



**Harvard Family
Research Project**



UPDATE: New Skills for New Schools

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In 1997, Harvard Family Research Project developed policy and practice recommendations to elevate the preparation of teachers in family involvement and authored the brief *New Skills for New Schools: Preparing teachers in family involvement*.¹ Since the publication of *New Skills for New Schools*, the education reform landscape has changed dramatically, making it necessary to align teacher preparation and professional learning for family engagement with the goals of a twenty-first century education. Today's education policies focus on providing children and youth with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in a global economy. Standards for student knowledge and skills are being aligned from early childhood all the way to college and beyond. Education reforms value innovation; systemic approaches; and the use of data for decision-making, continuous improvement, and accountability.

These changes are influencing the family engagement field to move away from “random acts” of family engagement—i.e., the proliferation of numerous programs and activities that are disconnected from instructional practice and school reform efforts. Instead, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners are advocating for systemic and integrated approaches to family engagement that have an impact on student achievement and school performance.² Preparation for family engagement must be designed in a systemic way to include standards, curriculum, collaboration, ongoing professional learning, and evaluation for learning and continuous improvement.

Harvard Family Research Project is gathering information about promising teacher education practices that prepare teachers to partner with families for student success.³ A preview of these practices—to be published in a forthcoming policy brief—is summarized in this update.

Standards for family engagement. Standards must be at the core of professional preparation for family engagement. The development of family engagement standards—in early childhood as well as elementary, middle, and high school settings—provides a content focus for training and professional development in institutions of higher education, districts, and schools. Professional standards describe what teachers should know and be able to do in order to work effectively with families.

For example, Bank Street College in New York City supports the implementation of family engagement standards in early childhood education such as those established by Head Start and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Pre-service teachers in the early childhood special education programs at Bank Street are required to complete an early childhood practicum in which the teacher candidate observes and interacts with a child in a family cultural context. This yearlong course is focused on learning how to observe and record the behaviors of children. Instead of just observing children in schools, teacher candidates are required to spend time with a family in the community through activities such as having dinner with the family, helping the child with homework, or observing the child in a non-school setting. In this way, teaching students are able to extend and broaden their observational skills to the family setting. Teaching students are encouraged to work with

families that are significantly different from their own families in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family structure.

Curricula that advance the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that teachers need to engage families. There are a variety of ways to prepare teachers to work effectively with families. Some universities purposefully infuse family engagement throughout their teacher preparation coursework, whereas others offer a separate course or sequence of courses. Regardless of the course structure, the curriculum must directly address the knowledge and skills that teachers need in order to engage families in practice.

The Kansas Parent Information and Resource Center (KPIRC) supports institutes of higher education in the state by providing \$3,000 in funding for faculty members to augment their traditional curriculum with modules and themes about family engagement, based on the PTA National Standards for Family–School Partnerships. The enhancement program introduces new teachers to the language of these standards and helps them learn about and design ways to engage families to support student performance. To apply for the curriculum enhancement, teacher preparation colleges must submit an application that identifies the instructional goals of the enhancements, learner outcomes, and an evaluation plan. All applicants are encouraged to use tools and resources available on the Parent Teacher Education Connection Website (<http://pte.unt.edu>) developed by KPIRC and the University of Northern Texas. The colleges must also alter course syllabi and develop a plan for sharing the project with other faculty members to ensure sustainability of the initiative.

At Kansas State University, the focus of the KPIRC-funded curriculum enhancement is on better preparing pre-service teachers to engage with families through *direct and deliberate interaction*. Aspiring teachers are required to conduct a video interview with the family of a special needs student and then present the video to their university class. At Wichita State University, meanwhile, the curriculum enhancement has focused on *enriching course assignments*. For example, in their field placements, teacher candidates receive guidance in preparing letters of introduction to parents of students they will serve, assisting school teachers in sending postcards to welcome families, and practicing making positive phone calls to parents. At Ottawa University, the curriculum enhancement is focused on transforming faculty members into *learning communities* around family engagement. Over the past 3 years, faculty have engaged in intensive dialogues in pairs or groups of 4–6 in which they read research together and discuss ways to support family engagement throughout the curriculum.

Collaborations among various stakeholders. An integrated system of training and professional learning for family engagement requires partnerships among a variety of stakeholders, including state educational agencies, institutes of higher education, school districts and schools, community-based organizations, early childhood programs, and families. These collaborations must have policies and procedures that grant prospective teachers the opportunity to work in the field to enable them to learn about exemplary family engagement practices. Moreover, systems must be in place for faculty members at institutes of higher education to conduct research and share best practices and strategies in the preparation of teachers for family engagement.

The Center for Urban Education (CUE) at Metropolitan State College of Denver was formed to help high-need students achieve excellence within a designated P-16 Zone for Student Achievement. A P-16 Zone refers to the idea of creating a continuous and aligned progression in learning from preschool through college. Pre-service teachers are given opportunities to work with veteran teachers, often graduates of Metro State's teacher education program, to build their skills for family engagement. By collaborating with teachers in the school, pre-service teachers strengthen their ability to communicate and work with parents and, conversely, veteran teachers have opportunities to grow from continued interactions with faculty from the college.

CUE understands that in order to promote children's success, the community at large needs to be involved. CUE works closely with community groups such as non-profit organizations, businesses, and social services in order to enhance the learning opportunities available in P-16 Zone Schools, and pre-service teachers are actively involved in this process. Because they work in the schools as part of their field experience, pre-service teachers learn not only what kinds of resources are available in the area, but also how to effectively leverage the available community resources to add capacity to the school and to their classroom. For example, many schools use Title I funding to hire a parent liaison. As part of their education, pre-service teachers are often required to shadow or intern with the parent liaison to enhance their abilities to work and collaborate with parents.

Continued professional development in family engagement. Simply put, a pre-service education for family engagement is not enough. Educators across the continuum—including pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and higher education faculty—benefit from deepening their knowledge and skills in understanding the impact of family engagement on student success.

The University of Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program (Chicago UTEP) is a two-year master's degree program that prepares educators to work with underserved children and families in urban public schools. UTEP takes seriously the competencies, attitudes, and stance teachers must develop to work with diverse families in meaningful ways and to address the achievement gap.

The Chicago UTEP experience extends long after students graduate and enter the teaching workforce. During their first three years of teaching, Chicago UTEP alumni receive individualized in-classroom coaching from UTEP staff with the specific responsibility of providing guidance to novice teachers. Select program graduates also have the opportunity to become clinical instructors for incoming student-teachers. One criterion on which they are chosen for this role is the quality of their relationships with families and colleagues. Clinical instructors have professional development workshops with Chicago UTEP faculty every 6-8 weeks. Time and attention is devoted to working with parents, especially in advance of parent-teacher conferences. For example, in the past, Chicago UTEP faculty members have engaged clinical instructors in mock scenarios where they were challenged to handle conversations that took unexpected and difficult turns. Faculty worked with clinical instructors to help clinical instructors become more comfortable in such situations and to deconstruct power dynamics and

how information is shared. Faculty helped the instructors play out the different scenarios and walked them through different perspectives. In turn, the clinical instructors were charged with preparing the student-teachers for similar conversations.

Evaluation for learning and continuous improvement. Evaluation can inform institutes of higher education about the areas of family engagement where teachers are doing well and where they need support. Such information can be used to make improvements in curriculum, training strategies, and professional development. Local data on the status of parent and family engagement in schools can also lead to a redesign of professional development efforts.

The Teacher Performance Assessment is a tool being developed by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Stanford University to measure the proficiency of new teachers and to improve the consistency with which teacher licensure and accreditation decisions are being made across states.⁴ The University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (UMN) is assisting in the development and piloting of the tool. Faculty members at UMN are creating checklists and rubrics for the competencies teachers should have when they graduate from the program. One of the domains in the Teacher Performance Assessment will examine how teachers understand a student's cultural context and socioeconomic background as they relate to student learning.

¹ Shartrand, A., Weiss, H., Kreider, H., & Lopez, M. E. (1997). *New skills for new schools: Preparing teachers in family involvement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

² Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M.E., Rosenberg, H. (2010). *Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform*. Paper prepared for the National Forum on Family, School, and Community Engagement, November 9, 2010, Washington, DC.

³ To research the information introduced in this brief, the authors conducted 11 interviews with university faculty members, a Parent Information Resource Center director, and a school administrator. During the interviews, these key informants shared current and future efforts by their programs to prepare teachers in family engagement. Topics discussed included policy, curriculum, evaluation, and partnerships. More detailed information about all of the programs mentioned will be presented in HFRP's forthcoming policy brief to be published jointly with the National PTA (expected Spring 2011).

⁴ Minnesota Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. (2011). *Teacher Performance Assessment* [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://mnteachered.org/tpa>.