



## Teaching the Teachers: Preparing Educators to Engage Families for Student Achievement

Margaret Caspe, M. Elena Lopez, Ashley Chu, and Heather B. Weiss

To be effective, teachers must be prepared to collaborate with families to support student success.<sup>1</sup> When teachers understand families and communicate and build relationships with them, students benefit. Many studies confirm that strong parent–teacher relationships relate to positive student outcomes for students, such as healthy social development, high student achievement, and high rates of college enrollment.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by giving teachers the support they need to work with families, teacher education programs can have an even greater impact on student achievement.

While many university teacher education programs include courses on family engagement, these courses often focus on early childhood and special education.<sup>3</sup> The modules about school–family partnerships some universities offer do not fully prepare teachers to deal with the reality of communicating and working with families to bolster student success.<sup>4</sup> Teacher education programs continue to face serious challenges in incorporating family engagement into the curriculum, including inadequate systemic support and limited resources.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, teachers report that they enter the classroom unprepared to engage families.<sup>6</sup> This is unfortunate given that a 2009 report found that teachers view the lack of support from parents as their most pressing challenge, and identify family engagement as one of the top strategies to improve outcomes for their students.<sup>7</sup>

Preparing teachers and offering them continuing professional development on effective family engagement practices can have an enormous influence

on how they feel about engaging and working with families, and what they do as practicing educators.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, some institutions of higher education are taking innovative steps to prepare teachers to work with families through coursework and hands-on experience in partnership schools during preservice and into their early years of teaching. With current public policy and philanthropic investments focused on teacher quality and overall effectiveness, the time is ripe for new models and approaches to preparing teachers for meaningful and effective family engagement.

In the twenty-first century, educators need new and different knowledge and skills to meet today's challenges, including the understanding and competencies to work with diverse students and families. More than one-third of the students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 classrooms in the United States are from minority groups. An increasing number of students are recent immigrants or children of immigrants. English is not the native language of many of these students, and many also come from diverse religious backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> All too often, new teachers are unprepared to deal with the challenges of this diversity in their classrooms.<sup>10</sup> Thus, teacher training programs need to design fresh strategies to equip the next generation of teachers to meet the needs of their diverse students and families.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, to better prepare future teachers, schools of education need to help teacher candidates develop positive attitudes toward families and encourage teachers to draw upon the knowledge and strengths of families to make the classroom education students receive relevant.<sup>12</sup>

The teaching workforce is also changing. By 2020, Generation Y—those born between 1977 and 1994—is projected to comprise 44 percent of the teaching force.<sup>13</sup> This new generation of teachers desires supportive school leadership, constructive and individualized feedback, opportunities for growth to improve their practice and effectiveness, and meaningful collaborations with their colleagues.<sup>14</sup> Teacher educators should capitalize on the strengths and motivations of these new teachers as they develop approaches to best prepare them to engage with families.

Finally, teacher preparation for family engagement is a matter of equity. Achievement gaps for minority and low-income students persist, and evidence consistently shows that complementary learning supports outside of school, including family involvement, play an instrumental part in eliminating these inequities.<sup>15</sup> All too often, new teachers possess negative attitudes and assumptions about families.<sup>16</sup> Rather than entering the teaching force prepared to help low-income children succeed by partnering with and empowering families, many new teachers underestimate the importance of family engagement and contribute to the unequal distribution of supports outside the classroom. In fact, a report by Civic Enterprises discloses these inequities: high-performing schools maintain strong communication with families, but low-performing schools are weak in communication and family engagement.<sup>17</sup> Given the importance of family contributions in the education of their children, the preparation of teachers for family engagement becomes not only an issue of good practice, but also one of equity.

This brief examines how teacher education programs can create the foundation for meaningful and effective family engagement. It describes five core elements necessary for a system of teacher training and professional development in support of family engagement, distilled from case studies of five promising teacher preparation programs. The five case studies are followed by a set of policy recommendations based on a synthesis of current knowledge about educating teachers.

## TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Teachers must develop the competencies to engage families as partners in learning to improve student academic success. Thus, teachers need to develop skills and practices that include:

- Welcoming partnerships with families;
- Identifying and using family strengths to support positive student outcomes;
- Communicating with families positively;
- Sharing data about student progress and performance in an accessible, understandable, and actionable manner;
- Providing families with strategies and activities to help their children learn inside and outside the classroom;
- Demonstrating respect, especially in working with culturally and religiously diverse families and families of children with disabilities; and
- Advocating with families for policies and practices to increase student learning and achievement.

These necessary skills are more likely to be imparted when family engagement is embedded in a system of training and professional learning. The five core elements in this system are:

1. **Standards for family engagement.** Standards must be at the core of professional preparation for family engagement. Professional standards describe what teachers should know and be able to do to work effectively with families. When standards are in place, institutions of higher education, districts, and schools are able to elevate family engagement in training and professional development. Currently, very few course or skills requirements related to family engagement exist within teacher preparation curricula, but there are notable exceptions. The National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation of early childhood programs and professional preparation programs clearly describes the knowledge and competencies early childhood educators need in the area of



family engagement. In addition, Ohio and Kansas have both endorsed and developed statewide family-engagement standards; however, the specific skills taught are left up to the discretion of each educational institution.

2. **Curriculum that advances the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that teachers need to engage families.** There are a variety of ways to prepare future teachers to work effectively with families. Some universities purposefully infuse lessons in family engagement throughout teacher preparation coursework, whereas others offer a separate course or sequence of courses. Regardless of the course structure, curriculum must directly address the knowledge and skills teachers must possess to engage families in practice. Although there are a variety of skills to be cultivated and multiple methods through which this can be achieved—including readings, teaching cases, or field experiences with families—a curriculum that explicitly defines family engagement work is critical.
3. **Collaborations among various stakeholders.** An integrated system of training and professional development for family engagement requires partnerships among various stakeholders, including state educational agencies, institutions of higher education, school districts and schools, community-based organizations, early childhood programs, and families. These collaborations must have policies and procedures in place to provide prospective teachers with field placements that enable them to learn about exemplary family engagement practices. Moreover, systems must be in place for faculty at institutions of higher education to conduct research and share best practices and strategies for family engagement with curriculum committees and current and future teachers.
4. **Continuing professional development around family engagement.** Preservice education on family engagement is not enough. Educators across the continuum—preservice teachers, practicing teachers, and faculty at postsecondary institutions—benefit from deepening their knowledge and skills about the impact of family

engagement on student success. Although it is outside the scope of this brief to describe a district's role in this training system, institutions of higher education can take a strong lead in strengthening teacher skills in family engagement through district partnerships and trainings for the working teacher.

5. **Evaluation for learning and continuous improvement.** Evaluation provides information about how prepared teachers are to partner with families. It can inform schools and institutions 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. National surveys already show that teachers are unprepared to engage families, and when local data confirm this trend, the information can spur the redesign of family engagement training. Local data on the status of parent and family engagement in schools can also lead to a redesign of professional development efforts.

Preparing teachers to work with families has important benefits:

- **Skilled and effective workforce.** When teachers partner with families, they are able to enlist support for student learning in the home and in the community.
- **Positive school climate.** When teachers and other school staff show that they value parents and honor the different roles families play in children's lives, they contribute to a positive social climate that supports student learning.
- **Teacher retention.** Teachers are more likely to stay in schools where there are high levels of trust with parents, and where teachers feel that parents support their work and respect them.<sup>18</sup>
- **Family and student outcomes.** When teachers invite families to engage with their children's education and communicate specific actions that family members can take, families are more likely to act. This positive action, in turn, contributes to student academic improvement.<sup>19</sup>



## CASE STUDIES

The following case studies illustrate the core elements of a system of training and professional learning for family engagement. Although no single case study features all five of these elements, each speaks to several of them. The core elements are:

1. Standards for family engagement;
2. Curriculum that advances the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that teachers need to engage families;
3. Collaborations among various stakeholders;
4. Continuing professional development around family engagement; and
5. Evaluation for learning and continuous improvement.

To develop the following case studies the authors conducted 11 interviews with university faculty members, a Parental Information Resource Center (PIRC) director, and a school administrator. During the interviews, these key informants shared current and future efforts by their programs to prepare teachers for family engagement. Topics discussed included policy, curriculum, evaluation, and partnerships. This information was triangulated with information from university and program websites, as well as a literature review on teacher preparation for family engagement.

### Kansas Parent Information Resource Center

The Kansas Parent Information Resource Center (KPIRC) provides technical assistance to institutions of higher education, schools, and districts, in the form of information, training, and tools needed to involve parents in their children's education. KPIRC also helps districts and schools comply with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – No Child Left Behind (ESEA-NCLB) Title I mandates by providing information on district and school parent involvement policies and school–parent compacts.<sup>20</sup>

**Standards for family engagement.** Standards can provide an incentive for teacher education programs to enhance and promote teacher preparation for family engagement. A clear definition and framework of family

engagement, buttressed by standards of program and professional practice, guides teacher education programs, while still allowing flexibility in how, where, and when to teach.<sup>21</sup> The KPIRC exemplifies how standards have helped reorganize teacher preparation throughout Kansas.

In 2008, the Kansas State Board of Education endorsed the PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships<sup>22</sup> as a statewide framework for family engagement. By endorsing these standards, Kansas paved the way for those in the field of education throughout the state to use common language and benchmarks for working with families.

**Curriculum.** Through the development of a curriculum-enhancement program, KPIRC supports institutions of higher education in Kansas by providing \$3,000 to faculty members to augment 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, 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 programs must also alter course syllabi and develop a plan for sharing the project with other faculty members to ensure sustainability of the initiative.

Three colleges in Kansas have been involved in the project thus far. They include Wichita State, Kansas State University, and Ottawa University. KPIRC has also worked with other institutes of higher education across the state to help colleges interweave family involvement throughout the coursework and to disseminate materials on family engagement to preservice teachers; however, the following three institutions have been most deeply involved in curriculum:



- **Wichita State University.** At Wichita State, 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. Teacher candidates also create a resource box with materials to be used during their first year of teaching to facilitate their role as family advocate. Assignments are also modified so that prospective teachers focus more attention on family engagement, including interviewing teachers about the importance of family and community connections.
- **Kansas State University.** At Kansas State, the focus of the curriculum enhancement is on better preparing preservice 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 present the video to their university class. Moreover, the program features an optional course dedicated to family engagement and ESEA-NCLB, taught by the KPIRC director. This course provides preservice teachers with the latest research on family engagement, an introduction to resources on family engagement for teachers and families, and effective strategies and activities parents can use to help their children learn.
- **Ottawa University.** At Ottawa University, the curriculum enhancement is focused on transforming faculty members into *learning communities* around family engagement. Ottawa faculty members had observed growing ethnic diversity in Kansas schools, coupled with an increasing disconnect between teachers and the families of the children they were educating. To better understand and employ the best techniques in reaching a diverse pool of families, the faculty decided to start a learning community. Over the past three years, faculty have engaged in intensive dialogues in pairs or small groups in which they read research together and discuss ways to support family engagement throughout the curriculum.

Moreover, faculty spend time looking at syllabi in the school of education and use different matrices to understand how different elements from National PTA, university, and state standards can be integrated into coursework. For example, a reading methods course might focus on how to communicate more effectively with families from diverse cultures, how to understand the literacy practices different cultures adopt, and how to better answer parents' questions about ways to support reading skills attainment at home. Teacher candidates might then discuss how to talk about early literacy in the broader community and help develop community-wide reading initiatives for families.

**Evaluation.** The three universities in the curriculum-enhancement project conduct evaluations to assess progress and improve instructional practice. At the beginning and end of each semester at Wichita State, students and their cooperating teachers complete a survey based on the PTA National Family-School Partnership Standards. In a 2010 survey, preservice teachers seeking secondary education degrees (for grades 6–12) showed a significant gain in their knowledge of specific actions used to communicate with parents and families.<sup>23</sup>

Faculty at Kansas State University, in collaboration with the KPIRC evaluator, conducted a quasi-experimental study. Both teacher candidates who participated in the enhancement program and candidates who did not completed family engagement surveys at the beginning and end of their junior year and again after the completion of their first year of teaching. Despite serious challenges to the study design, including self-selection, a small sample, attrition, and the lack of consideration for confounding factors, evidence suggests that teaching students who received enhanced training were better prepared to understand parent involvement and engage families. After graduation, teachers who had received enhanced family engagement training also demonstrated a stronger commitment to sharing power and the inclusion of parents as partners in their child's education than their peers who did not receive the training.<sup>24</sup>



At Ottawa University, quantitative and qualitative data come together to support the positive influence of the faculty learning communities. For example, on student surveys, the majority of teaching students report feeling somewhat prepared or well prepared to meet the family engagement standards. Faculty members reflect that the learning communities have been a creative process that has fostered rich discussions among both adjunct and full-time faculty members. There is an overwhelming sense that this work sets candidates apart from others in the field, and supports them in being better able to engage families and think outside of the walls of the school. Faculty members overwhelmingly believe that the topic of families emerges more and more in organic ways during class discussions. For example, when discussing student motivation, teaching candidates in educational psychology classes might ask about how to include parents or recommend interviewing parents as a strategy to improve student interest.

**Continuing professional development.** KPIRC is involved in professional learning through conferences with the Kansas State Department of Education, where KPIRC staff provide workshops to teachers and technical assistance directly to school leadership teams that include principals, teachers, and parents who are involved in developing school improvement plans. As an intermediary organization, KPIRC also strives to link university resources to schools across Kansas to support efforts to meaningfully engage families.

### Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program

Launched in 2003, 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. Chicago UTEP places emphasis on preparing elementary teachers and secondary mathematics and biology teachers for the Chicago Public School system. Approximately 90 percent of Chicago UTEP graduates are still teaching in Chicago Public Schools or in similar urban school districts after five years.<sup>25</sup> In the program, teaching candidates spend intense amounts of time in schools working with teachers, students, and families. The focus not only is on preparing high-quality instructors, but also on being mindful of the need to prepare teachers

to be leaders who can cultivate relationships with families and communities. The program is housed in the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute (UEI).

**Curriculum.** Curriculum focused on promoting social justice and equity can provide a strong rationale for enhancing teacher preparation for family engagement. Urban education programs, such as UTEP, take seriously the competencies, attitudes, and stance teachers must develop to work with diverse families in meaningful ways and to address the achievement gap. UTEP has designed a number of ways to ensure that teachers develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions they need to work with families effectively.

- **Coursework with a focus on equity.** During the first year, teaching students are required to develop knowledge about the urban, Latino, and African-American family experiences in the Chicago area. Students study familial structures and read seminal books, including *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot,<sup>26</sup> and articles about the local experience. Through coursework, faculty members cultivate the basic stance teachers need to work effectively with families. This includes having humility, possessing cultural sensitivities, being an active and perceptive listener, taking a strengths-based approach with families, and focusing on what families and children do well.
- **Direct engagement with families.** Throughout the two-year program, teaching students have various opportunities to engage with families in purposeful ways. For example, during the first year, preservice teachers are required to tutor students in math and literacy in an afterschool program. As part of this requirement, preservice teachers write letters to families to introduce themselves. They are also required to communicate with families about their children's academic progress each quarter. Faculty members support the preservice teachers in conveying data clearly and meaningfully. In the initial year, teaching students are also expected to complete a case study of a school, part of which requires them to interview families and report on the school from the family perspective. Interactions with families intensify by the second year, when



teaching students build relationships with the families of children in the classrooms in which they intern. Student teachers are responsible for actively building relationships with families in the same manner as the head teacher. Fulfilling this requirement can include participating in parent–teacher conferences and initiating phone calls with parents.

- **Family panels.** One of the most significant learning opportunities preservice teachers have around family engagement comes in the second year, when a group of approximately 10 economically and racially diverse parents sit on an expert parent panel to talk with the mostly non-minority Chicago UTEP teaching candidates. Parents communicate their experiences with and expectations of teachers, and issues related to race, culture, and class often emerge. Although this is a difficult topic to facilitate skillfully, teachers report that this experience is transformative and one of the most profound of their career preparation.

**Continuing professional development.** The Chicago UTEP experience extends long after students graduate and enter the teaching force. During their first three years of teaching, Chicago UTEP alumni receive individualized in-classroom coaching from UTEP staff specifically dedicated to providing guidance to novice teachers. Alumni also attend biweekly professional development meetings on topics specific to the needs of new teachers, including family engagement and building and fostering meaningful relationships with families.

After a certain amount of in-service experience, select program graduates also have the opportunity to become clinical instructors for incoming student teachers. One criterion used to choose them for this role is their relationships with families and colleagues. Clinical instructors take professional development workshops with Chicago UTEP faculty every 6–8 weeks. Time and attention are devoted to working with parents, especially around the time of parent–teacher conferences. For example, in the past, Chicago UTEP faculty members engaged clinical instructors in mock

scenarios in which they were challenged to handle conversations that took unexpected and difficult turns. Faculty worked with clinical instructors to help them 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 getting the student teachers ready for similar conversations.

### Metropolitan State College of Denver

In 2004, the Metropolitan State College of Denver (Metro State), in partnership with Denver Public Schools, was awarded a federal Teacher Quality Enhancement grant to launch a comprehensive effort to prepare teachers to serve the educational needs of middle and high school students in urban schools.<sup>27</sup> This effort became known as the Urban Teacher Partnership (UTP). UTP is a two-year preparation program in which teaching students, beginning in their first year, participate in 180 hours of field experience in a partner school prior to working as student teachers.<sup>28</sup>

In 2008, UTP hosted a series of discussions with faculty, teachers, and administrators in partner schools to reflect on the program and lessons learned. Out of these discussions emerged the goal to educate prospective teachers in the settings and communities where children live and learn. The Center for Urban Education (CUE) was formed as the umbrella organization for UTP, and expanded earlier strategies not only for teacher preparation, but also for helping high-need students achieve excellence through 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. There are four components of the CUE strategy:

1. The P–16 Zone;
2. Preparation of effective educators through UTP;
3. Community-based resources and support; and
4. Network development.



**Curriculum.** Inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone, CUE focuses on a continuum of supports for students from early childhood through postsecondary education in a designated urban community consisting of high-need feeder schools. CUE initiatives are initially targeting the schools of northwest Denver, a richly diverse area where Metro State is located and where many of Denver's underserved children live. CUE provides support for P–16 Zone schools through tutoring services from exceptional preservice students, provides guidance to parents on their children's learning, and leverages Metro State and community resources to support students and families.

A P–16 model of education is built on the notion that for children to succeed, and especially those at risk for poor academic outcomes, there must be continuity across the educational pipeline from preschool through college. By middle school, the school environment is often much less welcoming toward parents than it is in the early years. CUE faculty have made an effort to bring together faculty across the entire school to discuss what teachers need to know and be able to do to ensure that upper grades remain welcoming for parents. Through forward and reverse curriculum-mapping, in which grade levels are viewed as a continuum rather than in isolation, faculty create a vision in which family engagement maintains a strong presence throughout the core teacher-preparation curriculum.

CUE has developed a deliberative P–16 initiative that works not only with teachers and children, but also equips parents to help their children meet educational goals. For example, faculty organized a community book seminar to engage parents and teachers at all grade levels; faculty members chose a book that dealt with parenting topics that could apply across the developmental age span and then invited parents with students in various grades to listen to a panel discussion about the book. Following the panel discussion, parents met with veteran and preservice teachers to discuss the parenting topics in the book and how they related to student achievement.

**Community collaborations.** CUE believes that those teachers entering the profession in the twenty-first

century must develop the capacity to understand the complex family dynamics that often accompany living in poverty. Teachers must also be able to access and interpret family and student information carefully and work with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that families and students are appropriately accessing the full range of supports. Therefore, CUE works to prepare teachers to build and leverage community resources through a variety of mechanisms:

- **Partnership schools.** Preservice teachers are given opportunities to work with veteran teachers, often graduates of Metro State's teacher education program, to build their family engagement skills. For example, in one school, preservice teachers in the early childhood program worked with preschool teachers to host a science fair. As part of the fair's unit on inquiry-based learning in science and math, teams of preservice teachers prepared displays and interactive activities that engaged both the preschoolers and their parents. During the fair, preservice teachers taught their science lessons to both the children and the parents as they moved among the exhibit stations. In addition, teaching candidates put together a user-friendly packet of science projects with instructions in English and Spanish for each family to take home. By collaborating with teachers in the school, preservice teachers strengthened their ability to communicate and work with parents and, conversely, veteran teachers had opportunities to grow from continued interactions with faculty from the college.
- **Seminar and workshop series.** To complement the teacher preparation curriculum, CUE hosts an educational series for preservice teachers in which community-based organizations are invited to discuss the support services they offer to schools and parents. One workshop led by Denver Public Schools helps preservice teachers understand how to use the district-wide data system and how to tailor instruction to individual learning needs. The system houses sensitive data about the lives of students and their families; teachers are trained in how to use this information and how to interpret their own biases and judgments based on the information. Maintaining confidentiality is





## Examples of Family Engagement Activities for Preservice Teachers

| Desired Teacher Outcomes                        | Examples of Course Activities  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Understand Families</b></p>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a video interview with a family and present to peers and faculty</li> <li>• Observe and record behavior of a special-needs child in class and at home</li> <li>• Develop a case study of a school and interview families to gain their perspectives</li> </ul>      |
| <p><b>Communicate with Families</b></p>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write letters of introduction to the parents of students in the student-teacher's classroom</li> <li>• Role play to handle difficult conversations with parents</li> <li>• Hold conversations with parents on parenting topics based on readings of common books</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Build Relationships with Families</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in dialogue with a panel of economically and racially diverse parents</li> <li>• Participate in parent-teacher conferences under the guidance of a mentor teacher</li> <li>• Create resource materials to share with parents</li> </ul>                              |

also discussed. Other topics in the series include multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, and understanding families.

- **Coordinated community services.** CUE understands that to promote student success, the community at large needs to be involved. CUE works closely with community groups such as nonprofit organizations, businesses, and social services to enhance the learning opportunities available in P-16 Zone schools, and preservice teachers are actively involved in this process. Because they work in the schools as part of their field experience, preservice teachers not only learn what kinds of resources are available in the area, but also how to 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, preservice teachers are often required to shadow or intern

with the parent liaison to enhance their abilities to work and collaborate with parents.

**Continuing professional development.** CUE faculty view themselves as part of a broader village in which they can learn and benefit from the lessons that others have acquired. Recognizing that many other cities have established similar urban partnerships, CUE has made a deliberate effort to share knowledge about promising practices with other initiatives. In 2008, Metro State began hosting the annual Great Teachers for Our City Schools National Summit, a conference for educators from across the country to discuss the challenges that urban schools and teachers face and strategies they can use in such areas as family engagement. Many alumni from the program attend this summit and find it an effective way to stay connected to their college after graduation.



Furthermore, CUE faculty made a purposeful decision to work across the entirety of children’s developmental experience. This decision meant integrating faculty from all grade levels and special education, many of which had previously operated separately. CUE also brought in faculty from the Metro State’s School of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, who had been engaged in content methods but not in other elements of teacher education. By encouraging faculty to work together and engage in conversations, CUE is creating a more cohesive community of professionals dedicated to the goal of student success.

### Bank Street College of Education

Bank Street College of Education, located in New York City, operates a graduate school that offers intensive master’s degree programs, predominantly in the fields of early childhood and elementary education, to more than 1,000 aspiring teachers and school leaders each year.<sup>29</sup> Bank Street has offered courses in family engagement for decades, and today, numerous course descriptions mention work with families.

**Standards for family engagement.** Professional early childhood associations recognize that best practice in early childhood education requires intensive family engagement. Head Start offers comprehensive standards for family engagement practice, the National Association for the Education of Young Children standards call for inclusion and integration of families into teacher preparation and professional development, and the Child Development Association (CDA) credential requires a significant amount of family-involvement training. To meet these standards, early childhood training associations are required to focus on family engagement. At Bank Street, the standards are implemented by requiring teachers to take specific classes related to family engagement and to participate in coursework in which family engagement is embedded throughout the content material.

**Curriculum.** Bank Street’s philosophy is built on the notion that teachers must develop a sound understanding of the importance of family engagement and embrace a positive outlook toward families to achieve professional success. The Bank Street approach underscores the importance of educating the whole child and with that,

understanding the full context of a child’s life outside the classroom. For this reason, families are front and center. In addition, teachers must develop the skills and abilities to work well with families. Teachers are often called upon to educate parents in small- or large-group settings about children’s progress or the school philosophy and curriculum. Thus, teachers need to understand how adults learn best and develop sound communication skills. These skills include an understanding of basic conflict resolution, how to speak with parents about challenging subjects, and how to communicate with parents from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

At Bank Street, these competencies are developed through family-centered learning and reflective communities:

- **Family-centered learning.** Family-centered learning refers to the idea that teaching about family involvement requires that preservice teachers actively engage with families and/or use case studies to deepen knowledge and acquire practical approaches to parent involvement. Bank Street does this in several ways:
  - o *Coursework.* Many courses at Bank Street contain a family component. For instance, “Curriculum Development and Sheltered Instruction in Dual Language/Bilingual Classrooms,” is a course in which education students are asked to complete a thorough community study, including taking oral histories, collecting extensive data on community characteristics, and interviewing community members. This experience allows preservice teachers to develop concrete knowledge about a community, as well as embrace openness to difference. Development of both traits is essential for teachers to achieve professional success in communities to which they did not originally belong or for which they lack context.
  - o *Practicum.* Preservice teachers in the early childhood special-education programs are required to complete a year-long practicum in which they observe and interact with a child in a family cultural context. Instead of just



observing children in school, 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 schoolwork, 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 and learn how to record the behaviors of children. For example, teaching students learn to draw genograms that capture family history, relationships, and occupational patterns and learn to develop rich case descriptions of the child and family. 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.

- o *Specialization.* Teaching students who choose to specialize in a particular area of education are required to understand families within the context of their specialty. For example, “Native Language Literacy for Spanish-Speaking Children,” a required course in the dual language/bilingual program at Bank Street, obliges each teaching student to work one-on-one with a child who is acquiring literacy. After assessing the child’s literacy level, the teaching candidate must conduct an in-home interview with the child’s parents about their family’s literacy practices.
- **Reflective communities that promote critical thinking.** All teaching students at Bank Street are required to complete a year of supervised field work and advisement. This work includes a field-based experience in schools or early childhood programs. As part of this experience, candidates are grouped with five or six peers and a faculty advisor who meet once a week as a group. This arrangement is neither a seminar nor a separate course, but rather a way for teaching candidates to come together and form connections with their peers, reflect on the commonalities of their experiences, and share insights on their work with children and families. Through these group meetings, dilemmas and experiences with families often surface.

In addition, Bank Street employs a number of adjunct faculty members who are also current practitioners. These faculty members promote reflective practice and are able to draw on current practical experience in helping teaching students understand different perspectives. For example, one adjunct professor is also a Head Start educational coordinator with experience facilitating reflective practice among Head Start teachers, including discussing parent–teacher relationships.

**Continuing professional development.** Bank Street has entered into a formal agreement with the Brazelton Touchpoints Center to offer professional development to early childhood educators across the state of New York. This continuing education program is expected to support early childhood care providers in establishing more collaborative, interactive, strength-based relationships with families.

### University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Each year, the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota (UMN) prepares more than 350 new teachers to enter the classroom.<sup>30</sup> UMN is one of 14 higher-education institutions in the Midwest funded by the Bush Foundation Teacher Effectiveness Initiative, a 10-year program designed to improve student achievement by transforming teacher preparation.<sup>31</sup> Upon surveying UMN graduates who were teaching in the field, faculty learned that while teachers felt prepared to teach, many did not feel ready to work with families. This finding provided impetus for UMN to focus on teacher preparation for family engagement as one of the core areas of the teacher education redesign. Through the Teacher Education Redesign Initiative (TERI), UMN began revamping its teacher education program to better prepare teachers for the twenty-first century classroom.

The redesign of teacher preparation through TERI is still in its formative stages, as the core content courses, teacher performance and assessments, and partner school policies and procedures are being worked toward completion. In the summer of 2011, the first group of teacher candidates will enter the redesigned program. As the initiative continues to develop, data will be collected



from both teacher candidates and partner schools to refine and improve programs and practice continuously.

As part of the TERI redesign process, UMN faculty members were divided into different committees, one of which was the Families and Communities Task Force. This task force is charged with examining the research, theory, and practice on the role of teachers in engaging families, and the training and assessments that are necessary to accompany this engagement. Historically, UMN has taken a leadership role in training teachers for family engagement through its parent educator training and preparation program. Minnesota is the only state that has legislation and funding for licensed parent educators in all schools throughout the state; thus, many students come to UMN for training to become parent educators. However, this training is isolated to one small program in the college. Thus, the Families and Communities Task Force has become an important group for professionals to build on the institutional knowledge of parent educator training and discuss what family engagement should look like across all areas of teacher education. Existing legislation has also provided an important foundation for the work, as one of the obstacles to integrating family engagement into teacher preparation is the limited focus on families in the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards.

As a key outcome of their effort, the task force produced the following recommendations for revamping the teacher preparation program to encourage students to embrace the family perspective:

**Curriculum.** Understanding families and communities should be woven throughout foundational curriculum for all preservice teachers. Faculty and project staff are taking a critical look at the foundational courses to make necessary and significant revisions aimed at creating more innovative and adaptive practices and knowledge. Looking across the curriculum and thinking about what competencies and skill sets students will need when they graduate, the college is engaged in highlighting the importance of family involvement from the very beginning of a preservice teacher's program of study. By conceptualizing families as experts and partners in student learning, the curriculum aims to help preservice

teachers understand how families and communities contribute to student achievement.

The redesign process must consider a range of competing topics and interests, accommodate state-specified teaching standards that dictate course content, and adjust to fit new ideas of practice-based learning and partnerships. That said, the redesign team is committed to preparing teachers to engage families and communities and having faculty discussions about how family engagement fits into the overall curriculum.

**Community collaborations.** Partnering with schools is one of the key areas of redesign under TERI. Partnerships with schools enable preservice teachers to gain firsthand experience in local school settings and to learn from the practice and expertise of mentor teachers. UMN is developing partnerships with professional development schools that serve as learning hubs for new teachers. In those schools, teaching candidates participate in guided field experiences and onsite courses and are mentored by supervising teachers. These partnerships play a particularly vital role in helping to prepare teachers for family engagement by enabling preservice teachers to work directly with families. When preservice teachers have the opportunity to see how effective teachers value and engage with families, they develop a stronger understanding of how to approach family engagement in their own educational practice.

By making school partnerships a critical element of its redesign, UMN is rethinking the traditional top-down relationship between schools of education and public schools, and the sequential preparation process from campus to classroom. By listening to what those at the school and district levels have to say about what they are doing to engage families and why it works, schools of education can expand the scope of their training and develop a broader understanding of what it means to engage families effectively.

**Evaluation.** The Teacher Performance Assessment is a tool being developed by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 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. 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.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In 1997, Harvard Family Research Project developed policy and practice recommendations to elevate the preparation of teachers for family engagement.<sup>33</sup> Since that time, the education reform landscape has changed, making it necessary to align teacher preparation and professional learning regarding 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 to participate in a global economy. Standards for student knowledge and skills are being aligned from early childhood all the way through college and career preparation. 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, that is, the proliferation of numerous programs 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 a real impact on student achievement and school performance.<sup>34</sup> The programs profiled in this brief bear witness to the importance of integrating knowledge and skills related to family engagement into the overall preparation of all teachers. 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. Policies to support this work can emphasize the approaches mentioned below.

**Support the development of standards for teacher knowledge and skills for family engagement.** National and state standards should provide clear guidelines on the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that teachers must possess to work with families effectively so that institutions of higher education, schools, and districts can adequately prepare teachers. The programs profiled in this brief consistently describe the need for families to be referenced in state, national, and accreditation standards, both to support the overall importance of family engagement and to address specifically the skills and dispositions teachers need to be prepared to work effectively with families.

These family-engagement practice standards would support not only institutions of higher education as they develop teacher preparation for family-engagement coursework, but also school districts as they develop ongoing professional learning systems and growth opportunity structures. For example, teacher-leader and teacher-coaching positions within schools and districts should be tied, in part, to competencies in working with and engaging families. Moreover, performance review systems should be developed to provide feedback to help educators improve their knowledge and skills of family engagement.

**Promote curriculum and coursework innovation to prepare teachers for family engagement.** In nearly all of the programs profiled, funds were awarded or leveraged to bring about innovative work. Whether in the form of mini-grants or large-scale, multiyear projects, policymakers can create or piece together competitive grants to allow and incentivize faculty members or those at the district and school levels to come together and rethink family-engagement coursework. Regional or state intermediary organizations, such as the PIRCs, can play a role in supporting this work and facilitating statewide learning.

Innovations can be linked meaningfully to federal education programs and priorities. The P-16 model from the Metropolitan State College of Denver serves as an example of how higher education can prepare teachers to support underserved students through federal programs such as Promise Neighborhoods.<sup>35</sup> Current public investments in student data systems also offer an



opportunity to prepare teachers to understand the uses of data not only for classroom instruction, but also for sharing information with and empowering families. Parents benefit from having information about student attendance, growth in learning, and overall achievement. These data also open the door for meaningful conversations in which parents can inform teachers about student interests and needs to help teachers individualize instruction; likewise, teachers can use student data to work with parents to develop ideas about home support for students.

**Build capacity for collaboration in preparing teachers for family engagement.** The programs profiled in this brief philosophically agree that for teachers to develop the skills, understanding, and attitudes needed to work effectively with families, they must have the opportunity to work with families directly, as well as to share and reflect on those experiences with other professionals. Policymakers can support the development of incentives to stimulate richer and deeper university–school and university–district partnerships so that preservice teachers have opportunities to work in schools with families and highly qualified and effective professionals. Policymakers can encourage university–district partnerships to create residencies and apprenticeship models so that schools and communities can become the laboratories in which teachers learn to work with, leverage, and empower families. Incentives can also encourage reflective dialogue among teachers and collaborations among faculty at universities to discuss best practices in preparing teachers for meaningful family engagement to improve student outcomes.

**Create incentives for continuing professional development.** Policies can help integrate continuous growth opportunities that link to family engagement. Teachers who are entering the workforce now expect the profession to offer growth opportunities that include access to professional learning communities and dedicated time to reflect on practice. Institutions of higher education can design programs that support novice teachers through such experiences in family engagement. For example, after graduation, Chicago UTEP graduates working in Chicago public schools receive three years of support in various formats,

including one-on-one coaching. Eventually, these graduates have opportunities to go on to become clinical instructors for a new cohort of interning teachers. In this way, graduates can continue to expand their family-centered learning long after graduation. Experimentation with models of this nature would help provide continuity between preservice and inservice training and allow for more streamlined professional development opportunities.

**Invest in research and evaluation.** More research and evaluations are needed to examine the specific areas where teachers need help, as well as to evaluate promising training and professional learning strategies and their impacts on teacher practices. This information will help improve curriculum, training strategies, professional development collaborations, and other elements designed to equip educators with the skills to partner with families.

Researchers must conduct rigorous studies on how teacher preparation in family involvement affects teachers' attitudes and beliefs about families during preservice and inservice. There is a need to understand what types of preparation strategies are effective for teachers working under various circumstances (e.g., socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic characteristics of schools). Moreover, evaluations should test how teacher preparation for family engagement relates to and affects student learning and achievement as well as parents' abilities to support children's academic progress. Investments should also be made to translate this evidence base into practical teaching and learning tools that can be disseminated across the field.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Lee Shumow, Jacqueline Minow, and Heidi Rosenberg for their insights in reviewing this paper. We also appreciate the information shared by Virginia Casper, Nancy Gropper, Jane Groff, Amy Hogan, Susan Walker, Esther Rodriguez, and Kavita Matsko about their respective institutions' work on teacher preparation for family engagement.

To learn more about the programs and resources discussed in the case studies section of this brief, please visit [www.hfrp.org/TeachingtheTeachers](http://www.hfrp.org/TeachingtheTeachers).



## (Endnotes)

- 1 Goe, L., Bell, C., & Little, O. (2008). *Approaches to evaluating teacher effectiveness: A research synthesis*. Washington DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality.
- 2 For a discussion of the benefits of family engagement at different developmental stages, please see Harvard Family Research Project's *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* publication series, available online at [www.hfrp.org/FamilyInvolvementMakesADifference](http://www.hfrp.org/FamilyInvolvementMakesADifference).
- 3 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; Epstein, J. L., & Sanders, M. G. (2004). Prospects for change: Preparing educators for school, family, and community partnerships. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81(2), 81–120.
- 4 Chavkin, N. (2005). Preparing educators for school-family partnerships: Challenges and opportunities. In E. Patrikakou, R. Weissberg, S. Redding, & H. Walberg. (Eds.), *School-family partnerships for children's success* (pp. 164–180). New York: Teachers College Press.
- 5 Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997.
- 6 Markow, D., & Pieteres, A. (2009). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Collaborating for student success*. New York: MetLife, Inc.
- 7 Johnson, J., Yarrow, A., Rochkind, J., & Ott, A. (2009). *Teaching for a living: How teachers see the profession today*. Naperville, IL & Washington, DC: Learning Point Associates & Public Agenda; Hart Research and Associates. (2009). *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Strategic messaging research*. Memo prepared for Supporters of Common Core Standards.
- 8 Katz, L., & Bauch, J. P. (1999). The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative: Preparing preservice teachers for family/school collaboration. *School Community Journal*, 9(1), 49–69.
- 9 Aud, S., Hussar, W., Planty, M., Snyder, T., Bianco, K., Fox, M., et al. (2010). *The condition of education 2010* (Publication No. NCES 2010-028). Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- 10 Rochkind, J., Immerwahr, J., Ott, A., & Johnson, I. (2008). *Lessons learned: New teachers talk about their jobs, challenges and long-range plans* (Issue No. 3: Teaching in Changing Times). Washington DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality & Public Agenda.
- 11 Hill, D., Jeffrey, J., McWalters, P., Paliokas, K., Seagren, A., & Stumbo, C. (2010). *Transforming teaching and leading: A vision for a high-quality education development system*. Washington DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.
- 12 Knopf, H., & Swick, K. (2008). Using our understanding of families to strengthen family involvement. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(5), 419–427; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997.
- 13 Behrstock-Sherratt, E., & Coggshall, J. G. (2010). Realizing the promise of Generation Y. *Educational Leadership*, 67(8), 28–34.
- 14 Coggshall, J. G., Ott, A., Behrstock, E., & Lasagna, M. (2009). *Retaining teacher talent: The view from Generation Y*. Naperville, IL & Washington, DC: Learning Point Associates & Public Agenda; Hill, Jeffrey, McWalters, Paliokas, Seagren, & Stumbo, 2010.
- 15 Graue, E., & Brown, C. P. (2003). Preservice teachers' notion of families and schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19, 719–735.
- 16 Flanigan, C. B. (2007). Preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities: An analysis of college of education faculty focus groups. *The School Community Journal*, 17(2), 89–109; Graue & Brown, 2003
- 17 Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., Streeter, R. T., & Mason, J. R. (2008). *One dream, two realities: Perspectives of parents on America's high schools*. Washington DC: Civic Enterprises, LLC.
- 18 Allensworth, E., Ponisciak, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2009). *The schools teachers leave: Teacher mobility in Chicago public schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 19 Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 105–130.
- 20 Kansas Parent Information Resource Center. (2011) *Resources for Schools*. Available at: <http://www.kpirc.org/resources/for/schools>
- 21 Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997.
- 22 To learn more about the PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships, please visit the National PTA website at [http://www.pta.org/family\\_school\\_partnerships.asp](http://www.pta.org/family_school_partnerships.asp).
- 23 Bergman, D. (n.d.) *Pre-service and in-service teachers' experiences and perceptions of family engagement in middle and high schools*. Unpublished manuscript.
- 24 Groff, J. (2010). *The teacher-parent relationship: Using professional development to improve family and community engagement* [Webinar presentation]. Available at: [http://www.nationalpirc.org/engagement\\_webinars/archive-webinar4.html](http://www.nationalpirc.org/engagement_webinars/archive-webinar4.html); Groff, J., & Knorr, S. (2010). *IHE quasi-experiment 2010 progress report*. Unpublished manuscript, Kansas Parent Information Resource Center.
- 25 University of Chicago Urban Education Institute. (2011). *Urban Teacher Education Program* [Web page]. Available at: <http://uei.uchicago.edu/teachers/utep/index.shtml>
- 26 Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- 27 Metropolitan State College of Denver Center for Urban Education. (2011). *Pre-service teachers* [Web page]. Available at: <http://www.metrostatecue.org/index.cfm/id/36/PreService-Teachers/>
- 28 Metropolitan State College of Denver Center for Urban Education. (2011). *Educators overview* [Web page]. Available at: <http://www.metrostatecue.org/index.cfm/id/51/>
- 29 Bank Street College of Education. (2011). *About Bank Street* [Web page]. Available at: <http://www.bankstreet.edu/aboutbsc/>
- 30 University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development. (2011). *Teacher Education Redesign Initiative (TERI)* [Web page]. Available at: <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/teri/>
- 31 Bush Foundation. (2011). *Bush Foundation Teacher Effectiveness Initiative* [Web page]. Available at: <http://www.bushfoundation.org/Education/TEInitiative.asp>
- 32 Minnesota Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. (2011). *Teacher Performance Assessment* [Web page]. Available at: <http://mnteachered.org/tpa>
- 33 Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997.
- 34 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.
- 35 Promise Neighborhoods is a federal program that provides funds to organizations to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children in distressed communities. For more information, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods>.



## About Harvard Family Research Project:

Since 1983, Harvard Family Research Project has helped stakeholders develop and evaluate strategies to promote the well-being of children, youth, families, and their communities. We work primarily within three areas that support children's learning and development—early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education. Underpinning all of our work is a commitment to evaluation for strategic decision making, learning, and accountability.

Building on our knowledge that schools alone cannot meet the learning needs of our children, we also focus national attention on complementary learning. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach, which integrates school and nonschool supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed.

### Harvard Family Research Project

Harvard Graduate School of Education  
3 Garden St.  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
(617) 495-9108  
[www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org)  
[www.twitter.com/HFRP](https://www.twitter.com/HFRP)

## About National PTA®:

Founded in 1897, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is comprised of more than five million members, including parents, students, educators, school administrators, and community leaders. With more than 25,000 local units, PTA flourishes in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Department of Defense schools in Europe and the Pacific.

As the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy association in the United States, PTA's legacy of influencing federal policy to protect the education, health, and overall well-being of children has made an indelible impact in the lives of millions of children and families.

Visit [PTA.org](http://PTA.org) for more information.

### National PTA

1250 North Pitt Street  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314  
(800) 347-4PTA (4782)  
(703) 518-1200  
[PTA.org](http://PTA.org)



**Harvard Family  
Research Project**

