

Family, School, and Community Connections Symposium:
New Directions for Research, Practice, and Evaluation
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Sponsored by

National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, TX

&

Harvard Family Research Project

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA

Closing remarks

Cathy Jordan, Program Manager, National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools,
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, TX

I had an opportunity to look through some of the yellow sheets that you left for us, and there was one in there that I thought was particularly pertinent. And that was just a short message, and perhaps someone in the room wrote this message, but the message said what they were learning and what they were going to take back from this conference—from this symposium—was to “shun assumptions, ask questions, and promote dialogue across race, cultures, and class.” And I think that truly was a wonderful summary of everything that has been said today. A second thing that I’ve heard today, and that is that there is a desire to continue this dialogue and to continue networking opportunities like this. And so to that end, you will be receiving an e-mail in the next few days from us at SEDL asking you if you wish to participate in a LISTSERV to continue this dialogue and to continue to network. And so I want to encourage you to respond to that LISTSERV, and we know many of you are involved in far too many of those, but we hope that you will be involved with us as we continue this important dialogue. I, too, want to say a few thank yous before we close. Again, I want to thank Heather and all of her team. The Conference Center just has been wonderful. The food was delicious. We appreciate everything all of you have done to make this such a congenial and good experience today. I’d also like to especially thank our team from SEDL, especially Chris Ferguson who really has not been properly introduced all day. Chris, I want you to stand. She has been the coordinator and has put in an incredible amount of time making all of this happen today. And, Chris, we truly appreciate it. Lacy and Victor and Rachel are all important members of our team at SEDL, and I thank you for being here and supporting what we’ve done. Another group of people that we’ve not had an opportunity to fully recognize today is the steering committee for the National Center for Family and Community Connections at SEDL, and I see several of them in the room that have not been introduced yet. Estus Smith with the Kettering Foundation, we thank you and appreciate your being here today. And, of course, you’ve all heard from Chris and Arnold Fege earlier today. And I also see in the back of the room someone who has contributed a tremendous amount to the work that we’ve done at SEDL, that I certainly would be remiss if I overlooked her, and she often likes to be overlooked, but—she’s nodding in the back. That’s Martha Boethel, who is the co-author and author of several of the publications that you were given at lunch today. So, thank you all for being here and making this such a success. Heather, I’d like to, at this point, turn it over to you to close.

Eric Dearing, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology,
University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY

Well, I think that something that was said today—I believe it was one of the community members’ comments when he was playing the tape, I believe it actually said that she was a businesswoman and community member or something to that effect. She said something that I thought was very provocative. Perhaps to some of you this is more familiar to you, but I had never heard before. She questioned why the parents aren’t held accountable in terms of, for example, graduation, I think is what she said. That we would, in fact, mandate or require parents to be involved. And I think that’s very provocative. My immediate personal gut reaction was quite negative. But I spent, when I wasn’t thinking

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about what am I going to say today in my talk, when I wasn't thinking about that, it really just stuck with me why I responded so negatively to that. What about it concerns me? And maybe it's that I don't want my own family involvement regulated. I have a seven-year-old and a three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, and so they're just entering the schooling system, and am I responding negatively because of something personal or—so, anyway, I just thought that I'd leave it at that as something I'm struggling with. And I think that's something that's provocative enough for us all to struggle with for a little bit. Why aren't we requiring parents to do it? And I mean, what would be, what would change for the good? What would change for the bad if we did? And so I'll just, I think I'll leave it at that.

John Diamond, Assistant Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education,
Cambridge, MA

So I wind up saying the last comment. And oftentimes people think that the person who says the last comment will say something profound. This is probably, I don't have any sort of profound statements to make. But I will say that the experience I've had today has been a very positive one. I'm also energized by seeing people who are actually doing the work and who have strong concerns about some of the issues that I am interested in, like parents engaged in the schools. People who are actually in the field doing the work, practitioners and researchers who are interested in learning from each other. One of the things that I'll take away today is that, at least for some people, some of the things that I do in my research resonate in actual practice, and that's always important to me. Research and practice need to come together. And I think this is a very good example of how that can happen. So I'm very thankful for that learning and I'm also very thankful for the quality of questions, the quality of feedback that came from people who were participating here, and the quality of presentations that I was able to see. I wish I could have seen all of them. But I learned a great deal from all of them. So, thank you.

Arnold Fege, Director of Public Engagement and Advocacy, Public Education Network,
Washington, DC

There are a number of lessons really, and epiphanies that occurred to me. One is that this is a lonely business we're in sometimes and we don't realize that there's a lot of people that never, like you—I know I speak for Chris as well. We've really learned a lot from the questions and dialogues that we've had, both formally and informally, having coffee as well as during the sessions. I think there are a couple of other pieces. One, John, I learned from you too—and from Karen—how to put Clip Art on my Power Points, and I promise to use a cowgirl and cowboy the next time I do it. But I've really learned from you this lesson again, and it's validating, is this inextricable link between achievement and parental involvement. There was also another discussion, which was an "aha!" for me in one of our sessions, that we have frequently designed parental involvement programs for disadvantaged parents. But thinking that there's a lot of political and social capital among those that are more affluent in our communities, now we're finding that there's barriers to parental involvement across the board. Notwithstanding class and race, each face their own different barriers and different problems, but we may want to expand our research base and begin to take a look at a larger paradigm. Heather, I can't tell you how much I enjoyed your presentation, especially related to the competence of the next generation. I agree with you that this next generation of people taking on our work are going to be taking a look at how we link the research pieces to the, to practice in our school building. And I think, lastly, and I share the frustration, but I think we also have to take some optimism, is a number of people said, you know what I didn't—this really reaffirmed, I knew a lot about the research, but the real pieces that we were talking about is how do our organizations have to change. And I think Mary touched on this, if we have the same old organizations doing the same old things, we're going to get the same old results. And when we're moving into an atmosphere of high achievement, the same old practices didn't work when we had the same old schools. They clearly are not going to work when we have higher academic expectations for our communities. I think this issue of how to take the research and begin to implement it. Where do we access the system? What role does leadership play? What role does professional development in higher ed have to undertake in order to make changes in their programs? How do we, at the higher ed level, begin to create interdisciplinary experiences for our education students, taking in sociology, psychology. I love political science. And then the last piece is not losing the importance of mobilization, that it's not only the autonomous school, but beginning to mobilize parents around common themes, especially those things around achievement, equity, and racism. And lastly, I just learned tremendous amounts of tips and information from you all. I have to say it's extremely energizing. So, with all humility, I want to thank everyone who took their time to come here today.

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Christine M. McWayne, Assistant Professor of Applied Psychology, Steinhardt School of Education,
New York, NY

Hi, I'm Christine McWayne from New York University. And I was just incredibly honored and privileged and humbled to be asked to come here and speak to this very distinguished audience. I tell the students I work with that hardest group of folks I present to are Head Start parents and the most rewarding also because they are the hardest. And then my second favorite is practitioners and researchers in the same room. And I think this was so wonderful for me because of that. Because I think we have different perspectives but we have the same passion, and it's so important to bring those two together. Something that I've learned, actually—before John, right, because he's going last. When you go last, everybody says everything that you want to say, for the most part, so I just want to add a couple of things that other people have said. Arnold raised an issue that was also raised within my group, and I don't see the woman here anymore, and I'm sorry about that because she had some incredible things to say. But related to this issue of parent involvement in communities that we don't think a lot about, because we assume that things are okay. And Arnold brought up some of those issues, but I think an implication that I'm taking from that discussion that I think applies to all families is this issue of the link between family involvement and achievement, relates to the issue of what we define as successful in our society. And we're all educators here, in some respect. And so those issues are very near and dear to our hearts. But perhaps we should start thinking as a community about some of the other outcomes that define success for folks, realizing that the groups that we're ignoring in some sense because funding doesn't go there for obvious reasons, are the folks that are largely in charge of setting policy. And so I just, that was really thought-provoking, and I hope I was able to articulate that a little bit. The woman who was bringing it up in my session was actually much more articulate than I am right now. But that was very thought-provoking for me. So I appreciate the opportunity to be here and to be asked to speak, but I enjoyed more hearing from everyone else. So, thank you very much.

Kris Kaiser Olson, Executive Director, Parents for Public Schools of Waco, TX

I'm Chris Olson from Waco, Texas, with Parents for Public Schools. I think a few things that I've realized yet again is that there are few more people who want parent involvement and who agree that we need it than there are those who truly fight it. The challenge is finding the time and making it a high enough priority. We also have a consistent commonality in people from all over this country and the folks who are here from Canada. We face the same challenges, the same barriers, and many of the same strategies for being successful. Which I find very comforting. And Waco, Texas is not as wacky as people think. We all face the same kind of challenges. I'm also reminded again that process is unbelievably important. Probably the most important when it comes to parent involvement when it comes to creating and sustaining parent and community connections with schools, is the process that we follow to get to the point of implementation, and I am thankful to you all for reminding me yet again that parents are not alone in trying to make a place at the table for parents. There are a lot of folks all over the place who are seeing the value of parents being a part of the conversation and a part of the decision making. And thank you for that.

Heather Weiss, Founder and Director, Harvard Family Research Project, Cambridge, MA

I wanted to first, before introducing our presenters today to make some final comments to you, thank you all for being here and for engaging so enthusiastically in this symposium. And to invite you to, of course, join our family involvement network and to—which is free—and to access our online resources. And most importantly, to give us feedback about what's useful in carrying out your future important work in connecting with families and communities and schools. The kind of research, the kind of professional development tools, evaluation tools, and your own personal practices. We look forward to reading the proceedings from today's symposium and to hearing from you about your continued work. I know for myself that some of the information that you've heard from presenters and from your own questions and comments today that I'm going to take back with me, our research at Harvard Family Research Project as well as our training of aspiring teachers in our other work, is the importance of contexts. That family involvement doesn't come in a void. That it's important to think about it in the context of schools and in societal contexts such as the structural inequities across race and class lines, for example, which John Diamond was talking about this morning. It is also important to think of family involvement as a developmental phenomenon. And to think about the kinds, all the kinds of ways that families can be involved, ranging from participation and civic engagement. And to think of family involvement as a developmental phenomenon all the way from earliest childhood through high school, and to think about family involvement over time and how that may change and how we can sustain it. And to think about the

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different layers of family involvement. Some of the things that I was reminded of. All of this is very reaffirming to me. The individual perceptions and actions, the relationships that Karen Knapp talked about, and the organizations—schools and other organizations. And systems, and how we can go about supporting and changing those. So I'd like to invite our presenters to come up here and make a few of their own observations on things that they've learned throughout the day. Eric, I volunteer you first. I'm going to pass this off to you, Eric. And before I do that, I just want to make one more plug for your purple sheets, to hand those in at the end of the day. And Rachel has an envelope there in the back. Thanks, Eric.

Ruth Yoon, Executive Director, Families in Schools, Los Angeles, CA

Ruth Yoon from Los Angeles Families and Schools. And I believe it was Karen this morning—I don't know if she's still here—who said we need to put the findings into action. And I love what she said about are there plans here for Boston schools in terms of getting schools to create an action team and actually develop an action plan. And I know, this is something that she advocates. But just hearing it today, I was thinking okay, L.A. Unified, watch out, because here we come.