



Harvard Family Research Project  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Research and Evaluation of Family Involvement in Education: What Lies Ahead?

As researchers and evaluators in the field of family–school–community partnerships, we are inviting colleagues to join with us to advance its practice in the context of dramatic changes in both the demographic characteristics of the student population and the education reform agenda.

Our immediate goal is to start a national conversation about the need to invest in the research, development, and evaluation of family involvement interventions and about the most promising areas for these investments. This conversation, and written documentation from it, should help the field attract more funders and enable more strategic, targeted, and cumulative use of evaluation resources. The longer-term goal is to build the family involvement field by supporting the development and implementation of an overall evaluation investment strategy that results in more effective family involvement interventions that demonstrably benefit children and youth.

A first key step in this conversation will be an AERA panel discussion session on 4/14 at 12:25pm entitled “Research and Evaluation of Family Involvement in Education: What Lies Ahead?” We invite you to join us in Salon 8 at the Sheraton Hotel for this discussion. Panelists and session participants will start the collective and collaborative conversation that will be necessary to use evaluation strategically for field building.

A larger subsequent meeting of key players is being planned for fall 2005, in which participants will be asked to join the ongoing conversation and to critique, add to and communicate the emerging recommendations for a field-building evaluation strategy and priorities. By the end of 2005, we hope to have a collectively developed document laying out a strategy that warrants and guides the evaluation investments that are needed to build the family involvement intervention field.

In conversation with one another, we have begun to characterize key principles or criteria to guide the choice of four to five priority evaluation areas within the field of family–school–community partnerships. These are the criteria that we propose for priority evaluation areas:

- Those with the largest potential impact on children
- Those with the greatest potential to bring knowledge to practice
- Those that are grounded in solid research-based theory, and where the theory guides the choice of evaluation questions and outcomes
- Those that include interventions of programs carried out under different venues, including schools, community groups, and families
- Those that include evaluations of interventions for families with children of different ages

- Those where individual interventions are demonstrably ready for evaluation—strong interventions with a well worked-out theory of change and the capacity to conduct high-quality evaluation

We also propose some key features of evaluations designed to build effective interventions:

- Interdisciplinary theories that provide well-grounded predictions about the anticipated processes and outcomes of the interventions
- Multiple methods
- Longitudinal research
- Examination of subtle aspects of parent involvement (parent expectations and parent and child communication, for example) to build better understanding of how and what types of parent involvement promote development and to design more effective interventions

The following priority areas, which meet the above criteria, have been identified as starting points for further inquiry:

- Factors motivating parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education, how involvement influences outcomes, and how to help teachers and schools encourage involvement
- Home–school communication and parental expectations for children's academic success
- School-based programs of school, family, and community partnership and the roles of districts and states in guiding these programs
- Community organizing as a means of involving low-income and ethnically diverse parents and community members in improving low-performing schools and in children's learning and development

We welcome your input on these ideas. Please email us to share your feedback and to be informed about future opportunities for discussion and convening around this topic. We can be reached at [fine@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:fine@gse.harvard.edu).

Sincerely,

Heather B. Weiss  
Anne T. Henderson  
Joyce L. Epstein  
Kathy Hoover-Dempsey  
William Jeynes