

# **Reframing Family Involvement in Education: Supporting Families to Support Educational Equity**

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## Executive Summary

One of the most powerful but neglected supports for children's learning and development is family involvement both in and out of school. Over 40 years of steadily accumulating evidence show that family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children's school success, and that families play pivotal roles in their children's cognitive, social, and emotional development from birth through adolescence. However, resources for and commitments to promoting meaningful family involvement have been few, weak, and inconsistent.

Current education policy creates "random acts of family involvement" (Gil Kressley, 2008) instead of building a coherent, comprehensive, continuous, and equitable approach to involvement. This underscores the need for broader understanding of the potential benefits of more strategic and systemic investments in family involvement in education, particularly for disadvantaged children.

To reframe public understanding of the benefits of family involvement in children's education, this paper lays out a research-based definition and more equitable approach to family involvement and positions it as a key cross-cutting component of broader comprehensive or complementary learning systems in which families, schools, after-school and summer learning programs, school-based health clinics, and others have a shared responsibility for children's learning.

We define family involvement as co-constructed, shared responsibility because meaningful and effective involvement includes not just parents', caregivers', and teachers' behaviors, practices, attitudes, and involvement with the institutions where children learn, but also these institutions' expectations, outreach, partnerships, and interactions with families. Families, schools, and communities must together construct family involvement, actively taking part and sharing responsibility in building mutually respectful relationships and partnerships.

Public policy must champion and strengthen family involvement efforts so defined.

Beginning with a brief historical overview of conceptions of family roles and responsibilities in children's learning, this paper next offers a review of recent research on the ways in which expectations and support for family involvement have shifted, particularly with respect to economically disadvantaged and racial and ethnic minority families. Research suggests that low-income families have fewer opportunities for involvement and are, indeed, less involved in many ways.

The next section lays out a reframed approach to family involvement: Family involvement should be situated within larger complementary learning systems to facilitate continuity of learning across contexts and ages, increase the chances that families and other learning supports will share learning goals and commitments to the child's school success, and increase the opportunities to surround children with a linked network of supports so that if one area of support falters, others remain. Family involvement is necessary, but not sufficient: To be successful in school and in life, children must have access to multiple supports, including enriching early childhood experiences, effective schools, out-of-school time programs, and nurturing families. Emerging research suggests that these supports can be more effective when they are intentionally connected to each other.

This reframing is supported by a detailed review of the research and evaluation literature in order to make a research-based case for the benefits of comprehensive family involvement in student learning, including the effects of parenting practices, processes, and interactions; family-school connections, relationships, communication, and decision making; and supplementary or complementary learning settings such as after-

school or summer learning programs. We emphasize that no one support or strategy, but rather constellations of multiple localized family, institutional, and community behaviors and practices together contribute to learning.

Interventions that have been developed to increase parental involvement among low-income families and other at-risk populations are another important part of the knowledge base. The next section of the paper reviews the family involvement research and intervention literature, coupled with research on the barriers and supports for the involvement of disadvantaged and minority families. The interventions evidence provides much of the warrant for our proposed reframing of family involvement: Continuous, cross-context family involvement is necessary to meet the goal of educational equity.

To aid in achieving this goal, four research-based essential principles should be the foundation for future family involvement policy and investments:

1. Policy and other investments must approach family involvement as a shared and meaningful responsibility among multiple stakeholders and across different sections of society.
2. Family involvement must be understood as necessary but not sufficient for educational success and situated within a comprehensive or complementary learning system.
3. Family involvement efforts should operate from a developmental perspective and promote continuous involvement across key learning contexts.
4. Family involvement efforts should be systemic and sustained.

The recommendations and conclusion to the paper argue for a research-based and broadly shared approach to family involvement to guide policy development and practice. Family involvement within a complementary learning system is necessary to achieve educational equity and close achievement gaps; differences in opportunities

for family involvement precipitate or exacerbate unequal educational opportunities and outcomes.

The family involvement field does not now have the robust three-tiered infrastructure of national, state, and local supports necessary to develop strong, high quality, continuous, and accountable local involvement efforts. Nor is there sufficient monitoring of the implementation of federal family involvement mandates.

We believe that President Obama and his administration should use their bully pulpit to help the public understand the key role of families in shaping the life trajectories and school success of their children, and the public's shared reciprocal responsibilities. This should be followed by the development and implementation of a comprehensive and long-term family involvement strategy with resources for capacity building, monitoring and accountability, and professional development, as well as incentives for innovation and evaluation. It should also include a federal legislative audit to set the stage for a more integrated platform as part of the upcoming reauthorization of education legislation.

Real progress on family involvement will also require the development of a strategic research, innovation, and evaluation agenda. Conceptions of the role of research and evaluation are changing in major ways with new emphases on innovation, learning, and continuous improvement. This is particularly appropriate in cases where the intervention base is weak and the challenges are substantial and complex. Real progress will also require new investments in pre- and in-service professional development for family involvement for all involved in providing complementary learning services from early childhood educators and teachers to after-school providers. Investments in innovation must be co-developed by researchers and practitioners and based on partnerships among school practitioners, interdisciplinary university researchers, and social entrepreneurs—and we would add families to this mix.

## Overview

Research shows that children learn everywhere—not just in school. As recognition of this important finding grows, we and others are calling for new educational policies that reflect this understanding and for investments to expand the out-of-school learning opportunities that research shows are key to children’s learning, development, and school success (Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005a; Rebell & Wolff, 2009; Rothstein, 2004; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008; Wilder, Allgood, & Rothstein, 2008; see also [www.boldapproach.org](http://www.boldapproach.org)). Further, it is increasingly evident that access to quality out-of-school learning opportunities and supports is inequitably distributed along socioeconomic lines. This inequity contributes both to achievement gaps and to decreased chances that economically and otherwise disadvantaged children will reach their full potential. As a result, there is a need for greater public investments to ensure equitable access to these critically important learning opportunities. Finally, whether it is labeled “supplementary education” (Gordon et al., 2005), “complementary learning” (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005a), or “comprehensive educational opportunity” (Rebell & Wolff, 2009), we and others urge that in- and out-of-school learning opportunities and supports be systematically linked and aligned with each other to create mutually reinforcing and supportive learning pathways from birth through high school and beyond (Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes, & Malone, 2009).

In pursuit of this goal, one of the most powerful but also one of the most neglected supports for children’s learning and development is family involvement both in and out of school. As our review of the research will show, there are over 40 years of steadily accumulating evidence that family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children’s school success, and that families play pivotal roles in their children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development

from birth through adolescence. However, when parents are mentioned in the national dialogue about education reform, the tone is often one of blame, and family members are seen as a problem rather than an asset, particularly in the case of disadvantaged and ethnic minority families. From the national to the local level, resources for and commitments to promoting meaningful family involvement have been few, weak, and inconsistent.

As a result, current education policy tends to create “random acts of family involvement” (Gil Kressley, 2008) instead of building the more coherent, comprehensive, continuous, and equitable approach to involvement that research suggests could enable all families more effectively to support and contribute to their children’s learning, development, and academic success. This failure to create and test a more coherent approach reflects a lack of understanding of the many ways families do and could support learning when the supports and barriers to doing so are addressed; it underscores the need for broader understanding and discussion of the potential benefits of more strategic investments in family involvement in education, particularly for disadvantaged children. To reframe public understanding of family involvement and to stimulate further discussion, this paper lays out a research-based definition and more equitable approach to family involvement and positions it as a key cross-cutting component of broader comprehensive or complementary learning systems in which families, schools, after-school and summer learning programs, school-based health clinics, and others have a shared responsibility for children’s learning.

As our research review will show, meaningful and effective involvement includes not just parents’ and caregivers’ behaviors, practices, and attitudes and involvement with the institutions where their children learn, but also these institutions’ expectations, outreach, partnerships, and interactions with families on behalf of the child’s learning and development.

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Therefore, we define family involvement as a “co-constructed” concept and process centered on shared responsibility. Gordon (2005) has noted elsewhere that “Society has not equally prepared all segments of the population” for this shared responsibility (p. 328). Thus, we argue that there is a strong case for public policy to champion and strengthen family involvement efforts so defined, as well as for further development and testing of this approach, because these are essential elements in efforts to increase educational equity, close achievement gaps, and ensure that disadvantaged children develop the “intellective competence” (Gordon & Bridglall, 2006) and other skills they need for 21st-century success.

The paper begins with a brief historical research overview of shifts in expectations and support for family involvement in children’s learning, particularly with respect to economically disadvantaged and racial and ethnic minority families. In attending to the ways in which race, ethnicity, and social class affect parenting and family involvement, more recent research has increased understanding of the effects of societal and economic factors on families’ involvement in their children’s learning at home, at school, and in the community in order to promote their development and academic success. In light of this history and the accumulating research indicating the value of involvement as well as the barriers to it, the paper’s next section lays out our reframed approach to family involvement as a key component of comprehensive or complementary learning. We then present a detailed review of the research and evaluation literature through the lens of this broader definition of involvement in order to address the following questions: How do families support academic development and what kinds of supports are demonstrably related to academic development and school success? Is there evidence that family involvement interventions in fact pay off in better outcomes? What are the implications of the research and intervention literature for developing more evidence-based approaches to family involvement?

We believe the answers to these questions

provide the warrant for our proposed new approach and describe some promising examples now being tested in states and communities. We conclude with recommendations for new and greater strategic federal, state, and local investments in family involvement.



## Historical Overview of Conceptions of Family Roles and Responsibilities in Children’s Learning and School Achievement Programs

Public and community interest in and discussion of child rearing and of what families do to support their children’s learning are as old as human culture. Citing the consideration that writers such as Plato and Rousseau gave to parenting issues and responsibilities, Brim (1959) noted that childrearing is fundamental to society, and “thus like society’s economic system, religion, and politics, receives the attention of commentators upon the social order in every historical period” (p. 323). In the American colonial period, concern with family involvement in learning resulted in enforcing a 1642 Massachusetts law requiring families to make sure that their children learned to read and were taught a trade (Bremner, 1970). In his analysis of the roles of families and of the balance of responsibility for learning, Coleman (1968) reminds us that, in earlier centuries, families assumed responsibility for the welfare of their members from cradle to grave. He argues that “It was a welfare society, with each extended family serving as a welfare organization for its own members” (pp.7-8). Thus, it was in the family’s best interest to provide support for its own members; it was also in the family’s interest to see that its members became productive.

With the 19th-century transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, this focus of developmental responsibility for economic relations and commodity production on the family became less central. Coleman argues that this change was partly responsible for the emergence of public education in this period and thus for the shift in assignment of responsibility for learning, considered essential for the country’s economic productivity, from the family to the schools. For working class and under-resourced families, in particular, schools became the source of basic and formal education, and schools increasingly became the place where children learned. However, research (reviewed shortly in this paper) indicates that for middle and upper-class families and their more economically privileged children, the family, not just schools, continued to be seen as a key

source of support for learning and the development of personal, political, and social competence.

American society and public policy in the 20th century have placed an increasingly large responsibility on schools for the academic, social, and moral education of children, particularly those from disadvantaged families (Wells, 2006). Wells (2006) attributes “the American public’s love affair with education” (Aaron, 1978, p. 65) to a variety of factors including Americans’ antipathy toward other forms of social welfare and an ideology of focusing on education to provide a “hand up” rather than a “hand out”; the growth of the “cultural deprivation” view of poverty and a belief in schools as the best way to combat it; and the civil rights movement’s focus on educational access and school desegregation. All of these factors, along with deficit views of disadvantaged families and their capacity to support learning, have shaped conceptions of roles and responsibilities of families, schools, and communities with respect to learning; they are tied to issues and beliefs about race and the confounding of race and poverty in America. They have reinforced the view that schools alone are where children learn and have limited public and policy awareness of the significant role that family involvement plays in children’s learning and school success.

As will be shown in our subsequent more detailed review of the research findings about the central role of parents in children’s learning and in their educational trajectories from birth to adulthood, steadily accumulating research has made it increasingly clear that family involvement is a strong predictor of children’s development and school success. In 1966, a year after the passage of the landmark 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA) creating a federal role in education, the *Equality of Educational Opportunity Study*—more commonly known as the Coleman report—found that family background mattered more for children’s educational achievement than school

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characteristics, provoking debate and prompting a new wave of research on the role of families (Coleman et al., 1966).<sup>1</sup> Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory also highlighted the fact that children are not raised in a vacuum but rather are embedded within larger family, community, and societal contexts, which may be more or less replete with the concrete and emotional resources necessary for healthy development. More recently, research has found that early parenting practices are significant predictors of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps (Murnane, Willett, Bub, & McCartney, 2006; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998) and that parenting matters more than other environmental factors, including early childcare arrangements (Belsky et al., 2007) and even schools (Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996).

Recent developmental and behavioral genetics research, as well as research on brain development, confirms the importance of the family and of the ways in which it supports learning. While genetics research suggests that genes comprise parents' most significant contributions to children's development (Harris, 1998; Rowe, 1994; Scarr, 1992), parental behavior has also been found to have a considerable independent effect on children (Ge et al., 1996; Plomin, 1994; Plomin, Fulker, Corley, & DeFries, 1997; Rutter, Silberg, O'Connor, & Simonoff, 1999). Related findings from experimental studies (Baumrind, 1993; van den Boom, 1989) suggest that, independent of gene-environment correlation, substantial parental behavior changes are associated with corresponding modifications in children's behavior. In short, this research shows that both nature and nurture influence parenting and, by extension, children's development. In other words, parenting clearly does matter for children's growth and development (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Maccoby, 1999).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, substantial recent research on early brain development, summarized in the National Academy of Sciences report (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) underscores the importance of the family environment and processes for children's development.

## Recent Research on Involvement of Economically Disadvantaged and Minority Families

Promoting and supporting involvement among all families requires that we generate a nuanced and sophisticated understanding not only of family processes and the outcomes associated with them, but also of the contextual factors that influence involvement, particularly for ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged families. However, until recently, research into and understanding of parenting practices was limited in two important ways. First, the research was largely on white, middle-class samples, which both led to a skewed understanding of how parenting behaviors are affected by socioeconomic and other contextual factors, and limited awareness of how alternative behaviors by other groups might lead to positive child outcomes. Much of the research was guided by Baumrind's three-part typology of parenting as authoritarian, authoritative, or permissive, and it suggested a strong relationship between the authoritative type and various aspects of positive child development. Later research examining a broader sample suggested that particular aspects of authoritative parenting are differentially distributed across racial and ethnic groups and are related to positive developmental outcomes for some groups but not others (Brody & Flor, 1998; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Steinberg, Dornbush, & Brown, 1992). Some studies also found that authoritarian practices were sometimes protective, especially for children in dangerous neighborhoods (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder & Sameroff, 1999). Research looking at how class, race, school receptivity, and support for families' navigation of the education system affect African Americans' family involvement is shedding light on the interactions between parents' perceptions of school context and their educational orientation and practices (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

The second limitation, as noted by several researchers (Demo & Cox, 2000; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; McLoyd & Randolph, 1985), has been the long-

term use of deficit models, which examine problems, rather than the use of more strength-based models in the study of disadvantaged and ethnic minority families. These models have characterized ethnic minority parenting practices as deficient rather than as "adaptive strategies responsive to unique environmental and historical demands" (Garcia Coll & Pachter 2002). This deficits approach grew from earlier work by Lewis (1966), Moynihan (1965), and Rubel (1966). These findings, based on samples of low-income families with entrenched problems, were accepted without question and construed as representative of parenting characteristics within minority groups (Taylor, 2000). Baca-Zinn and Wells (2000) remind us that this deficits-based approach to examining parenting in ethnic and minority groups is based on the assumption that certain childrearing practices are more effective than or superior to others; this assumption has severely limited research on adaptive parenting practices.

Research in the past few decades has moved away from a dysfunction-based to a strengths-based approach, and it acknowledges, measures, and examines the ways in which particular contextual factors and forces, such as socioeconomic disadvantage and racism, affect racial/ethnic minority families. As a result, it is shedding light on family involvement practices and the factors that support and constrain them. Recent conceptual models designed specifically to examine ethnic minority parenting often focus on the effects of broader sociocultural contexts (e.g., racism, segregation, poverty) on parenting practices (Belsky, 1984; Garcia Coll, 2000; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; McAdoo, 1978; McLoyd, 1990; Ogbu, 1981). This has led to a more nuanced understanding of how families manage in the face of socioeconomic and related stresses (Harrison et al., 1990; Ishii Kuntz, 2000; Ogbu, 1981; Taylor, 2000). Jarret's work (1995, 1997), for example, identifies family processes that aim to bridge the African American community with the

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majority culture as a means of providing social mobility opportunities for youth living in neighborhoods with few resources (i.e., inadequate schools, housing, and municipal services) and many risks (e.g., crime, drugs, gangs, violence).

Research on poverty and on socioeconomic disadvantage in particular has examined a number of contextual factors and barriers to engaged parenting and family involvement in learning (Garcia Coll & Chatman, 2005; Moles, 1993). For example, research by McLoyd (1990) and McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, and Borquez (1994) exemplifies how variability in parenting strategies reflects the way that families react to the multiple stresses of poverty. Parents living in poverty or in economic stress, for example, experience higher levels of emotional strain and mental health problems (McLoyd, 1990, 1998), which can impair their ability to engage with and support children and increase their likelihood of using harsh or punitive parenting practices (Conger, Vonger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitebeck, 1992; McLoyd, 1990, 1998). Poverty constrains families' abilities to provide educational materials and activities. Disadvantaged families also experience more logistical barriers, such as lack of transportation and schedule conflicts because low-income jobs afford less schedule flexibility, paid sick time, and paid vacation time (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995; Garcia Coll & Chatman, 2005; Heymann & Earle, 2000; Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000; McLoyd et al., 1994; Mistry, Vandewater, & Huston, 2002; Moles, 1993). This research suggests that efforts to involve families in their children's learning at home and at school must address some of the poverty-induced barriers to involvement and reconsider the relationship between educational success and adequate social welfare provision (Rothstein, 2004; Wells, 2006).

Another major factor influencing parenting and family involvement is the discontinuity between many ethnic minority parents' indigenous cultural/social capital and mainstream culture and institutions (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Moll, 1994). Baca-Zinn and Wells (2000) identify social location or social class as another

source of discontinuity for ethnic minority groups. They and others (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Garcia Coll & Pachter, 2002) suggest that a minority person's social location (defined and shaped by racism, discrimination, prejudice, and oppression) is typically maintained by hegemonic institutions, policies, and practices. This may shift, however incrementally, in light of the demographic changes occurring in the United States that favor the growth of minority groups relative to the white population.<sup>3</sup> Understanding of the ways that minority cultures value learning and the transmission of knowledge to children, and of how mainstream culture devalues indigenous cultures, has led to new approaches including Moll's "funds of knowledge" approach, which uses information about family culture and practices to build family and school relationships and enrich classroom instruction (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005).

Research employing the lens of social, cultural, and polity capital is also increasing understanding of the barriers and, correspondingly, the supports that are important for effective family involvement in support of children's school-related learning. Economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority families often do not have the cultural and social capital valued by the dominant middle class society and therefore by schools (Bourdieu, 1977). As a result, disadvantaged families have less access to information about school policies, structures, and staff. Consequently they are not as likely to communicate with teachers, volunteer, or mobilize and act collectively in the face of problems; nor do they know how to make educational decisions and help students learn at home (Gordon et al., 2005; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Lareau (2003), for example, found that social class differences in parents' cultural capital influences children's cultural capital: working-class parents' child-rearing philosophy of "the accomplishment of natural growth" did not include the provision of academically beneficial and school-endorsed activities (such as extracurricular activities, tutoring, and summer camp)

that characterized middle-class families' "concerted cultivation" philosophy. Strodbeck (1964) called this difference in cultural and social capital the "hidden curriculum of middle-class families" in his early work on the issue.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority families are significantly less likely to be involved in learning at home and school for all of the above and other reasons, including parents' own negative experiences with school as children, educators' assumptions that poor and minority families do not want to be involved, and lack of teacher and administrator training to involve families (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, & Killings, 1998; Kohl, Lengua, McMahon, & The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2000; Lareau, 1987; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). While research on ethnic differences in family involvement is finding that ethnic groups vary both in the types of involvement they provide and in the ways that involvement strategies affect children's learning—a finding that may reflect the confounding of ethnicity and socioeconomic status—a number of ethnic groups are less likely to be involved, particularly at school (Chao, 1994, 1996; Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Craft, 2003; Keith et al., 1998; Mau, 1995).

These differences in social, cultural, and other forms of capital do not imply that disadvantaged and ethnic minority children and families are culturally deprived, but rather that they have not been exposed to the practices, experiences, and values that are validated by the hegemonic culture (Gordon, Rollock, & Miller, 1990). In other words, "society has not equally prepared all segments of the population" (Gordon, 2005). This significantly affects their ability to access necessary resources and relevant opportunities for their children. The irony of this self-perpetuating cycle is that the children most in need of educational capital are least likely to have access to it. Indeed, many families whose children are most at risk for educational failure have neither the access to nonschool learning supports, nor the experience to know that they matter, nor the

child-rearing philosophies that support them (Gordon et al., 2005; Lareau, 2003).

The increasingly nuanced research about the involvement of economically disadvantaged and racial and ethnic minority families also suggests both that there is a strong desire to be involved in their children's learning, and that when institutions reach out to engage them and address the barriers to involvement, families will be involved in ways that benefit their children's academic success. Research consistently demonstrates that families from all backgrounds report a desire to be involved, want their children to do well in school, and hope that their children will achieve a better life (Moles, 1993). Research also suggests that outreach from school, district, and community leaders is associated with higher levels of family involvement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Sheldon, 2005; Simon, 2004). Finally, some studies find that when disadvantaged parents do get involved, children benefit from this involvement more than their middle-class peers (Dearing et al., 2006; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Although further study is needed, these findings give us reason to believe that parents will become involved if they have access to appropriate supports and incentives and that their children will benefit. For this to happen, we believe a new, comprehensive approach to family involvement is necessary. We lay out our conception of it below.

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## A Comprehensive Approach to Family Involvement in Learning

As we noted above in our brief history and overview of the research on family involvement among disadvantaged groups, there is a common view that learning is what happens in schools and that children's learning is almost entirely the school's responsibility. This view is reinforced by education policy in general and by the emphasis on schools and school accountability in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in particular. We have also shown that the most under-resourced families and those most alienated by the hegemonic culture are least likely to view their involvement as key, whereas more affluent and academically sophisticated families, as Gordon (2005) has noted in previous writing on supplementary education, do not hold this belief. Rather, "they actively and deliberately orchestrate . . . varieties of educative experiences for their children, mediate their children's educative encounters, and activate specialized resources for their children as needed" (p. 332). Further, disadvantaged families and children have less access to many kinds of capital, including "polity capital," defined by Bourdieu (1986) as a sense of membership in and by the social order, which are critical to ensure the supports necessary for school success.

### Family Involvement as Shared, Mutual Responsibility

As Gordon (2005) has argued, children and families who lack polity capital do not feel they belong to the dominant group; nor does this group consider them members and include them. We believe that building polity capital—in this case a sense of shared mutual responsibility for learning—is the foundation for a new approach to family involvement. This undergirds our definition of family involvement as not just parents' and caregivers' behaviors practices, attitudes, and involvement with the institutions where their children learn, but also these institutions' expectations, outreach, and partnerships, and interactions with families on behalf of the child's learning and development. Both

families and society play active roles in building and sustaining family support for children's learning.

The society, through public policy and the policies and practices of institutions such as schools, is responsible for making the political, financial, and social investments that promote families' capacities and opportunities to support their children's learning. Families, in turn, are responsible for providing the time, energy, commitment, and other resources to support their children's learning. Families need not do everything nor all do the same things, but, with adequate supports, all families can and should act to support learning at home, at school, and in the community. Though we previously noted the need for more research with diverse families, the developmental research that is being conducted is making ever clearer just what families do that supports learning, intellectual competence, and school success. Effective parent involvement includes a range of actions from reading and talking with children and asking "What did you learn today?" to attending parent-teacher conferences and helping children and youth make good choices about what they do after school and in the summer. The foundation of shared responsibility for family involvement is the recognition that families are part of a dynamic system that supports or constrains their involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 1983; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). Social policies and structures affect the basic necessities of economic well-being (such as shelter, nourishment, and health care), which need to be in place for families to be supportive and for children to learn (Conger et al., 1992; McLoyd, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). Schools influence family involvement via outreach, opportunities, and expectations (Sheldon, 2005; Simon, 2004); while community-based institutions such as early childhood and after-school programs provide additional entry points for families. Businesses have an impact on involvement through schedule flexibility and time-off policies (Heymann & Earle, 2000) and by working with

families to construct feasible involvement strategies, even in the face of difficult work schedules (Weiss et al., 2003). Children are also agents of family involvement, via their invitations to parents, requests for help, and needs and skills (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Rudy Crew, most recently former superintendent of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, has articulated and operationalized this conception of mutual responsibility for family involvement: “To absolve parents of responsibility for their children is patronizing,” he writes. “If I believe that all kids can learn, I also believe that all parents can teach” (Crew & Dyja, 2007, p. 156). Based on his experiences in urban schools, he believes that the vast majority of parents—rich and poor alike—want to support their children’s learning, but many poor parents do not know how to do it effectively. To address this gap, he believes that schools and communities must help what he calls “supply parents” become “demand parents.” Crew characterizes supply parents as “very often poor and powerless and easily abused. . . . [They] often feel like outsiders in the very schools that are supposed to be serving them. . . . No one’s letting them into the knowledge core of the system, the things you need to know to make the school work for you, and they are not asking” (p. 154). Demand parents, on the other hand, “[d]emand things from their schools because they understand that they are indeed owed something and it is their responsibility to get it for their children” (p. 155). Crew believes that schools must help marginalized supply parents become demand parents and find a way to “play the game” (p. 154). Crew argues that parents, in turn, share responsibility for building relationships and creating consistency between home and school. He writes that schools can and should demand things of parents, including knowing how their children are doing, engaging in basic activities at home that are proven to help children learn, and communicating regularly with the school, not just when their child encounters problems.

In emphasizing both societal and familial responsibilities for children’s learning, the framework

of mutual responsibility moves away from the limitations of past approaches. It finds a balance between deficits-based approaches, which have tended to blame the victim and make value judgments about effective parenting, and perspectives of “difference” and adaptation, which place sole responsibility on schools to adapt to families’ cultures and learning styles and “make a ‘politically correct’ apology” (Gordon, 2005, p. 328). In order to enable and expect involvement among disadvantaged families without blame or stigma, policies and practices must address affordances, opportunities, and supports for involvement. Further, this involvement is more likely to lead to better child outcomes when it is enabled by and nested in a system of comprehensive supports.

To operationalize this shared responsibility for children’s learning and school success, families, schools, and communities must construct family involvement together, actively taking part in and sharing responsibility for building mutually respectful relationships and partnerships. Research suggests that “co-constructed” family involvement relationships are characterized by trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002); shared values (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1991); ongoing, bidirectional communication (Eccles & Harold, 1993, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill, 2001); and mutual respect (Lightfoot, 2003). Such relationships have benefits for both parents and children. For example, research suggests that home visitors who provide early childhood family support and education build a trusting relationship, and that when this occurs, parents describe the visitors as “like family” (Weiss, 1993). The power of a trusting relationship is also exemplified in parents’ reporting that the presence of trusted after-school providers can increase their comfort and enable better communication during parent-teacher conferences (Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffey, 2006). Such mutual, trusting family involvement relationships can improve the academic adjustment of children (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Lightfoot, 1978; Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004/05; Weiss, Dearing, Mayer, Kreider, & McCartney, 2005).

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## Family Involvement Across All Learning Contexts and Age Groups

Further, a comprehensive approach to family involvement requires more than just volunteering and participation on committees. This approach emphasizes not only shared responsibility, but also a broader definition of family involvement not limited to involvement just for school-aged children or only in school. Our subsequent review of the developmental and intervention literature, organized around the roles family involvement plays at different developmental periods, indicates there is substantial evidence that family involvement is an important predictor of child development, learning, and school success from birth to adulthood. Therefore, policies and practices that support involvement must take a developmental view, beginning early and creating sustained and well-supported family involvement pathways from birth through high school and perhaps beyond.

The evidence also indicates that aspects of effective family involvement practices change in response to children's changing developmental needs (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). As children get older, parents and caregivers become less involved in instrumental support and supervision, but more involved in ways that promote autonomy and help launch children into the next stages of life (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey 2000; McCaslin & Murdock, 1991; Simon, 2004). The ways in which institutions support family involvement should also change as children develop and move on, for example to middle and high school. As children get older, many families report feeling less welcome in increasingly large and bureaucratic schools and less able to help with schoolwork (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Building family involvement pathways that begin at birth with support for parenting, continue with involvement in early childhood programs, and continue further with involvement in school, after-school, summer learning,

and other community supports for learning, is key.

There is also increasing evidence that family involvement is important to support learning not just in school, but across the multiple contexts in which children learn, including after-school programs, community centers, libraries, and faith-based institutions, and that involvement in one leverages children's access to multiple supports as well as broader family involvement. For example, Celano and Neuman's (2008) research on the differences in summer library use between more and less economically advantaged children indicates that even when the latter have equal access to libraries, their use differs in important ways. Low-income children choose books with less print and lower reading levels, and they spend less time with a helpful family member or caregiver helping them access challenging and enriching information in books or with the computer. Celano and Neuman's research indicated that more-advantaged children read three times more lines of print than their less-advantaged peers. As these authors note, children and youth today access a great deal of information outside the classroom on their own time, but children in less-advantaged neighborhoods have both less guidance and less access to much less information. Thus both summer learning loss and overall achievement gaps are enlarged.

Supporting family involvement in children's learning across contexts is also important because families are key in helping children and youth access nonschool opportunities. Recent research suggests that parents and other caregivers play a critical role in whether or not children participate in after-school programs (Kakli et al., 2006; Little & Lauver, 2005; Wimer, Bouffard, Caronongan, Dearing, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). They also mediate and scaffold those learning experiences (Gordon, 2005). As our subsequent research review suggests, family involvement in after-school and summer learning can leverage involvement in other complementary learning settings such as schools, and it can lead to families' both encouraging



and reading more with their children. Research such as this reinforces the importance of approaches to family involvement that cut across learning contexts to support parent involvement pathways across context and developmental time on behalf of children's learning and school success.

An approach to family involvement that emphasizes shared responsibility and cross-age and cross-context involvement pathways is thus an essential component of larger comprehensive or complementary learning systems.

### **Family Involvement Embedded in Complementary Learning Systems**

As noted at the outset, family involvement should be situated within and be an integral part of a comprehensive or complementary learning system wherein in- and out-of-school learning opportunities and supports are linked and aligned with each other to create supportive and mutually reinforcing learning pathways from birth through high school. Family involvement, then, is essential to a complementary learning system, and is potentially more powerful when it is part of such a system. This positioning of family involvement within a shared circle of responsibility increases the likelihood of access to and maximization of the value of multiple learning resources for children. Complementary learning facilitates continuity of learning across contexts and ages, and increases the chances that families and other learning supports will share learning goals and commitments to the child's school success. It increases the likelihood that all involved with the child will reinforce and support family involvement, and surrounds children with a linked network of supports so that if one area of support falters, others remain to prevent the child from falling through the cracks.

Second, complementary learning systems facilitate the creation of redundancy in key supports for the learning and development of economically disadvantaged children, which is vital for success. As Gordon (2005) has noted, most complex systems that

achieve effectiveness and stability are characterized by redundancy—that is, by the existence of back-up or alternative components for all critical mechanisms in case of failure in the primary system. Just as biological and mechanical systems routinely employ this principle, social systems—especially those involving developing children—require redundancy. At best, the components of a redundant system should complement each other; at the very least, they should serve a compensating function. Recent research suggesting that children whose parents are more engaged and more involved in their schools are more likely to attend after-school and youth programs suggests the importance of redundancy and of multiple familial and nonfamilial means to enable children to access key learning opportunities and supports.

A third reason for situating family involvement within a broader complementary learning system is that we view family involvement as a necessary, but not sufficient—part of a larger system of supports for children's learning and development. The growing national movement for comprehensive learning supports builds on a long history of social science research demonstrating the role of multiple contextual influences, including families and other out-of-school supports on children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Sameroff, 1983; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975; Steinberg et al., 1996). Research continues to demonstrate that there is no single solution for ensuring academic achievement. To be successful in school and in life, children must have access to multiple supports, including enriching early childhood experiences, effective schools, out-of-school time programs, and nurturing families. These supports are not mutually exclusive; indeed, emerging research suggests that they can be more effective when they are intentionally connected to each other (Bouffard, Little, & Weiss, 2006; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005a; Weiss et al., 2009; Weiss & Stephen, 2009) through mechanisms creating comprehensive systems and pathways for children and families.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we argue here and elsewhere (Weiss

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et al., 2009) that elevating the importance of family involvement for children’s learning and development and situating it within a complementary system is necessary and essential for achieving educational equity and closing achievement gaps. There is growing evidence that differences in opportunities for family involvement precipitate or exacerbate unequal educational opportunities and outcomes. As previously noted, disadvantaged and some ethnic minority parents experience more barriers to supportive parenting and family involvement in education and are less likely to be involved in many ways that benefit their children’s learning (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007; Garcia Coll & Chatman, 2005; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Horvat et al., 2003; Keith et al., 1998; Kohl et al., 2000; Lareau, 1987; Moles, 1993; Stevenson & Baker 1987). Research by Ferguson (2007) and others suggests that early parenting practices and behaviors play a role in establishing achievement gaps (Heckman, 2008). Further, disadvantaged and minority children, who achieve less, on average, than their more-advantaged white and Asian-American peers, face a number of educational inequities that are the result of what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) has called a compounding “educational debt” in America. They are more likely to attend under-resourced schools with less qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2004a, 2004b), and they are less likely to have access to and participate in other complementary learning supports available to more advantaged children, including enriching out-of-school time experiences (Pedersen & Seidman, 2005; Wimer et al., 2006). They lack equal access to necessary physical and mental health services (Rothstein, 2004). For all of these reasons, we argue for positioning family involvement as an essential component of complementary learning systems designed to support the development and school success of economically and otherwise disadvantaged children, and thereby reduce achievement gaps. As the research review below will suggest, there is a powerful research-based case for family involvement *per se*—and an increasingly powerful case for positioning it within a complementary learning framework.

## Benefits of Comprehensive Family Involvement for Student Learning

Reviews of research on family involvement typically focus on family involvement in school, but in accord with the new comprehensive approach to involvement we have outlined, we have broadened our focus to examine what is known about the ways in which family involvement contributes to learning and school success from birth through high school, across learning contexts, and with respect to shared responsibility for involvement. We first review naturalistic studies and then evaluations of intervention efforts designed to increase involvement. As we noted earlier in the paper, we are mindful of the limits of existing research on the involvement of disadvantaged and minority families and of the need for more research, especially on the strategies that support such involvement. It is also important to acknowledge that, relative to the number of interventions, there are few evaluations and even fewer rigorous ones with experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. Because family involvement policy has created “random acts of involvement” rather than comprehensive efforts, the bulk of existing evaluations are of short-term programs rather than the broader, long-term, and sustained pathways for which we argue here. Finally, we call attention to important literature distilling research and practice experience and sharing lessons learned to guide new and existing interventions. We do not review that literature here because we have chosen to focus on the literature establishing empirical links between family involvement and children’s learning and development in order to make the strongest possible case for its elevation in educational policy and investments (see, for example, Allen, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Lightfoot, 2003).

While it is clear that more rigorous evaluations of both programmatic and more long-term systemic approaches are highly necessary for the family involvement field, the existing research has increased our understanding of how family involvement,

positioned as a key component of comprehensive learning systems, and across an array of settings, institutions, and relationships—home visitation, early childhood programs, schools, communities, and after-school and summer programs—contributes to and leverages children’s learning and development and increased family involvement. Our review of the research and the evaluation base, along with those of others (Caspé et al., 2006/07; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jaynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Kreider et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 2006), indicates that family support and involvement matter from cradle to career and across learning contexts, and that a range of contextual factors constrains or enables this involvement. The research also underscores the demonstrated and potential benefits—as well as the challenges—of involvement for low-income and minority families.

We have organized the research into three general areas: studies of things that parents do through their parenting practices, studies of things that parents and schools do together, and things that parents, schools, and studies of other complementary learning supports do that enable children’s development, academic achievement, and school success. Our review indicates that, in the first area, parental responsiveness and emotional support,<sup>5</sup> cognitive stimulation in the home, academic socialization, and providing structure and support for learning are associated with academic achievement and school success. In the second area, positive family–school relationships, which are created through intentional efforts to build home-school connections and communication, can also promote in-school learning. While the research on ways in which family involvement in school governance and decision making is limited, it does suggest that this type of involvement leverages greater family and community involvement in ways known to affect children’s academic achievement. Lastly, we examine the relatively new research on family involvement across

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complementary learning contexts and the ways in which complementary learning promotes involvement and access to resources that contribute to school success. Although we have divided the research into these three broad categories, we emphasize that constellations of multiple localized family, institutional, and community behaviors and practices together contribute to learning.

## Parenting Practices, Processes, and Interactions

A substantial body of research indicates that parental responsiveness and emotional support are related to learning and school success. Beginning at birth, parents and other caregivers support learning by engaging with their children in informal interactions that are warm and emotionally supportive. In early childhood, parents' responsiveness fosters the social, emotional, and cognitive building blocks of learning (Als, Tronick, & Brazelton, 1979; Bowlby, 1969; Trevarthan, 1977). During middle childhood and adolescence, emotional support, trust, and open communication are associated with academic expectations and identity, positive behaviors, and academic achievement (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Morrison, Rimm-Kauffman, & Pianta, 2003; Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2005; Simpson, 2001). Baumrind (1993) and others' research on the combination of emotional responsiveness, "demandingness," and control suggests that children achieve more when their parents and caregivers are authoritative (highly responsive and demanding with low levels of intrusive and punitive behaviors) rather than authoritarian (highly restrictive and controlling with low levels of warmth and responsiveness). However, as we noted earlier, more recent research has highlighted the important role of culture in effective parenting approaches. African-American children and adolescents appear to benefit more from a style that is "more demanding and less acquiescent to child demands" (Mandara, 2006); some researchers suggest that the authoritarian style that is most adaptive for these groups (Lamborn, Dornbusch & Steinberg, 1996; Steinberg et al., 1996; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch

& Darling, 1992), but others have recently suggested that the most adaptive pattern for African Americans is qualitatively different from the classic authoritarian/authoritative distinction—that is, it is warm but strict, without the harsh or punitive aspects of the authoritarian style (Mandara, 2006). Research has also demonstrated that parental capacity for emotional support is influenced by families' life contexts. For example, families experiencing economic hardship may be more likely to engage in harsh or punitive parenting practices (Conger et al., 1992; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Elder et al., 1995; Jackson et al., 2000; McLoyd, 1990, 1998; McLoyd et al., 1994; Mistry et al., 2002).

A large body of research also points to the importance of parent or caregiver provision of cognitive stimulation in the home. Beginning at birth, parents' engagement in children's play is associated with literacy development and academically relevant skills such as independent and prosocial behaviors (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002; Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 1999; Tamis-Lemonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). When parents provide cognitively stimulating home environments, their children develop stronger academic skills and demonstrate higher achievement (e.g., Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Cunha & Heckman, 2006; Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002; Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005; Nord et al., 1999; Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2004). One way parents provide cognitive stimulation is through supplying and interacting with materials such as books and games. A study by Jacobs and Bleeker (2004) showed that when parents of elementary school children purchase math- or science-related items or engage in math or science activities with their children, those children participate more often in math or science activities and maintain an interest in math over time.

Language use in the home is particularly important and associated with long-term academic benefits: the number of words used, the complexity of speech, and parents' efforts to engage children are all positively associated with subsequent cognitive and linguistic development (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Britto,

Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). Shared book reading also has strong cognitive benefits, including language growth, emergent literacy, and reading achievement, (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). For example, children whose parents read to them at home recognize letters of the alphabet and write their names sooner (Nord et al., 1999). These findings are not solely attributable to children's exposure to written words; parental interaction is important: adults talk in more complex ways while reading picture books than in normal conversation (Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Hoff, 2006).

Given the evident benefits of responsive parenting, cognitive stimulation, and conversations in the home, findings that children of lower socioeconomic status are exposed to less educationally rich home environments are of concern. The ability to provide materials such as books and toys is clearly dependent on socioeconomic status. Lower-SES families also demonstrate less frequency and complexity of language use, and fewer educational discussions. For example, Hart and Risley's seminal (1995) study found that young children with middle-class parents heard an average of 2,153 words per hour, compared with 1,251 words per hour among working class families and only 616 words per hour among poor families. By age three, the cumulative vocabulary for the three groups of children demonstrated corresponding gaps: about 1,100 words for middle-class children, versus 750 words for working-class children and just above 500 for poor children. Although limited, there is some evidence of similar patterns with older children. Lareau (2003) found that working-class families are less likely to engage in sophisticated dialogue, are more likely to issue commands, and are less likely to encourage their children to question authority than are middle-class families.

Parents also promote their children's learning through academic socialization—that is, conveying to their children regularly and in multiple ways that they value education and have high expectations for

their learning and educational attainment. When children perceive that their families value education, they demonstrate higher motivation, perceived competence, expectations, and effort (Eastman, 1988; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Marjoribanks, 1998; Sands & Plunkett, 2005; Seginer, 1983). Children also demonstrate more adaptive academic behaviors when their families help them feel competent, teach them that intelligence can be increased over time, and model the role of curiosity in learning (Bouffard & Hill, 2005; Frome & Eccles, 1998; Leibham, Alexander, Johnson, Neitzel, & Reis-Henrie, 2005; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2000). Parents' expectations for their children's achievement and future educational attainment are strongly related to academic success, especially during adolescence (Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Sui-Chu & Wilms, 1996; Trusty, 1999).

Shared book reading and linguistically rich conversations convey parental expectations and values, but parents use many other socialization strategies as well. In middle childhood and adolescence, parent-child discussion about current and future education is associated with a range of positive academic outcomes including higher grades and achievement test scores (Catsambis, 2001; Desimone, 1999; Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Keith et al., 1998; Ma, 1999, 2001; McNeal, 1999; Sui-Chu & Wilms, 1996; Trusty, 1999). Supportive educational discussions are especially critical during adolescence, as teenagers face increased social and academic pressures and important life decisions (Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Kreider et al., 2007). For example, discussions with parents help adolescents make choices about out-of-school time activities and plans for college and work (Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Kreider et al., 2007), and most adolescents obtain most of their information about college preparation from parents. This finding highlights an important issue for practice and policy: many families do not have access to knowledge about college preparation and application, particularly those who have not attended college or were not educated in the American system, and building such knowledge is important to ensure equity of access for all students.

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Structure and support families provide at home are further important predictors of learning and school success. When families create regular routines, eat dinner with their children, limit TV watching, monitor activities, and manage learning activities, children demonstrate better academic outcomes (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddell, 2006; Bradley & Caldwell, 1976; Clark, 1983; Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Perry, 2004; Rankin & Quane, 2002; Spera, 2006; Taylor, 1996; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). Monitoring is related to supervision and evolves according to the child's developmental phase. Parents and caregivers usually practice more vigilance with younger children, while they tend to focus on knowing what the child is doing and with whom he is doing it as he gets older (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). Although too many rules may be perceived as controlling, an optimal amount of monitoring helps parents and caregivers know when to intervene and is associated with academic benefits (Catsambis, 2001; Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001; Rankin & Quane, 2002; Rodriguez, 2002; Sartor & Youniss, 2002; Simons-Morton, & Crump, 2003; Spera, 2006). However, the effects of monitoring and rule setting may vary according to child and contextual characteristics. For example, youth living in dangerous neighborhoods appear to benefit most from strict rules and limit setting (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

Similarly, the effects of homework involvement vary, based on the child's age and specific parental behaviors (Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, & Walker, 2001). Homework involvement is related to positive outcomes when it supports children's autonomy, self-management, and self-regulatory skills, and when parents use a positive and encouraging tone that emphasizes mastery of skills over performance (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2006; Pomerantz, Wang, & Ng, 2005; Xu, 2004; Xu & Corno, 2003). However, involvement that is perceived as controlling, intrusive, or indicative of low competence—particularly during adolescence—is related to negative outcomes (Cooper, Jackson, Nye, & Lindsay, 2001; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2000). As many as two-thirds of parents engage in some inappropriate

form of homework involvement (Cooper et al., 2000), and many parents—especially parents of adolescents and parents with low levels of educational attainment—feel insecure about their ability to help with homework (Eccles & Harold, 1993). These findings underscore the need for parents to learn how to scaffold their children's skills appropriately (Caspé et al., 2006/07).

### **Family–School Connections, Relationships, Communication, and Decision Making**

Family involvement that is based on a foundation of shared responsibility for learning on behalf of better outcomes for the child is critically important; this is reinforced by the research on family-school connections insofar as it shows that when families and schools connect, build a relationship, and communicate meaningful information, children do better in school. Some research and much practical experience indicate that schools must reach out to engage economically and otherwise disadvantaged parents. When schools make these efforts, they increase the chances of building effective relationships as well as more sustained family involvement pathways across a child's school years.

From preschool through high school, positive family-school relationships promote information sharing, convey to children the importance of education, and increase children's educational expectations and achievement (Falbo et al., 2001; Rodriguez, 2002; Steinberg et al., 1996; Trusty, 1999). Family-school communication is fundamental to these relationships and has a positive relationship with student achievement (Anguiano, 2004; Catsambis, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). When studies have found a negative relationship between parent-teacher communication and achievement, it was usually explained by students' academic or behavioral problems, suggesting that the problems drove both the communication and the poor achievement, rather than communication leading to poor achievement (Catsambis, 2001; Desimone, 1999; Sui-Chu & Wilms, 1996). These findings show that families and schools

often communicate only when there are problems, despite the fact that communication is particularly beneficial when it is ongoing, bidirectional, and focused on progress as well as problems (Lopez et al., 2004/2005). Research also demonstrates that contextual factors, such as time, language, and logistical constraints, play a role in whether and how often positive communication occurs (Lightfoot, 2003). Families of lower socioeconomic status are particularly unlikely to have ongoing contact with schools (Kohl et al., 2000; Lareau, 2003; Stevenson & Baker, 1987), yet they are more likely to be contacted when problems arise (Lareau, 2003), which can create a negative cycle of involvement.

Family involvement at the school, including attendance at parent-teacher conferences and volunteer involvement in school activities, builds relationships, equips families with information to make educational decisions, provides a venue for families to demonstrate their support and advocate for children, and is associated with positive academic outcomes (Barnard, 2004; Dearing et al., 2006; Hill & Taylor 2004; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Jeynes, 2005; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Moon-Ho, 2005). Involvement at school is predicted by a combination of outreach and invitations from the school, convenient opportunities, parental self-efficacy, and parents' beliefs about their appropriate role in educating their children (Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997), which vary across cultures (Chao, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Garcia Coll & Chatman, 2005; Moles, 1993). When families do get involved at school in these and other ways, those who have traditionally felt marginalized can gain voice and presence. For example, in some recent studies, many African-American parents have reported that motivations for getting involved in the school building include showing that they value education, monitoring teachers, and establishing their authority (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

With the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, the federal government assumed important roles in education and, from then to the

present, federal legislation has specified an advisory or a governance role for parents in schools, most recently with the mandate for family involvement in school improvement councils. Although research is not conclusive on whether students benefit from family participation in school governance (e.g., committees, councils, PTAs, and PTOs), it suggests that these activities can promote mutual responsibility for family involvement, build families' social networks, and give voice to historically underrepresented families. For example, minority representation on school councils is related to greater parental satisfaction and student achievement among minority families and to greater minority representation on the school staff (Marschall, 2006). These findings may have implications for reducing the exclusion that many minority and low-income families experience relative to school leadership, decision making, practices, and policies. Such exclusion is reinforced by the types of social and cultural capital that are most valued and rewarded by schools.

More recently, researchers have been examining family and community organizing around education, particularly collective family involvement and mobilization efforts among traditionally marginalized community members in order to promote school accountability and educational equity (Fruchter & Gray, 2006; Lopez, 2003; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; Warren, 2005). Until recently, there have not been rigorous studies of the impact of community organizing on student success. A recent six-year mixed-methods study of seven diverse community organizing programs found several positive outcomes, including increased family engagement and involvement, improved school climate and policies, and improved student achievement, engagement, and behavior (Mediratta, Shah, McAlister, Fruchter, Mokhtar, & Lockwood, 2008). In addition, several other qualitative studies suggest small, positive improvements as a result of such community organizing programs, including better school environments and more resources, greater student access to supplemental programs, and higher student achievement (Gold & Simon, 2002; Mediratta, 2004; Mediratta & Karp, 2003; National Center for

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Schools and Communities, 2002; PICO National Network, n.d.; Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2005).

### **Family Involvement in Supplementary/ Complementary Learning Settings**

As recent pioneering research on family involvement efforts in nonschool or complementary learning settings is beginning to show, efforts to involve families can contribute to children's school success, build cross-context reinforcement and commitment of family involvement, and begin to create longer-term family involvement pathways supporting learning and school success across a child's school career. Recent research on early childhood family involvement and the transition to kindergarten shows that when early childhood programs foster co-constructed involvement with both families and kindergarten teachers, they can facilitate educational transitions from preschool to elementary school, establish long-term involvement patterns for parents, and promote children's language, social, motor, and basic academic skills (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Izzo et al., 1999; Kreider, 2002; Mantzicopoulos, 2003; Marcon, 1999; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Ou, 2005; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999; Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000). Educators play a central role in this process. For example, when kindergarten teachers involve parents and other stakeholders before school starts in the fall, parents initiate more involvement and children have higher achievement at the end of the school year, especially for low- and middle-income children (Schulting et al., 2005).

As children proceed into middle childhood and adolescence, family involvement in after-school programs (such as the YMCA and Boys' and Girls' Clubs), or other extracurricular activities such as sports and arts lessons and summer learning, is associated with increases in families' social capital, knowledge about the education system, and involvement in school (Lareau, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Vandell et al., 2005).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, family involvement in summer programs, which seek to reduce summer

learning loss experienced by many disadvantaged students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Burkam, Ready, Lee & LoGerfo, 2004; Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Heyns, 1978), is related to more literacy involvement at home (Chaplin, & Capizzano, 2006). There is also emerging evidence of benefits from family involvement in college preparation (Auerbach, 2004; Trusty, 1999).

### **Themes Across the Research**

Taken together, these studies and evaluations, representative of decades of research, find that parents and other caregivers have a strong influence over their children's learning and educational trajectories from birth through adolescence. Parents use a range of strategies for promoting their children's learning in home, community, and school settings. No one strategy is more beneficial than another; indeed it is likely that combinations of these strategies provide the most powerful explanation for the associations between parental involvement and learning. Across many types of parental involvement strategies, research suggests that economically disadvantaged families have fewer opportunities and affordances for involvement and are, indeed, less involved in many ways. As we describe below, interventions that have been developed to increase parental involvement among low-income families and other at-risk populations are another important part of this knowledge base, exploring not only the benefits and processes of parental involvement, but also the feasibility and effectiveness of increasing it.



## The Interventions Evidence

Two key questions follow from our view that there is compelling evidence that family involvement is a strong predictor of children's development and school success, particularly in the case of those children whose families face the most constraints and thus are least likely to be involved. The first question is whether there is evidence that one can intervene effectively in ways that promote involvement and thereby support educational achievement. The second is whether there are other, more powerful, alternative investments. Investments as well as the quantity and quality of evaluation studies have been limited (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002), due perhaps in part to limited public and private interest in and funding for both programs and evaluations as well as to methodological issues. As the review below indicates, evaluations of family involvement interventions cluster into two areas: (1) those for programs designed to strengthen and support parenting, support family literacy, and connect families to other community services in the early and elementary years, and (2) those of shorter-term programmatic interventions in middle childhood and adolescence that target activities such as family involvement in homework, college preparation, and the prevention of conduct problems such as aggressive behavior. As previously noted, there is one new study pointing to the benefits of parent involvement in governance (Marschall, 2006), and the multisite study reporting community organizing for student success (Mediratta et al., 2008). In addition, several studies discussed below suggest the value of training teachers and administrators in order to increase family involvement. There are also a few pioneering evaluations of family involvement in after-school and summer learning that examine the benefits of such involvement, as well as how it in turn leverages involvement in other contexts. While we have restricted our review to completed evaluations, we underscore here that there is much to be learned from ongoing efforts to create family involvement pathways that we will describe later in the paper.

These evaluations and meta-analyses of them have demonstrated small but significant effects on children's and families' outcomes. The effect sizes (often in the .20 range) are similar to effect sizes for class-size reduction and other interventions that are widely considered to be successful (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; McCartney & Dearing, 2002). Furthermore, there is emerging evidence that the families most at risk also benefit the most (Fuligni, Brooks-Gunn, & Berlin, 2003; Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein, & Price, 2001). Investments in interventions have been limited, a situation that has weakened the evidence-based case for investments in family involvement. However, we believe that more investments are warranted in the careful evaluation of promising existing efforts and the development and testing of new ones, especially those that use the existing research and evaluation information to build more systemic, continuous, and complementary family involvement pathways for disadvantaged and minority children. We must caution that, while evaluations of family involvement are finding some promising results and information that supports efforts to scale them, they also make it clear that changing parenting processes and behaviors, improving home and school connections and communication, and other aspects of family involvement are all complex processes, which may take multiple generations (Phillips et al., 1998) and require significant investments in quality and sustainability (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, & Fuligni, 2000; Kreider, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Many of the early childhood parenting education and support programs on which there are evaluation data were created as part of the 1960s' War on Poverty and the later family support movement (Lopez & Caspe, 2007). Family support programs build the capacity of at-risk parents to support their children's development, providing services to parents directly, through their involvement in educational services for children, or by some combination of the two, often referred to as the "two-generation approach" (Lopez & Caspe, 2007;

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Smith, 1995). One of the most common family support approaches is early home visiting, in which a trained parent educator provides parent training, health services, referrals to social service agencies, and other services in families' homes in an effort to strengthen parenting and to support child and sometimes adult development (Sweet & Applebaum, 2004). As many as 400,000 families currently receive home visiting services, and, in 2001, at least 37 states had state-based programs for at-risk families (Weiss & Klein, 2007).

Meta-analyses and reviews of family support and home visiting interventions have found small but statistically significant effects on family processes and child outcomes, including cognitive and academic development (Casper & Lopez, 2006; Daro, 2006; Gomby, 2003; Layzer et al., 2001; Sweet & Applebaum, 2004; Wasserman, 2006; Weiss & Klein, 2007), with stronger effects for "two generation" approaches (Smith, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1995). Home visiting programs are more likely to have positive effects on parenting processes, the home environment, and outcomes for parents rather than on children's outcomes. However, some programs are associated with children's cognitive development and school readiness, particularly if the program delivery approaches emphasize children's learning and combine both center- and home-based services (Love et al., 2002).

Center-based early childhood programs also promote family involvement in a variety of ways, including family events, family resource rooms, and opportunities for families to be employed as classroom aides and teachers. Research on the benefits of early childhood education programs for children's learning is extensive and suggests that a combination of center- and home-based approaches is most beneficial for children and families (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, Fuligni, & Leventhal, 2000; Daro, 2006; Gomby, 2003; Kagan, 2006; Wasserman, 2006). Findings from Early Head Start and other programs that these combined approaches are more effective than center-based-only services (e.g., Love et al., 2005) suggest that families play an important role.

However, relatively few studies have examined the specific role of family involvement in learning in early childhood programs (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, et al., 2000), and research to date has been mixed. Some studies have found that family involvement has long-term effects on children's academic progress, including higher achievement, less need for remedial education and special education, lower rates of grade retention, and higher rates of high school completion (Barnett, 1995; Reynolds et al., 2007). On the other hand, research findings from Head Start, the oldest federally funded preschool program for low-income children, are more equivocal. Although parents who participate in Head Start were more likely to engage with children in reading and enriching activities, families demonstrated few changes over time. Additionally, Head Start graduates differed in very small ways from the comparison group during the kindergarten transition and remained academically behind their more advantaged peers (Puma et al., 2005; Ramey et al., 2000).

Interventions that specifically promote family involvement in reading and literacy during early childhood have demonstrated more evidence of success. Interactive reading interventions have had a positive impact on children's vocabulary, story comprehension, storytelling skills, and academic gains (e.g., Jordan, Snow, & Porsche, 2000; Sénéchal, 1997; Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995) and may have the greatest benefits for children who start out with low skills (Jordan et al., 2000). One of the most common and effective models is "dialogic" reading, a shared reading approach in which adults encourage children to be active listeners, pose questions while reading (e.g., "Why do you think the boy looks happy?"), and give children opportunities to be storytellers (see Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, for a review). However, research on family literacy programs—which combine literacy training for parents and children—is more mixed (Casper, 2000; Hannon, 1999). While some studies have reported positive outcomes (see Brizius & Foster, 1993), the national Even Start evaluation reported disappointing findings (Ricciuti, St. Pierre,

Lee, Parsad, & Rimdzius, 2004; St. Pierre et al., 2003). Furthermore, few studies have examined differences between family literacy programs and services offered to parents or children alone, and several reviews have cited the need for more rigorous research (Caspe, 2000; Hannon, 1999; Nickse, 1993).

Interventions during middle childhood and adolescence, focused more on family involvement in education in specific ways designed to support academic achievement, have found small but significant effects on both family involvement and student achievement (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Erion, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Nye, Turner, & Schwarz, 2006; Walker-James & Partee, 2003). Meta-analyses find that programs that teach families how to help children with learning activities at home (e.g., shared reading, supplemental math activities, and parental academic instruction) have moderate to highly significant effects on achievement (Erion, 2006; Nye et al., 2006). Programs that train families in how to be appropriately and effectively involved in their children's homework, most of which have used moderately rigorous evaluation designs, have found positive effects on families' supportive involvement, increases in the time children spend on homework, higher homework accuracy, and higher grades (Bailey, 2006; Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2003). There is also some evidence of benefits from programs that target family-school relationships on families' social networks, parent-child closeness, family involvement in education, and children's social and academic outcomes (Kratochwill, McDonald, & Levin, 2003; Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004; McDonald et al., 2006; see also Caspe & Lopez, 2006, for a review).

Several studies of programs to prevent and treat behavioral and conduct problems that include training in supportive parenting and family involvement have found that they have a positive impact on the children's cognitive outcomes and achievement, as well as social and behavioral skills (Corcoran & Dattalo, 2006; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2004; Conduct

Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). In most cases, the specific contribution of the family component has not been evaluated separately, but one study found that changes in parental behavior partially mediated the relationship between program participation and decreases in children's oppositional and aggressive behavior (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002b). These findings suggest that family components can be an important part of comprehensive interventions and that more research is warranted to examine the potential added value of family involvement in interventions to promote learning, social skills, and other developmental outcomes.

Program interventions such as those noted above that have demonstrated small but significant effects hold three important lessons for the design of future ones. First, the evidence suggests that the families at the greatest risk benefit most (Fuligni et al., 2003; Layzer et al., 2001). Second, evaluations of multisite interventions suggest that sites that rate higher in quality and model fidelity are more likely to achieve positive results (Kalafat, Illback, & Sanders, 2007; Raikes, Green, Atwater, Kisker, Constantine, & Chazan-Cohen, 2006). In fact, variation in quality across sites may help to explain the mixed results of several national evaluations.<sup>8</sup> Third, when parents participate with higher "dosage" and intensity—that is, more frequently or for longer periods of time—and are more actively engaged, children and families appear to benefit more (Berlin, O'Neal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Erion, 2006; Liaw, Meisels, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Raikes et al., 2006, St. Pierre, Swartz, Gamse, Murray, Deck, & Nickel, 1995.)<sup>9</sup>

More recent pioneering evaluations of family involvement are focusing not just on the family as the point of intervention, but directly on teachers and administrators, as well as on districts' family involvement policies as enablers of family involvement. These evaluations are reporting promising findings pertinent to the benefits of shared responsibility for family involvement and are leading the way to new research about how shared responsibility enables

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effective family involvement. A recent study of the site-based local school councils (LSCs)—created as part of the decentralization of the Chicago Public Schools in 1988 and composed of a majority of parents, as well as community members, teachers, and principals in shared governance—found that higher Latino representation on the LSCs was associated with more school efforts to involve families, higher cultural and community awareness among teachers, and higher achievement among Latino students (Marschall, 2006).

A series of small-scale nonexperimental and quasi-experimental studies suggest that both teacher and administrator training programs that emphasize how to engage families can increase both teachers' outreach practices and families' likelihood of involvement (see Epstein, 2005, for a review). Several other studies have found that it is possible for such programs also to change parents' role construction, self-efficacy, and social capital (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; McDonald et al., 2006; Sheldon, 2002; see also Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), which are predictors of involvement. Although more research is needed to explain why some interventions work better than others (e.g., see mixed findings from Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002), the existing evidence suggests that there is value added from programs and policies targeting the educational system.

There is also evidence that such programs and policies are needed. Research on families shows that there is only a moderate amount of outreach from educators to parents to involve them (Carey, Lewis, & Farris, 1998; Chen, 2001; Vaden-Kiernan, 2005), and it may not be as effective as it could be. For example, although most kindergarten teachers reach out to families (Pianta et al., 1999), most of this contact occurs only after school has started (Pianta et al., 1999). Of greatest concern, disadvantaged and minority families report receiving less outreach, despite educators' reports of equal outreach to all families (Carey et al., 1998; Chen, 2001; Marschall, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005). Although it is not clear whether

this parent and teacher discrepancy in perception is due to actual differences, it is likely to have negative consequences for family-school relationships and involvement. Evidence is accumulating that programs and policies that address and support school outreach can strengthen involvement, particularly when they are culturally appropriate and responsive, employ an assets-based approach, and honor the strengths and contributions of diverse families (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Gomby, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999; Rodríguez-Brown, 2004).

There are now a handful of studies that examine family involvement in after-school and summer learning, and while more research is needed, they are important for several reasons. First, they suggest that family involvement in these out-of-school learning opportunities is sometimes related to higher achievement and that it can leverage involvement in other settings, including school (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2003).<sup>10</sup> A rigorous evaluation of a summer learning program found that participating families read more frequently with children and encouraged reading more than nonparticipating families (Chaplin & Capizzano, 2006). In another evaluation, parents who participated in workshops and home visits as part of an after-school program for Mexican immigrant youth reported increases over two years in the quality and frequency of family-school contact, parental engagement in school activities, and children's academic achievement (Riggs, 2006). A national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC), the major federal funding stream for after-school programs, found that children's participation was associated with higher family involvement in the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). This leveraging of involvement across settings potentially strengthens family involvement in a child's learning overall, thereby further increasing the chances of even greater impacts on achievement and school success. It thus also strengthens our argument for the importance of positioning family involvement as a key cross-cutting component of comprehensive

or complementary learning systems.

Evaluations of involvement in out-of-school learning are also important because, as the evidence about the benefits of family involvement in those settings accumulates, family involvement is being incorporated into specifications for high quality after-school and summer programs. A recent large-scale evaluation of after-school programs in New York State, for example, found that strong family involvement is one of the features common to the highest-performing programs (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005). As a result of such evaluations and the after-school field's commitment to continuous quality improvement, indicators of family involvement and community partnerships are now included in over half of the field's quality standards frameworks (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005b).

These pioneering evaluations point the way for the next generation of evaluations, which can not only examine the benefits of family involvement for children's learning in and across different contexts, but also assess whether involvement across contexts leverages sustained family involvement over time with associated benefits for children's learning and school success. Such evaluations will be necessary to test the value of a comprehensive approach to family involvement and can be embedded within evaluations of new and existing complementary learning initiatives.

Our review of the family involvement research and intervention literature, coupled with research on the barriers and supports for the involvement of disadvantaged and minority families, provides much of the warrant for a comprehensive approach to family involvement. Continuous, cross-context family involvement is necessary to meet the goal of educational equity. For it to do so, four research-based essential principles underlying this approach should be the foundation for future family involvement policy and investments. Specifically,

1. *Public policy must approach and fund family involvement as a shared and meaningful responsibility among multiple*

*stakeholders across different sections of society.* Social, cultural, and political factors play essential roles in enabling or constraining involvement. Policies must therefore be designed to support and enable all families—especially economically and otherwise disadvantaged ones—to build and leverage their assets, abilities, and opportunities to support their children's learning. Firstly, this means that social policies must establish an adequate and level floor for all families—that is, a minimum standard of living (including food, shelter, and other basic resources) that is needed in order for families to meet their children's other needs, including intellectual and social development. Secondly, it means that family involvement policies and initiatives must include intentional roles for schools, businesses, higher education, communities, and other institutions, all of which create the affordances, opportunities, and incentives for involvement. Thirdly, it means that families must in turn be expected to support their children's learning within their means and abilities.

2. *Family involvement must be understood as necessary but not sufficient for educational success and situated within a comprehensive or complementary learning system.* While family involvement is clearly important for school success, it is not a “magic bullet” and it should not be viewed as one. Children and youth need access to many opportunities to learn; for example, research demonstrates the benefits of high-quality early childhood programs (Fuligni et al., 2003; Kagan, 2006; Weiss & Klein, 2007) and out-of-school time learning opportunities (Little & Harris, 2003; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Wimer, 2006). In an age of increasing demands for complex skills and global competition, children need these multiple opportunities to develop “21st century skills” (Levy & Murnane, 1996) and the well-rounded development that Gordon and Bridglall (2006) refer to as intellectual competence. Just as siloed instructional reforms fail to live up to their potential, so too will family involvement if it is disconnected from other educational needs and supports. Instead, family involvement policies and

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initiatives should operate from a complementary learning/supplementary education perspective. That is, policies should comprehensively include families as part of connected systems of learning supports, which intentionally integrate families and schools with out-of-school time programs, early childhood opportunities, cultural and community institutions, businesses, higher education, and others. Connecting these institutions and settings can provide more entry points and opportunities for family involvement, facilitate continuity, make family involvement a mainstreamed and sustained effort, and make investments more efficient and therefore more effective.

3. *Family involvement efforts should operate from a developmental perspective and promote continuous involvement across key learning contexts.* To get the maximum potential added value for children's learning and school success, policies and initiatives—as situated in a comprehensive learning system—should not only promote involvement at multiple ages and time points, but should intentionally approach children and families from a developmental and cross-contextual perspective. That is, they should be designed to build family involvement as a continuous process that grows and evolves as children mature. Inherent in this perspective are a critical role for families across educational transitions, a commitment to engaging families early and often, efforts to support and reinforce involvement across learning contexts and the learning year, and efforts to build on and leverage earlier family involvement efforts.
- 4 *Family involvement efforts should be systemic and sustained.* As our research and evaluation review made clear, to date, many family involvement efforts have been programmatic interventions with short terms and small scopes. However, it follows logically from the previous three principles—and from the research base—that new investments in family involvement should take a more systemic approach. New initiatives need to move beyond

siloed school- or community-based programs to efforts that build family involvement pathways into the fabric of schools and communities. Furthermore, there is a need to create more coherence and connectedness across local, state, and national policies and initiatives to enable this (Weiss & Stephen, 2009; Weiss et al., 2009).

Our review of the research and evaluation literature makes a strong, plausible case that efforts to develop policies and interventions based on a comprehensive approach to family involvement have merit and are worth serious consideration. These findings also make the case for investing in policies and initiatives that promote and support family involvement at the local, state, and national levels as a key to truly leaving no child behind. Our review examined existing research but did not cover the many programs and initiatives that are now in the pipeline from which much is being and will continue to be learned about family involvement and that may act as catalysts for larger complementary learning efforts that link in- and out-of-school learning. We now examine some of the pipeline efforts that function as innovation and learning laboratories and that illustrate our proposed approach.

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## Promising Family Involvement Investments

Although meaningful investments in family involvement have been limited in the past, promising initiatives and related policies illustrating the new comprehensive approach that we support are developing in communities, in states, and at the federal level. These examples, described below, and many others, provide “existence proof” that these more systemic family involvement efforts are possible and practical. They illustrate how communities and states are building continuous family involvement pathways to help children succeed in school and life from cradle to career. Continued documentation and evaluation of these and other initiatives will be an important step in turning the research lessons about the importance of family involvement into demonstrably effective and systematic new initiatives. The initiatives and their implementation experiences also highlight the need for federal, state, and local support and policies that allow and support family involvement within this broader comprehensive or complementary learning system. The principles of the new approach, including shared responsibility and emphasis on co-construction, underscore the importance of locally developed efforts and policies that recognize and support such local work. We describe several different types of local approaches followed by ways in which states are enabling new, more continuous and cross-context family involvement below. In the conclusion, we offer recommendations for an increased and more strategic federal role in family involvement. We believe that national leadership enabling states and communities to create family involvement pathways as part of an integrated in-school and out-of-school approach to learning is essential to education equity in service of closing achievement gaps.

### Miami-Dade’s Connected Schools

When he was superintendent of the Miami-Dade public schools, Rudy Crew incorporated family involvement into the fabric of the district as a

central element in his vision of Connected Schools in which families and communities are an integral part of the education system. Crew stressed the need for a common interest in and responsibility for schools across the community and created numerous formalized partnerships with community organizations and stakeholders, with a big role for parents. To develop more “Demand Parents”—his term for parents who ask their schools to supply what their children need—Crew established the Parent Academy, a multifaceted and community-wide initiative helping parents learn about their roles, rights, responsibilities, and opportunities to support learning. “We’re walking out halfway and extending an institutional hand,” he writes, emphasizing the importance of school outreach; “we’re making a big, wide bridge to connect [parents] to us, with handrails so they feel safe, and we’ve put it close to home, in their neighborhood, their churches, and their community centers” (Crew & Dya, 2007, p. 165). The topics covered in the Parent Academy are determined in collaboration with parents and include two-generational efforts that support the parents’ own learning as well as information on how they can support their children’s. To date, the Parent Academy has worked with community partners to reach over 85,000 parents through workshops, educational and cultural events, resource sharing, and referrals on a wide variety of topics. As superintendent, Crew also included family involvement as one of the performance criteria for principals and suggested it for teachers as well.

### Community Organizing

Community organizing is powerful entry point to increase and enable parent involvement, marshalling parents and others to develop and leverage collective leadership for family involvement and school improvement. There are many examples of how community organizing efforts focused on school improvement have led to a co-constructed system of family, school, and community involvement with

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a strong sense of shared responsibility for student success. The previously noted seven-site study by Mediratta and colleagues (2008) of the benefits of community organizing is a pioneering effort to assess the benefits in regard to students' school success. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), a leader in community organizing for over 45 years on the northwest side of Chicago, is another good example of how organizing engaged families supports school improvement. LSNA has created several programs that help parents learn to support their children's learning while also developing the skills to be employed as educators within the school and the community. When parents are trained to become involved as tutors, mentors, literacy ambassadors, and certified teachers, children benefit from the extra help and support and parents' increased involvement; schools benefit from an engaged workforce that is reflective of the population it serves; and parents benefit from empowerment, knowledge, and continued educational and career development. Lessons from the Logan Square experience have informed other Chicago public school family involvement efforts. This system takes the concept of continuous and systemic family involvement to a new level, both by reinforcing the value of family involvement community-wide, and by incorporating the parents' own personal development as a key component of family involvement (Emerging Knowledge Forum, 2007).

### **Conditional Cash Transfers**

Conditional cash transfers, a model originating in Mexico and now being tested worldwide, are an innovative way to operationalize the concept of shared responsibility by addressing economic disadvantage simultaneously with increasing family involvement in support of children's learning and school success. In an effort to help break the cycle of poverty, increase economic opportunity in New York City, and test an incentive-based approach to improving family involvement, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration recently unveiled a new initiative called Opportunity NYC, the nation's first conditional

cash transfer program. This privately funded pilot initiative, based on successful models of conditional cash transfer programs developed outside the United States, is meant to improve and support a family's education, health, and employment status by providing cash incentives to parents and children in six of New York's most impoverished communities. It consists of three discrete pilot projects: one family-focused, one adult-focused, and one child-focused. As part of the family-focused project, families can earn \$25 per month for attending parent-teacher conferences; \$50 for obtaining a library card; and \$25–\$50 if their children maintain 95% school attendance. As part of the child-focused component, families can also earn \$300–\$600 for improvement in student test scores, \$400 for graduation, and additional cash incentives for credits completed and taking the PSAT exam. The pilot program is being evaluated using an experimental research design, and the results will be very helpful in understanding the value of this simultaneous approach to family involvement and poverty reduction.

### **Building Pathways across Contexts and through the School Career**

There are thousands of examples of community efforts to build family involvement pathways across learning contexts and throughout a child's school career. Many of these efforts are designed to link school, after-school and summer learning, and family involvement in support of the child's development and school success. These efforts are important because family involvement drops off as children progress through elementary school. One of the new family involvement frontiers is engaging families, middle and high school students, schools, and after-school providers to support youth in building their pathway to college and career. For example, After-School CollegeEd, a program created in New York City by The After-School Corporation (TASC), the College Board, and the Partnership for After School Education (PASE), connects families, schools, after-school programs, and higher education to help students and their families plan for college. Generación Diez, an after-school



program for Latino high school youth, is an example of an effort to build intentional connections among families, schools, and community health agencies in support of student's school success through home visits and other opportunities for parents, most of whom do not speak English and cannot communicate with school teachers. (For more information on both of these initiatives, see Harvard Family Research Project, 2006.)

### **Cradle to Career Family Involvement**

As recognition of the importance of out-of-school learning and of building comprehensive and continuous supports for learning increases, communities are building complementary or comprehensive learning systems with family involvement from cradle to career as a key component. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), a model creating a set of coordinated supports for families and children from early childhood through to high school and beyond. HCZ is working to change the odds for children and families in a 60-block zone in central Harlem. Its goals and strategy target family stability, opportunities for employment, decent and affordable housing, youth development activities for adolescents, and quality education for children and parents. HCZ's component programs are designed as a system that serves children and families continuously and comprehensively over time.

Several of HCZ's initiatives stress the role of families, including Baby College, a nine-week series of workshops offered to parents of children from the ages of 0-3; the Family Empowerment Program, which provides home-based supportive counseling and behavioral, health, and after-school mentoring and tutoring, as well as individual and family therapy, a parenting group and an anger management group; and The Promise Academy, a charter school enrolling students in grades K-12. Parents and children continue in these programs, which are designed as a system serving both children and families over time. Paul Tough (2008) described HCZ in a recent

book laying out the challenges in its implementation. Ongoing evaluation of the program will be very instructive for similar efforts now under way or being designed around the country.

These newer efforts include Building Bright Futures (BBF) created in 2007 in Omaha, Nebraska, by Mayor Mike Fahey, local philanthropists, and a group of concerned citizens. BBF aligns educational support systems from birth through college, because it believes that children require ongoing, continuous support to achieve its ultimate goals of educational and life success in adolescence and adulthood. To operationalize this philosophy, BBF supports public-private partnerships and brings together diverse community stakeholders—including parents, businesses, higher education, and faith-based institutions—into six task forces that address strands such as early childhood, career awareness. Family involvement is a key element in this effort as it is in a similar effort, STRIVE, in Cincinnati, Ohio. (For more on these and other complementary learning efforts see [www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning](http://www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning).)

### **The Role of State Support**

Strong and effective community efforts positioning family involvement within a complementary learning system require leadership at the state level to support, sustain, and coordinate local efforts, align the necessary funding, and maintain visibility and momentum for family involvement with state leaders, agencies, and organizations. States are providing this support in a variety of ways. State-government-level children's councils, cabinets, and commissions represent promising approaches to connecting multiple actors, organizations, and efforts at the state level. P-16 (pre-K-college) and P-20 (pre-K-graduate school) councils promote an integrated and continuous education system from preschool through early adulthood. These efforts represent an opportunity to engage other agencies and stakeholders from child- and family-focused sectors outside of the school system. If P-20 councils make

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family involvement a priority, they have the potential to bring family involvement to a larger statewide table and to integrate families into efforts to educate the whole child.

Increasingly, states are adopting family involvement standards, with some states (e.g., Kansas) using standards from national organizations while others (e.g., Kentucky) develop their own. Kentucky has a long history of leadership in family involvement beginning with the path-breaking Kentucky Education Reform Act (1990) with its inclusion of family resource centers at the core of education reform and continuing with its design of a statewide system of accountability for family involvement. A 2007 report, “The Missing Piece of the Proficiency Puzzle,” outlines an accountability system developed by the Commissioner’s Parents Advisory Council (CPAC), a statewide group of family involvement leaders that advises the state commissioner of education. The accountability plan delineates six overarching goals for family involvement, a set of detailed recommendations, and a set of benchmarks for assessing progress. These accountability provisions and guidelines represent a major step forward. Early indications are that the report is receiving active consideration at the state level, with the Kentucky Department of Education beginning to incorporate the assessment guidelines into its school audit process.

Many states are also using their federally funded Parent Involvement Resource Centers (PIRCs) whose role is to build state capacity for family involvement and to lead cross-agency family involvement efforts. One of the major strategies, illustrated by the Iowa PIRC, is convening representatives from Title I, the state education agency, the state PTA, and other stakeholders and leaders whose engagement is critical to implementing systemic family involvement, including the School Administrators of Iowa (the professional association for superintendents and principals) and Area Education Agency 267 (one of the state’s publicly funded intermediary agencies that provide support and technical assistance to school

districts). This has created both broad buy-in for family involvement and an array of services to build local capacity for it.

The nonprofit Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFE), the state’s PIRC grantee, is another example of work to coordinate multiple educational and social services across the state and to integrate family involvement into schools and other services from early childhood through high school, working from the belief that the best outcomes are achieved by investing in the continuum of childhood from cradle to career. The Foundation has created a partnership among the Nebraska State Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), the state’s 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) out-of-school time programs, and the state’s C.S. Mott Foundation-supported after-school network to link learning across contexts and embed continuous family involvement pathways across a child’s learning contexts and school career. NCFE also connects families, schools, and after-school programs through its Community Learning Center Network, which supports integrated family-school-community support centers, and also promotes statewide policy, funding, public awareness, and quality programs for family-school-community partnerships.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

As we noted at the start of the paper, it has been clear for many years that family involvement in children's learning and development is one of the strongest predictors of their school success. Yet it is marginalized in education reform discussions. "While federal policy has attempted to deal with parent involvement," one long time observer notes, "those efforts have been half-hearted, unfocused and ineffective" (Cross, 2004, p. 157).

What will it take to change that? We believe that the series of actions at the national level recommended below are necessary to create a more strategic and effective approach to family involvement. Federal legislation and funding for family involvement through Title I and Section 1118—as well as that mandated in other scattered and siloed legislation within education and across health, child care, social services, juvenile justice, agriculture, and other areas—has been critically important for building and maintaining interest, and for the limited capacity building and implementation that has taken place. (See Weiss and Stephen (2009) for a review of the federal role.) But these "random acts of family involvement" have not resulted in a coherent and effective approach to intervention, nor have they created incentives for integrated and sustained family involvement efforts at the state and community levels. There have also been few resources for the training, technical assistance, and pre- and in-service professional development at the scale that is necessary for schools and communities to build systemic, sustained, and effective family involvement. As noted in our review of the intervention literature, there have also been relatively few investments in building the applied knowledge base of the field, specifically in evaluation (particularly with regard to involvement beyond the early years), nor in the development and testing of innovative and integrative approaches to involvement, nor in circulation of evidence-based practices to strengthen the field. These limitations

will need to be addressed in order to create the more equitable and effective family involvement that is a necessary part of strategies to close achievement gaps among our nation's children.

As we have argued here, there is an urgent need for a research-based and broadly shared definition or approach to family involvement to replace limited current ones and guide policy development and practice. We have offered one such approach here, centered on shared responsibility and cradle-to-career family involvement pathways to insure that economically disadvantaged children get access to the school and out-of-school learning opportunities more available to and demonstrably supporting the school success of their more-advantaged peers. We believe that President Obama and his administration should use their bully pulpit to hold the spotlight on and help the public understand the key role of families in shaping the life trajectories and school success of their children, and the public's shared reciprocal responsibilities. This should be followed by the development and implementation of a comprehensive and long-term family involvement strategy with resources for capacity building, monitoring and accountability, and professional development, as well as incentives for innovation and evaluation. It should also include a federal legislative audit to set the stage for a more integrated legislative platform as part of the upcoming reauthorization of education legislation.

The family involvement field does not now have the robust three-tiered infrastructure of national, state, and local supports necessary to develop strong, high quality, continuous, and accountable local involvement efforts. Nor is there sufficient monitoring of the implementation of federal family involvement mandates. With a clear definition of family involvement—and capacity to implement it—the federal government can proactively monitor

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implementation of the current parent involvement provisions of Title I and other provisions of NCLB and build a three-tiered monitoring, continuous improvement, and accountability process while considering how to strengthen and integrate family involvement provisions in reauthorized legislation. The first tier includes a common set of standards and indicators for monitoring state accountability. The second tier, for states to use at the district and community level, would be keyed to the federal standards but allow for additional ones. The third tier, at the community and school level, would incorporate locally developed standards with particular attention to inclusion of family involvement assessment as part of school and staff performance reviews and to building ongoing shared accountability and progress-tracking on the sustained engagement of economically disadvantaged families.

Mandates and accountability without the carrots of capacity building, training, and technical assistance most likely will not increase family involvement. Education legislation has afforded opportunities to define systemic family involvement plans and strategies and provided some resources to implement them, at least in Title I schools, but most efforts are at best spotty, not sustained, and unlikely to support the school success of disadvantaged children. As McLaughlin and Shields (1987) noted over 20 years ago, systemic involvement is dependent on educators' and families' core beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Sheldon, 2002). Changing those beliefs will require sustained bully-pulpit communication about the importance of family involvement for all concerned; evidence that involvement is paying off in children's increased school success; substantial, long-running capacity building, training and technical assistance; and practitioners' access to the latest research and evaluation results at each of the tiers from the federal level down.

To make real progress on family involvement will also require the development of a strategic research, innovation, and evaluation agenda to build and to use

the knowledge base to support innovation as well as practice and policy formation. Conceptions of the role of research and evaluation are changing in major ways with new emphases on innovation, learning, and continuous improvement, and this is particularly appropriate in cases where the intervention base is weak and the intervention challenges are substantial and complex. The field has few rigorous evaluations, and they are mostly of discrete and time-limited programs, not of the types of systemic and sustained efforts to create pathways aligned across the contexts for which we have argued here. There is no doubt that investments in the development and evaluation of more systemic approaches are critically important to guide policy and practice, and to test the added value of involvement and partnerships for children's learning and development. Evaluations must grapple with the challenging but essential questions about whether and how initiatives promote continuous, equitable, and sustained family involvement, and whether they thus improve academic performance and help close achievement gaps. Attention to cost effectiveness is also key, particularly when resources are scarce and communities are making difficult trade-offs and decisions about ways to best approach narrowing the clear inequities in the educational achievement of their children. In a recent book chapter, Bryk and Gomez (2008) argued that the research and development infrastructure for school improvement is weak and constitutes a case of "market failure for educational innovation" (p. 182), and this is especially the case for family involvement. We support their call for investments in innovation that are co-developed by researchers and practitioners and based on partnerships among school practitioners, interdisciplinary university researchers, and social entrepreneurs—and we would add families to this mix as well.

Real progress will also require new investments in pre- and in-service professional development for family involvement for all involved in providing complementary learning—from early childhood educators and teachers to after-school providers.

Family involvement is not now a core professional competency for any provider, although this is changing as these professional fields rewrite their quality standards. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, for example, is including family involvement in their core competencies and many after-school quality standards are doing similarly (Little, 2007). Teachers and others indicate that lack of training is a huge barrier to involvement (Markow & Martin, 2005; Weiss, Kreider, et al., 2005). We suggest that professional development, like the other elements in a national plan outlined above, must be conceived broadly and underscore the foundation of involvement within a framework of shared responsibility and cross-context complementary learning. Strategic federal investments would include demonstration grants to develop and test different approaches to professional development, accompanied by evaluation; the creation of networks to share effective practices; support for state efforts to strengthen certification guidelines with clear definitions of family involvement; specification of competencies; alignment of these with course content in training institutions and in-service programs; and ongoing development of training materials reflecting the core principals of family involvement, including shared responsibility. (For an example of the latter, see the toolkit for parent-teacher conferences with materials for families, teachers and principals at [www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org).)

It is our hope that this paper will lead to vigorous debate about how to increase family involvement as a key part of efforts to achieve educational equity and to provide disadvantaged children with the knowledge and skills that they need, and that we need them to have, for 21st-century success. We have argued that it will be difficult if not impossible to close achievement gaps without much more attention to and investment in the involvement of economically and otherwise disadvantaged families in their children's education, and that there is a strong research-based warrant to do so. We have also proposed a new research-based approach for broader consideration by policymakers, practitioners, families, and others intent on achieving

educational equity. At the same time, we believe that family involvement must be positioned within a broader commitment to shared responsibility reflected not least in efforts to build complementary learning systems. We underscore that family involvement is not a panacea or a quick fix, and that it would be a serious mistake to go from the frying pan of lack of serious investment in family involvement to the fire of exaggerated expectations of what it can achieve without strong schools and other comprehensive supports. Therefore, rather than focusing on involvement alone, we have argued for the need to nest it within a comprehensive and complementary learning system where it can serve as both a strong component of, and a powerful stimulus for, greater educational equity, and improved developmental and educational outcomes for disadvantaged children.

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## NOTES

1. New statistical techniques have raised questions about the size of these effects (Viadero, 2006), but the legacy of the report is still felt in research questions and recent findings about the role of families.
2. This assertion, however, does not negate the importance of considering the effect of hereditary characteristics as mediators of parental influence.
3. The minority population (Hispanics, non-Hispanic African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans) represented 16% of the population in 1970, increased to 27% in 1998 (Smelser, Wilson, & Mitchell, 2001), and increased to 34% of the U.S. population in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau).
4. Such mechanisms include community schools, extended school services, school-based parenting workshops and services, home visiting services, and school-based health services (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2004; Dryfoos, 1994; Rothman, 2007; Rothstein, 2004; Weiss & Klein, 2007).
5. Here we refer to parents or primary caregivers.
6. In fact, family involvement is recognized as one of the standards for high quality out-of-school-time (OST) programs (Vandell et al., 2005).
7. Due to space constraints, we do not attempt to cite every intervention study conducted to date, but rather to provide an overview of major evaluations, previous reviews, and notable studies.
8. For example, a national evaluation of the federally funded Even Start family literacy program found positive effects on the home literacy environment (e.g., number of books in the home), but no sustained effects on children's literacy or cognitive outcomes. The investigators attribute the findings in part to wide diversity among program sites, the fact that approximately one-third of control group families also received other education services, and the fact that families did not take full advantage of the program's services (St. Pierre et al., 2003).
9. Dosage and engagement have been studied in relatively few programs. Those studies that have examined the issue have found a positive association in home visiting, comprehensive family support, and interactive homework programs.
10. Some small-scale studies suggest that family-centered school drop-out prevention and college preparation programs are also associated with positive outcomes (e.g., Gándara, 2002; Vidano & Sahafi, 2004), but few have been rigorously evaluated to date.

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Dr. Weiss writes, speaks, and advises on programs and policies for children and families and serves on the advisory boards of many public and private organizations; she is a founding member of the National Family, School and Community Engagement Working Group, and is a consultant and advisor to numerous foundations on strategic grantmaking and evaluation. Recent publications focus on reframing research and evaluation to support continuous improvement and results-based decision-making; examining the case for family involvement as part of complementary learning from a research and policy perspective; and assessing new ways of providing and evaluating professional development.

She received her doctorate in education and social policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and she was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Yale Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy.

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