

Family, School, and Community Connections Symposium:
New Directions for Research, Practice, and Evaluation
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*Assessing Parent Involvement Programs – Creating a Learning System:
New Directions for Family-School-Community Partnerships*

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Why hasn't the parent involvement and family-school-community partnership arena made more progress in getting recognition and resources? Although the field has been in existence for over 30 years, we have no big funding streams dedicated to the work we do. We have proven programs and an evidence base that supports the value of what we do in terms of the benefits to children and youth, and we have an institutional infrastructure that's worthy of the importance of this effort. But we're not getting investments in programs, training, and research. Why is it that parent involvement is not on the top, or near the top, of the agenda for school reform and reducing the achievement gap?

We need to think about why this state of affairs prevails and how we want to change it. The next 10 years are not going to be like the last 30. We're about to make a big leap in terms of demand for and recognition of the value of family-school-community partnerships. One reason is that the clock is ticking on No Child Left Behind. By way of example, when I was preparing for a presentation to the legislature and the governor in Wisconsin, I looked at that state's educational statistics: Seventy-eight schools there are performing far below what they should be. A few of them are sprinkled on Native American reservations and in rural areas. Most of them are concentrated in Milwaukee, in neighborhoods of color. We know exactly who isn't succeeding and how far behind they are, and the state is trying a whole set of mostly within-school strategies to remedy the achievement gap.

However, willingness on the part of elected officials, governors, secretaries, commissioners of education, superintendents, and principals to look outside the school for other resources to close the achievement gap and meet the promise of No Child Left Behind is growing. These constituents increasingly are willing to look at early childhood education, out-of-school time programs, and parent involvement in a systematic way.

Consider, then, the following questions:

- Are we ready for this new demand for our work?
- How are we going to make the most of this opportunity and keep the momentum so that we achieve meaningful and sustained family-school-community partnerships?

We need a national strategy to accomplish these partnerships. A key piece is to create a learning system for family, school, and community partnerships. This learning system should include the collection and use of

research and evaluation, the development of strong, research-based evidence of the power of family-school-community partnerships, and results-based accountability.

The fields that are successfully getting resources, such as early childhood education and out-of-school time, all have a learning system with these elements. They use this learning system to get sustained resources so they can develop and deliver effective services. It's very important that we work together to create this learning system and develop a research and evaluation agenda that serves practice and professional development and furnishes evidence that our work adds value to children's learning and development.

Our collective goal should be to achieve a sustained local, state, and national commitment to family and community partnerships. Furthermore, these partnerships should be accountable, have resources, demonstrably contribute to the development and academic success of children and youth, and have multiple access points and connections to other institutions in the community that also support that learning and development. We can get to this goal in part through building a learning system in the next 5 to 10 years.

One of the ways that researchers and evaluators can help is to be skeptical advocates. I choose to work in this area because I strongly believe in it. I think that when parents are involved in kids' education and development, children turn out better. At the same time, given the role I play, I also have to be a skeptic. Research and evaluation serve us best through this stance of skeptical advocacy.

Research and evaluation also challenge us to think differently. We all have a tendency, myself included, to do the same set of things again and again and yet expect different outcomes. A good evaluation challenges. Often the data tell us things that we didn't anticipate, prompting us to rethink our practice. The challenges lead us to improve what we are doing. This system of learning and evaluation is what feeds good practice.

What should be the priorities of a research and evaluation agenda?

- First, we need to mine the research in developmental psychology and sociology and use this knowledge in applied parent involvement work.
- Second, we need to strive for a deeper knowledge base. I mentioned earlier that a learning system includes the development of strong, research-based evidence of the power of family-school-community partnerships. If there's a weak area in our work, it's that we don't have enough evaluation that shows not just that families matter, but that we can in fact intervene with a whole set of positive results.
- Third, if we're going to learn from each other we need to invest in organizations and their capacity to distill knowledge. For example, the Campbell Collaboration is doing a meta-analysis of family involvement evaluations. This is the kind of critical distillation and distribution of information that we need so that practitioners as well as researchers can learn from it.

To use our scarce learning, evaluation, and research resources well, we need to develop an intentional, collective, national strategy. It's important that we not demand high-cost evaluations of everything, that we have a division of labor, and that there is a continuum of evaluation. Everybody who's doing a parent involvement program or creating a parent-school-community partnership should do some basic evaluation. We can argue about what form that might take, but just the process of collecting and looking at data, even if it's just participant data, is very important to maintain vitality in the field. At the same time, we ought to use our scarce resources to invest in a few experiments on factors that we particularly want to test or models that we think have promise.

With respect to evaluation investments over a few thousand dollars, it is critical that these contribute to documenting practice and help us understand some of the implementation lessons, and that we get that information back out into the field. And I add "get the information out" because I see time and time again people relearning lessons that the last generation laid out ad nauseam. Again, we need to be investing in documentation, distillation, and communication of the most important lessons. We must learn from examples

of programs that have done evaluation and from the ways they have used evaluation information to strengthen themselves.

If we had a hundred million dollars for research and evaluation to build a learning system for this field, how would we allocate it? Following are six points to consider in making that decision.

Rethink our definition of parent involvement. We need to recognize, acknowledge, study, and support different types of parent involvement and listen to parents about what their parent involvement is. We've been doing a longitudinal study that's included an ethnographic component—one of my colleagues has been looking at the ethnographic work to find out what parents define as parent involvement.¹ Many low-income parents are involved in schools in ways that never get on the radar screen, because their contributions are not recognized as parent involvement. Those of us who study parent involvement and have our fixed categories of participation—parent-teacher meetings, volunteerism—miss it. We have a research perspective on what parent involvement is because we want to measure it and standardize it, but as a result we miss a great deal of what parents actually do. We've called our work "being there." For a lot of the parents in our study, parent involvement is literally being there in school, checking things out, and talking to other parents about what's happening. We need to broaden our definition of what parent involvement is and listen to parents to get a functional, working, and honest definition.

1. *Focus on learning.* We should also make a personal and professional commitment to learning and reflection. All of us need to think about and reflect on our practice, to make a personal commitment to help build this field. Research and evaluation that contributes to practice and policy development is helpful because it supports work on the ground. It is generated, in part at least, from the concerns of practitioners—what they need to know to do their work better. Research and evaluation supports reflection on practice by connecting people to each other's experiences and lessons. There's a collaborative learning element to any kind of system that aims to inform a field and a profession. One of the earmarks of a strong profession is that it has the capacity to reflect on its work.
2. *Conduct assessments.* Even if funders do not demand evaluation, we need to ask for resources to do evaluation, and we need to group together into networks to do it. One example is the work of a foundation in Boston that has put together a network of out-of-school time programs.² Network members receive technical assistance on evaluation, meet regularly, and engage in peer learning. The results will be better evaluation and collective learning, as well as advancement of the out-of-school time field. It's time for those of us in the parent and community involvement area to build learning networks like this one to support each other in evaluation.
3. *Align research with practice.* The fourth thing we need to do is create and contribute to efforts to connect research and evaluation with practice. Practitioners need to get in the face of researchers and evaluators and push back on us. Tell us what you want to know and what you need to know. Push back on us to make the research, evaluation, and practice connection a partnership. It's important also that practitioners give feedback to those who distill research and evaluation—many applied researchers are interested in understanding better what kinds of information practitioners need, how to format it, how to disseminate it.
4. *Support professional development.* We should also get involved with preservice training and professional development at universities and colleges. We need to have practitioners as part of our professional development curriculum, talking about the importance of the work they do and how they learn. This type

¹ Mayer, E., Kreider, H., & Chung, C. (2005). *Being there at school: Mother-generated authentic patterns of educational involvement among low-income diverse elementary school families*. Manuscript in preparation.

² See the website of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation at www.nmefdn.org.

of information will show people who are going into family involvement work the importance of research, evaluation, reflection, and continuous improvement.

5. *Stay connected.* If we're going to take advantage of the opportunity in front of us in the next 5 to 10 years, it'll be because we work together to create a national strategy, beginning with local and state folks connecting with each other. The time to begin building this national strategy is now.