



NATIONAL POLICY FORUM FOR
FAMILY, SCHOOL, &
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Bringing Families to the Table
Recommendations and Next Steps from the
National Policy Forum for Family, School, and
Community Engagement

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Research Project

NATIONAL POLICY FORUM FOR FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Speakers and Panelists

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FEATURED SPEAKERS:

Carmel Martin, Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development

James H. Shelton III, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement

Moderator: Karen L. Mapp, Lecturer on Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education

PANEL 1: What does family and community engagement look like in a new era of education reform?

Anthony S. Bryk, President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Ron Mirr, President, RM Consulting

Arthur VanderVeen, Chief Executive Officer, Office of Innovation, New York City Department of Education

Heather B. Weiss, Founder and Director, Harvard Family Research Project

PANEL 2: How can federal, state, and local stakeholders leverage existing and emerging legislation and programs to create systemic family engagement?

Carl Harris, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and State Technical Assistance, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

Jacqueline Jones, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning, U.S. Department of Education

Joan Lombardi, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Inter-Departmental Liaison for Early Childhood Development, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Heath E. Morrison, Superintendent, Washoe County School District

Alexa Posny, Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education

Gene Wilhoit, Executive Director, Council of Chief State School Officers

PANEL 3: How can educators and other stakeholders use student performance data to connect families and schools in meaningful ways?

D'Lisa Crain, Administrator, Department of Family-School Partnerships, Washoe County School District

John Q. Easton, Director, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education

Aimee R. Guidera, Executive Director, Data Quality Campaign

Thomas C. Schultz, Project Director for Early Childhood Initiatives, Council of Chief State School Officers

Bill Tucker, Managing Director, Education Sector

PANEL 4: What are the opportunities for engaging families in transforming low-performing schools?

Robert Balfanz, Director, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University

Charlotte Boyle, Superintendent, Creighton School District

Antonia Hernández, President and Chief Executive Officer, California Community Foundation

Robert L. Hughes, President, New Visions for Public Schools

Catherine Jordan, Program Manager, Afterschool, Family, and Community, SEDL

Minnie Pearce-Tate, Parent Representative and Parent/Community Engagement Consultant, National Coalition of ESEA Title I Parents

INTRODUCTION

“We recognize that as a country we have failed to put together the systems and supports that allow us to actually achieve our goals for getting families and parents involved in their students’ academic lives and in our schools. And education—public education, in particular—has paid the price for that, which means that our children have paid that price.”

– **James H. Shelton III**, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education

To be effective, family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) should be a shared responsibility among all parties, should be continuous from birth to young adulthood, and should take place wherever children learn—in the home, school, and community. Yet, until now, family engagement provisions in federal policies and programs have been piecemeal and insufficient. Efforts are often siloed within federal agencies and treated as simple to-do lists of activities to check off by school districts, many of which do not fully understand the contribution of family engagement to student learning.

Recognizing this problem, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) convened a National Policy Forum on Family, School, and Community Engagement in November 2010 to spark new ideas for federal, state, and local policies that can drive these opportunities. Over two dozen panelists engaged in dynamic, interactive discussions about the role of FSCE in education reform. This diverse group of parents, community members, education practitioners, philanthropists, and representatives from federal and state agencies shared ideas to help develop a policy strategy that fosters systemic, integrated, and sustainable FSCE in support of student learning. This more comprehensive form of FSCE represents a shift from previous thinking around engagement (illustrated in the Appendix on page 8). This report highlights the major themes and recommendations that emerged from forum discussions¹:

- Recognize family and community engagement as an essential ingredient of student success and meaningful education reform.
- Create capacity-building mechanisms to advance systemic family and community engagement.
- Develop concrete indicators of success for family and community engagement initiatives.
- Create opportunities for blended funding to promote greater cross-agency and cross-level program collaboration.
- Require comprehensive family engagement plans aligned with measurable outcomes in family engagement provisions in federal and state legislation.
- Provide clear expectations for how states, districts, and schools should engage families as part of federal grant programs.

¹ This paper, and the forum it discusses, build on ideas introduced in the forum working paper, *Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform*. Authored by Harvard Family Research Project, the working paper helped lay the foundation for the forum’s conversations about the role of FSCE in education reform by offering a framework based upon four decades of research and emerging innovations in the family engagement field. We invite you to read *Beyond Random Acts* alongside this report to learn more about how the changing policy landscape is making room for more systemic, integrated, and sustainable FSCE. The paper is available at www.hfrp.org/BeyondRandomActs.

- Use education data to promote meaningful continuous improvement, rather than for compliance purposes.
- Make data actionable by having them reveal how a child's skills are progressing over time, rather than simply providing performance assessments based on one-time tests.
- Emphasize data sharing as a key strategy to empower families to have meaningful conversations with school staff about their child's performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

How should family and community engagement contribute to a new era of education reform?

"There is no one silver bullet in education reform. By analogy, it can be thought of as like baking a cake. Which ingredient matters most? Sugar, flour, eggs, baking powder? It's kind of a silly question. Leave out the flour or you leave out the eggs, and it's just not a cake."

– **Anthony S. Bryk**, President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Recognize family and community engagement as an essential ingredient of student success and meaningful education reform. Anthony S. Bryk, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, noted that family and community engagement is a necessary piece of a school reform strategy that also comprises supports such as strong principal leadership, professional development, a student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance. As education reform initiatives are developed—whether at the federal, state, or district level—family and community engagement must be an integral part of the reform strategy. If FSCE is not explicitly included as part of a reform initiative's directives, it is less likely to be integrated in meaningful ways. Efforts to integrate family and community engagement in reform should be inclusive and take the following steps:

- Spend time trying to understand the challenges from the perspectives of the individuals who are experiencing them so that solutions are co-designed and not imposed upon families and communities.
- Relate to parents as equal partners in problem solving. Equal partnership does not mean that parents and educators take that same actions, but that they have an equal stake in the work and are at the table as partners.
- Share student performance data with parents to empower them to have meaningful conversations with school staff about what needs to happen to help individual students improve and to help schools create and implement lasting school-wide improvements.

As policymakers and school districts design school reform strategies that include a family and community engagement component, families need to be part of the development and planning process. Only then can policymakers and educators understand the issues that students and families face and work with them to jointly design solutions that engage families as equal partners. This people-centered approach to designing family and community engagement initiatives illustrates the importance of shared responsibility in systemic family and community engagement. When families feel that their involvement is valued and needed, they are more likely to develop active partnerships with school staff in support of student learning.

Create capacity-building mechanisms to advance systemic family and community engagement.

Without appropriate infrastructure or other mechanisms to drive and sustain family and community engagement, these strategies tend to devolve into a loosely connected patchwork of services and activities rather than serving as a cornerstone of education reform. Capacity building needs to happen at multiple levels—on the national/state level to help build support for family engagement, and on the local level with the practitioners who will actually implement family engagement strategies as part of their work. Effective capacity building involves the following actions:

- Collect evidence of and disseminate information about best practices in family and community engagement.
- Provide technical assistance to help schools and districts adapt such practices to address the needs of their communities.
- Guide evaluation efforts to assess whether family and community engagement strategies are having the desired effects.

Develop concrete indicators of success for family and community engagement initiatives.

Family engagement strategies need to include measurable goals that are linked to student achievement. These indicators need to move beyond simple head-counts of parents who attend an event or join an email list to instead use benchmarks that demonstrate the impact of FSCE strategies on student achievement. This helps the field to move beyond showing whether family engagement *occurred* to demonstrating what it *accomplished*, since purposeful family engagement that has the most impact on student learning. In addition, schools and policymakers need to understand the factors that hinder family engagement so they can design strategies to address these obstacles and create the conditions that allow parents to actively support their child's learning. Absent this understanding, family engagement strategies may fail to involve the parents who are most in need of assistance in supporting their child's academic growth. Policymakers can provide guidance and support for the development of indicators and benchmarks by convening an inclusive panel of researchers, practicing educators, and family and community members to develop indicators that determine whether strategies to engage families and communities are effectively addressing existing obstacles to engagement, and determine whether strategies to engage families and communities are effective and having an impact on student achievement.

How can federal, state, and local stakeholders leverage existing and emerging legislation and programs to create systemic family engagement?

“At the federal level, we have to be clear about what it is we expect when we provide a funding stream that’s truly dedicated to the engagement of our families, schools, and communities, and also have some measurable outcomes so that we know whether or not we’re actually accomplishing specific goals. And these goals really need to be tied to whether or not we see true academic achievement happening with our kids.”

– **Carl Harris**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and State Technical Assistance, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, USDE

Create opportunities for blended funding to promote greater cross-agency and cross-level program collaboration. Carmel Martin, Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development at USDE, noted that the federal government needs to move away from offering small, siloed funding streams with narrow purposes and strict requirements to instead offer larger, more

flexible funding that empowers families and local leaders to design strategies that work in their communities. Martin argued that “for too long, the tendency at the federal level has been to think of family engagement as a matter of a particular funding stream rather than putting in place a context for coordinated and aligned strategies that drive towards student outcomes.” Jacqueline Jones, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning at USDE, noted that the upcoming reauthorization discussions for programs such as NCLB–ESEA,² Head Start, and IDEA³ provide ideal opportunities for stakeholders to come together and promote blended funding and other collaborative mechanisms that would allow for more systemic family engagement. These collaborative mechanisms will help promote better coordination of family engagement efforts within and across different levels of the system.

Require comprehensive family engagement plans aligned with measurable outcomes in family engagement provisions in federal and state legislation. Family engagement provisions within federal programs must be robust and meaningful. Too often, the family engagement components of federal programs have been reduced to individual activities to check off a list, rather than real changes in the ways that schools and families partner with one another. The family engagement provisions within these programs can be made more rigorous in these ways: tie family engagement provisions to specific goals related to student learning, and include measurable outcomes to show whether programs are making progress toward and accomplishing those goals.

Provide clear expectations for how states, districts, and schools should engage families as part of federal grant programs. Carmel Martin noted that the USDE plans to embed family engagement throughout its proposals in systemic, ongoing, and meaningful ways. When designing grant competitions that include family engagement components, federal agencies need to provide clear expectations for how grant recipients should engage families as part of these programmatic initiatives. This helps move family engagement from the periphery to the center of proposed education reform plans, as applicants are required to think about how to engage families in meaningful ways as an integral part of their grant proposals. As Heath E. Morrison, Superintendent of the Washoe County School District in Nevada, noted: “This is not about being prescriptive, but rather putting out a framework for family engagement so that as states, districts, and schools are applying for these grants, they are looking at a rubric that is going to lead to action, rather than just words on paper.”

How can educators and other stakeholders use student performance data to connect families and schools in meaningful ways?

“We need to help educators, parents, advocates, and policymakers think about data not as a hammer, but as a flashlight.”

– **Aimee R. Guidera**, Executive Director, Data Quality Campaign

Use education data to promote meaningful continuous improvement, rather than for compliance purposes. For too long, education data have been used mainly for compliance purposes, which have resulted in little more than showing whether programs or educators were doing what was required of them. When used for continuous improvement, data can help parents understand what their child needs in order to strengthen core skills and address challenges; teachers understand what they need to adjust in their instructional practices or outreach efforts in

² No Child Left Behind—Elementary and Secondary Education Act

³ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

order to better serve students and families; and policymakers become aware of the impact of various strategies and can identify promising practices to consider taking to scale. Data sharing needs to be a dynamic process in which the people who receive data have the ability and authority to act on that information. It must also be an ongoing process that is woven into the fabric of what schools and programs do, not something that is only done at the end of the year or at the conclusion of an initiative, when it is too late for the data to highlight areas for improvement and to make any needed changes to programming.

Make data actionable by having them reveal how a child's skills are progressing over time, rather than simply providing performance assessments based on one-time tests. In order to be used effectively for continuous improvement, education data also need to be put in context and translated into action steps. Schools need to identify crucial, interconnected indicators of student growth and use these data to help families create support strategies to address learning difficulties and highlight areas of strength. Data sharing efforts can strengthen schools' and families' ability to partner with one another to promote student success in the following ways:

- Make data actionable by personalizing and revealing specific indicators of a student's progress and achievement, such as attendance, project performance, and gains in knowledge over time.
- Connect data points to action steps so that families can understand how their student's performance can be affected based on what they do with the information they receive.
- Use data sharing to have meaningful conversations between parents and school staff so that parents understand what needs to happen to help their student improve, and school staff inform parents about resources and services available to support student growth and address learning challenges.

CONCLUSION

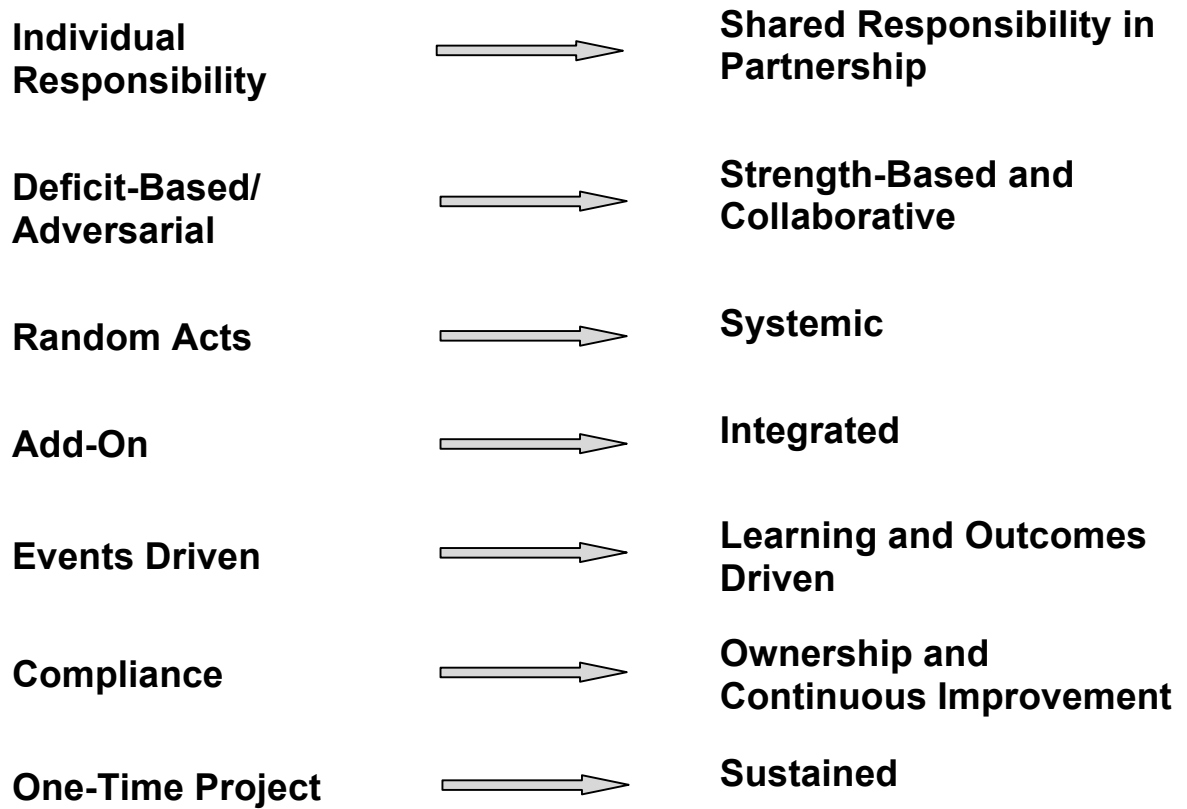
The discussions at the policy forum surfaced a number of common themes across the panels, including the importance of policymakers and educators working with families and community members to co-construct strategies to address educational concerns. The development of this shared responsibility for student success, in which parents are valued as equal partners in promoting student learning, is especially crucial when designing reform initiatives to turn around low-performing schools. The following recommendations represent overarching messages from the forum that policymakers and educators must keep in mind if efforts to improve low-performing schools are to succeed.

- **Recognize that in areas with chronically low-performing schools, rebuilding positive relationships between families and schools is a critical first step in successful turnaround efforts.** The relationships between families and schools in under-resourced, low-performing areas are often fraught with tension and mistrust. Families often complain that they are not involved in reform efforts until after decisions have been made about how to transform a low-performing school and, as a result, decisions that do not always take into account local families' needs and concerns. Excluding families from conversations exacerbates the feelings of alienation many already feel, and damages educators' opportunities to tap into families' abilities and willingness to partner with schools to ensure student success.

- **Involve parents in the decision-making process around education reform initiatives so they feel a greater sense of ownership over reform efforts.** Parents need to be engaged from the beginning in decision-making around instruction, staffing, and how the school is organized. The more that parents are involved in these critical components of education reform initiatives, the more likely they are to contribute to efforts to improve the school's functioning. This involvement helps parents feel as though they are acting *with* schools to effect change, rather than being acted *upon* by school staff and policymakers who did not value the community's input enough to involve them in discussions about school turnaround approaches.
- **Increase parents' capacity for informed advocacy to help empower them to understand and demand the changes they need.** Informed, targeted, and meaningful family engagement constitutes a vital component of education reform. Parents need to understand the issues that impact their students and communities, as well as know their rights regarding education reform options. Families in areas with low-performing schools are often angry about their children's educational prospects but lack the information they need to become informed advocates and agents of change. Helping parents to gain a more thorough understanding of a school's performance and the options available improve it is a necessary step in increasing parents' capacity to partner with the school and work towards common goals.

APPENDIX

Family Engagement: Reframing the Work⁴



⁴ This chart is excerpted from an August 2010 meeting of the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group.