants to serve areas with high concentrations of low-income children, and are required to use a minimum of thirty percent of funds for early childhood parent centers, the program is integral to engaging

the parents of all children along the continuum of education. There are 62 PIRCs in all 50 states and several US territories and outlying areas.

Recommendation:

Based on the integral role of family, school, and community engagement in implementing sustainable educational reforms and increased student academic achievement, the FSCE Working Group applauds the Department’s proposal to sustain PIRC program operations via the waiver and extension of project period. The FSCE Working Group strongly recommends that the waiver and extension of project period be coupled with a clearly-communicated emphasis on data collection, research, best practices, and program outcomes that will assist in the development of a strengthened PIRC program. This new emphasis will focus on the PIRCs’ role as capacity-building engines and hubs of state-wide leadership on family and community engagement in education.

The proposed waiver and extension of project period is an acknowledgement of family engagement’s integral role in educational improvement efforts, as the opportunity for the PIRC program to continue evaluation and collection of program outcomes represents the Department’s commitment to build capacity for much-needed educational research and development. As John Easton suggests, education research must be relevant and usable, linking research, development, and innovation.³ The Working Group views the Department’s proposal as an opportunity for PIRCs to serve those aims by collecting valuable, usable, and relevant data and information that will be helpful in promoting innovation and scaling the program’s best and most innovative practices in building the capacity of state and local educational agencies to raise student achievement. PIRCs are working toward the implementation and use of rigorous evaluation techniques to collect program outcomes on not only increased parent involvement across multiple settings, but also the effect of increased involvement on student academic achievement. Included are case examples of work currently underway demonstrating program outcomes of PIRCs serving in this new role of providing statewide leadership, capacity-building, technical assistance, and data collection.

In addition, the proposed waiver and extension provide PIRCs with the opportunity to use leading edge evaluation techniques. One such evaluation is the 90-Day Research Cycle. Based in part on Proctor and Gamble’s innovation method and pioneered by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement⁴, this method serves as a quick way to research and assess the potential of innovative ideas for advancing quality improvement. Under the leadership of Tony Bryk, the Carnegie Foundation recently employed the method to examine the failure of extant placement in community college math classes. Upon conclusion of the 90-day cycle, the research team presented recommendations on new routines to build validated models of more effective practice and increase success in developmental math.

³Easton, John. *FIVE BIG IDEAS FOR IES*. Atlanta, G.A. Speech at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTA), 2010. Available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/director/pdf/easton022010.pdf>

⁴Huston, L. and N. Sakkab. *Connect and Develop*. Cambridge, M.A. Harvard Business Review, 2006.

California State PIRC-1/California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE)

Project INSPIRE:

Developed by California PIRC/CABE, Project INSPIRE's Parent Leadership Development Program is assisting this PIRC in efforts to operationally define and examine efforts to develop effective Family-School-Community collaborations and relationships. With an overarching program goal of increasing parents' involvement in the education of their children at home, school, and across the community, Project INSPIRE is currently working with eighteen school districts across California. The curriculum was designed using a research-base of both Community Learning Theory and adult learning and professional development⁵, and key component of the project is an ongoing dedication to an advanced evaluation technique – a randomized research study to assess the relative effectiveness of each of the three levels of parent education and leadership development on increasing the type, frequency, and intensity of parent involvement, and, subsequently, on student achievement.

Both qualitative and quantitative data on parental engagement suggest significant changes in involvement levels among participating parents when compared to non-participating parents. Teachers and school administrators in every participating school report improvements in the type, frequency, and intensity of interactions with parents participating in the INSPIRE program. Data from individual parent interviews and parent focus groups revealed that participating parents learned, at a minimum:

- The significant role that parents have in learning and in school;
- That the state's accountability system is comprised of both content and performance standards;
- The assessment process to identify how each child learns and how the school is helping students to meet or exceed grade level student performance standards;
- The range of ancillary services available to parents and families to support student learning; and
- When and how parents can exercise rights under School Choice.

Perhaps of most value, participating parents reported that program participation resulted directly in opportunities to share thoughts, dreams, and ideas with other parents, in addition to learning important information about schools and student academic growth. This building of relational trust among adult stakeholders is a key component of capacity-building to meaningfully engage parents.

⁵ Neufeld, B., and D. Roper. *Coaching: A Strategy for Developing Instructional Capacity*. Washington, D.C.: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2003.

The study also sought to measure the impact of Project INSPIRE on student academic achievement. Findings show that students with parents who are participating in PIRC-1/CABE's Project INSPIRE experienced an average increase of 12.8 score points in English language arts and 18.5 score points in math achievement on the state assessment test.⁶ Thus far, the increased achievement among children of participating parents is not only statistically significant, but it is also consistent across all grade levels. Project INSPIRE plans to continue data collection-efforts to ensure continuity of success and program outcomes.

Iowa's Sustaining Parent Involvement Network (iSPIN):

The Iowa State PIRC is ensuring there is a system of quality and oversight across the state by leading efforts to integrate parent engagement into the standards for administrators and teachers, and by working closely with the Iowa Association of School Boards and the School Administrators of Iowa to align these standards with other learning standards and to include them in the assessment of school leaders. The program, operating in 27 states across the state, is called Iowa's Sustaining Parent Involvement Network (iSPIN), with a program model based on the Academic Development Institute's Solid Foundation program and enhanced with additional research-based best practices.

In addition to integrating parent engagement into teacher and administrator standards, the iSPIN program provides training and technical assistance to state Title I accreditation teams to help them monitor local compliance with Title I family engagement provisions. Through development and implementation of the iSPIN program, the PIRC has been working to create an infrastructure for family engagement across the state by adapting an evidence-based model for family engagement that all Iowa schools can implement. Participating schools are required to agree to a minimum set of commitments, such as focusing on family engagement for at least two years.

Although just recently implemented, the Iowa State PIRC believes the iSPIN program is most likely to lead to better outcomes for schools, families, and youth. A 2004 evaluation of the Solid Foundation program, from which iSPIN has been adapted, showed increases in student achievement significantly higher than those of non-participating schools. Emerging outcomes include increased parent involvement both at home and at school, and attitudinal improvements among staff members regarding parent engagement. Highlights from the 2010 program evaluation of cohort 1, which began program implementation in the 2008-2009 school year show promising improvements in student achievement, with 6th grade median reading and math scores experiencing increases of six and nine points, respectively, and 3rd grade English language learners (ELL) increasing from 23% to 64% in reading proficiency after just one year.⁷

⁶ J. David Ramirez, Ph.D. *Building Family Support for Student Achievement: CABE Project INSPIRE Parent Leadership Development Program*. California: California Association for Bilingual Education, 2010.

⁷Galloway, Robin. *Iowa PIRC iSPIN 2010 Evaluation Report*. Online, 2010. Available at:

<http://www.iowaparents.org/learning-about-my-child/iowa-pirc-ispin-2010-evaluation-report>

The work of California PIRC-1/CABE's Project INSPIRE and Iowa's iSPIN program are just two examples of PIRC program grantees operating to build the statewide capacity of schools and communities to meaningfully engage all parents in their children's learning, school, performance, and achievement across all learning settings. What's more, the data collection efforts show that when PIRCs are equipped with the resources to implement program evaluation on meaningful program outcomes, including both parent engagement and student academic achievement, the data is compelling.

The FSCE Working Group recognizes the ongoing efforts of the Administration to support effective family engagement in education. We appreciate the opportunity provided by the Secretary and the Department to provide feedback on the proposed waiver and extension of project period for the PIRC program, which we view as integral to those efforts. Our leadership collaborative believes the extension of project period to be a key opportunity to leverage systemic family engagement efforts to improve educational outcomes by ensuring PIRCS are positioned and equipped to serve as statewide leaders and capacity-builders in the field of family engagement. Please feel free to contact Heather Weiss at heather_weiss@harvard.edu or (617) 495-9108 or Jacque Minow at jminow@pta.org or (703) 518-1200 Ext. 3351, if further clarification on the comment is needed.

Sincerely,

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group