

Involving Parents in Education



Introduction

Today, I'm signing a bill that is truly revolutionary. We are bringing government closer to the people, to the classroom where real decisions are made, and directing the money where the need and the challenge is greatest.

— GOV. JERRY BROWN ON SIGNING SCHOOL FINANCING LAW, JULY 11, 2013

The dramatic reform of California's school funding system, currently being implemented in schools across the state, calls for involving parents in their children's schools in two important ways:

- Schools must get input from parents as to how additional state funds intended for low-income students, English learners and foster children are spent.
- Parent involvement is one of eight "priority areas" identified by the state, and schools will be assessed as to how successful they are in working with parents.

EdSource, in collaboration with New America Media, has conducted a review of the voluminous research on the value and impact of parent engagement on their children's performance and the schools they attend, especially as it relates to the California experience.

Much of the research on parent involvement is written for an academic or policy audience, often in very abstract terms. But these are some of the principal conclusions that can be drawn from the examination of much of the research:

- Parent involvement at home and at school has a measurable impact on student performance in school, and is particularly important for English learners and students from low-income families.
- Parent involvement is related to improved student behavior in school and better attitudes about schoolwork generally.
- Improved communication between teachers and parents increases student engagement as measured by homework completion rates, on-task behavior and class participation.

- At-risk behaviors such as alcohol use, violence and other anti-social behaviors decrease as parent involvement increases.
- Barriers to parent involvement are multiple, including: a lack of time among working parents; negative prior experiences with schools; an inability of parents to help children with their homework; limited funding to support parent engagement activities; teachers and administrators connecting with parents primarily when their children misbehave; and a lack of staff training in different strategies to involve parents.
- Principal leadership is a key element in involving parents. Successful strategies implemented in Los Angeles and elsewhere include: holding workshops for immigrant families on the U.S. education system that include food and activities geared to parents' literacy levels; setting up weekend teacher-led workshops on math, science and computers; and offering workshops on parenting strategies for more effective discipline at home and how best to help students with their homework.
- Although there has been little systematic work in this area, the research literature does point to community organizing efforts that have been effective in bringing about change on a districtwide level.
- Parent involvement has been mandated by state and federal laws for many decades. As a result, a multitude of instruments exist for evaluating the success or otherwise of a school's parent engagement efforts.



*I always have to remind people
that the biggest ingredient
in school performance is the
teacher. That's the biggest
ingredient within a school. But
the single biggest ingredient is
the parent.*

– PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AT FOX
SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN MISSOURI,
APRIL 29, 2009.

BACKGROUND

California's new legislation reforming how the state funds its public schools (Assembly Bill 97) puts more power in the hands of school districts and gives parents and communities a stronger voice—and greater responsibility—in dictating how those dollars are actually spent. It is perhaps the most significant and far-reaching change in California public education in four decades.

Under the Local Control Funding Formula, additional funds will be directed to districts and student populations based on the number of low-income students, English learners and foster children they serve, in the expectation that the extra funds will be used to improve the educational outcomes of these high-needs students.

All districts will also be required to work closely with their communities in devising accountability plans. With about half of California's 6 million public school students coming from low-income homes and 40% from homes where English is not the primary language,¹ the new law represents a significant opportunity to reduce funding inequities and to help raise student achievement.

School districts will be required to draw up a Local Control and Accountability Plan with parent input by July 2014.² To involve parents in preparing the budget, the law requires districts to hold a public meeting, get input from a district-level parent advisory committee and, if applicable, from an English learner parent advisory committee.

"The PTA is encouraging parents to partner and ask questions now, even as development of accountability plans is happening," said Colleen You, president of the California State PTA. "School districts should communicate these opportunities to parents, and explain that parents may comment in writing during a public hearing or via parent advisory committees."

In January 2014, the State Board of Education issued [guidelines](#) for how school districts should "meaningfully engage" parents, students and other community members in the plan.

For example, school districts will be expected to involve parents in a timely manner so that they can effectively contribute to the development of the plan. Districts will also have to show what changes were made to the plan in response to input from parents and other stakeholder—and to show how that input contributed to improved outcomes for students.

State Board President Michael Kirst also stressed the importance of parent involvement in making the new law work. "I would turn the challenge over to parents and say, you can't expect it to happen as a result of a state law," he said. "You've got to get out there and get involved."

NOTES

1 EdSource Today, [California's Students](#).

2 California Department of Education: [Local Control Funding Formula Overview](#).

NEW ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN CALLS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The Local Control and Accountability Plan that every district must draw up requires it to set annual performance goals in eight separate categories and create specific plans to achieve them, including parent involvement.³ Districts must annually update their plans for the targeted student populations showing progress in each of the eight state priority areas, including parent involvement.⁴

EIGHT PRIORITY AREAS

Student Achievement

- Performance on standardized tests.
- Score on Academic Performance Index.
- Share of students that are college and career ready.
- English Learners (ELs) that become English proficient.
- EL reclassification rate.
- Share of students that pass Advanced Placement exams with 3 or higher.
- Share of students determined prepared for college by the Early Assessment Program.

Student Engagement

- School attendance rates.
- Chronic absenteeism rates.
- Middle school dropout rates.
- High school dropout rates.
- High school graduation rates.

Other Student Outcomes

- Other indicators of student performance in required areas of study. May include performance on other exams.

School Climate

- Student suspension rates.
- Student expulsion rates.
- Other local measures.

Parent Involvement

- Efforts to seek parent input.
- Promotion of parental participation.

Basic Services

- Rate of teacher misassignment.
- Student access to standards-aligned instructional materials.
- Facilities in good repair.

Implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- Implementation of CCSS for all students, including EL.

Course Access

- Student access and enrollment in all required areas of study.

NOTES

3 Legislative Analyst's Office. *An Overview of the Local Control Funding Formula*.

4 Ibid.

5 Elementary & Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.) Title I—Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (Sec. 1001).

The new law describes parent involvement as “the efforts a school district makes to seek parent input in making decisions for the school district and each individual school site, and including how the school district will promote parental participation in programs for...pupils...with exceptional needs.”

At least since 1965 when the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act⁵ specified that parents should play a direct role in their children’s education, parent involvement has been recognized as promoting both better student achievement and stronger communities. In 2011, the California Department

of Education published its *Family Engagement Framework*,⁶ based on a decade of work involving a federally mandated advisory group called the Family Area Network and the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd. The framework notes “while the school and the home may operate independently, individuals and activities in each arena shape the education and development of the child. Together we can be more effective.”⁷

In fact, California’s Education Code Section 11504 specifically calls for school districts to establish a “parent involvement program for each school” and describes in detail what the program should consist of and what its purposes are.⁸

The most widely adopted framework for viewing different levels of parent involvement comes from Johns Hopkins University’s Joyce Epstein, who directs the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools.

Epstein’s six-part framework, *Schools, Family, and Community Partnerships*,⁹ forms the basis of California’s own *Family Engagement Framework*. It has also been adopted by the National PTA, the National School Boards Association, as well as departments of education in several states.

Epstein has identified six ways for schools to involve parents:

- 1. Help with parenting.** Schools assist families with parenting skills and provide family support.
- 2. Communications.** Schools communicate with families about programs, curricula and student progress, and create two-way communication channels between school and home.
- 3. Volunteering.** Schools actively recruit parents as volunteers in a wide range of activities.
- 4. Learning at home.** Schools help involve parents in their child’s learning at home, including doing homework, helping their children set goals and other activities related to the school curriculum.
- 5. Decision-making.** Schools include families as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees and parent organizations.
- 6. Collaboration.** Schools help coordinate their own resources and services for families, students and the school with community organizations, businesses and cultural organizations.¹⁰

NOTES

6 California Department of Education. *Family Engagement Framework: A Tool for California School Districts*, 2011, p. 3.

7 Ibid, p. 2.

8 See California Education Code Sections 11500–11506.

9 Epstein, Joyce L. *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Westview Press, 2010.

10 Epstein, Joyce L., Sanders, M.G., Simon, B.S., Salinas, K.C., Jansorn, N.R. and Voorhis, F.L. Excerpted from *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (2nd edition). Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002.

But to ensure success in each of these areas, Epstein has developed a program that has been introduced in schools throughout the nation. It involves establishing “action teams” made up teachers, administrators, parents and community partners in every school that are focused on involving parents in a meaningful way with their child’s education and their school.

With a clear focus on promoting student success, the team writes annual plans for family and community involvement, implements and evaluates activities, and integrates the activities conducted by other groups and individual teachers into a comprehensive partnership program for the school. By implementing activities for all six types of involvement, schools can help parents become involved at school and at home in various ways that meet student needs and family schedules. Input from participants helps schools address challenges and improve plans, activities and outreach so that all families can be productive partners in their children’s school success.¹¹

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

The emphasis—and desire—for parent involvement has spawned decades of research that point to a powerful connection between parents’ involvement in their child’s education and a range of other outcomes.

However, although a large number of studies show a positive relationship between student academic outcomes and parent involvement, the relationship is a complex one.

Research shows that parent involvement by itself can lead to gains, but when paired with other types of school improvements, its effects can be even greater. Outcomes will depend on many factors including the particular way parents are involved, the achievement measures used to measure academic outcomes (e.g., grades or test scores), the academic subjects that are being measured (e.g., math or reading), and the socioeconomic background of students.¹² Other research shows that even when the relationship between parent involvement and academic outcomes is not clear-cut, there is evidence that it can positively affect students’ behavior and social skills.¹³

As researchers from WestEd noted in their review of the literature in 2011 for the California Department of Education:

The richness and complexity that characterize parent involvement in education preclude the drawing of strict cause-effect conclusions. An infinite variety of demographic variables impact the experiences of children and families.

Thus, rather than causation, it makes more sense to talk of an association between parent involvement activities and outcomes.¹⁴

The following are some of the principal conclusions to be drawn from research regarding parent involvement.

NOTES

11 Epstein, Joyce L. and Sheldon, Steven B. “Moving Forward: Ideas for Research on School, Family, and Community Partnerships.” Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2006.

12 “Question: Does parent involvement increase student achievement at the middle level?” Research Summary #18, National Middle School Association, 2000.

13 El Nokali, Nermeen E., et al. “Parent Involvement and Children’s Academic and Social Development in Elementary School.” *Child Development*, Vol. 81, Issue 3, pp. 988-1005, May/June 2010.

14 California Department of Education. *Family Engagement Framework: A Tool for California School Districts*, 2011.

Improved School Outcomes

Research indicates a strong association between parent involvement with a child's education both at home and at school and student performance in school. Engaging parents is particularly important for English learners and students from low-income families. In fact, greater parent involvement is correlated with higher student test scores and better grades for the school as a whole.¹⁵

Data from the University of Chicago's Consortium for Chicago School Research, *The Essential Supports for School Improvement* (2006), for example, measured parent involvement in 104 schools. Among those weak in parent involvement, just 10% showed substantial improvement in reading, and just 4% showed substantial improvement in math. Among those strong in parent involvement, 40% showed substantial improvement in reading, and 42% showed substantial improvement in math.

According to the report, one key reason for the gains was that parents involved in their children's education become aware of homework assignments and tests and were able to reinforce good study habits in the home.

Researchers relying on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study on more than 10,000 12th graders found that students whose parents "promoted academic achievement" scored better on academic tests. These parents checked homework, attended school meetings and events, and discussed school programs, classes and activities with their children. The impact of this parent interest outweighed social factors at school such as student participation in extracurricular activities, a positive school climate and teacher morale.

NOTES

15 Darsch, Craig, Miao, Y. and Shippen, P. "A Model for Involving Parents of Children with Learning and Behavior Problems in the Schools." *Preventing School Failure*, Vol. 48 (3), pp. 24-35.

16 Dufur, Mikaela J., Parcel, Toby L. and Troutman, Kelly P. "Does capital at home matter more than capital at school? Social capital effects on academic achievement." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, Aug. 29, 2012.

17 California Department of Education. *Family Engagement Framework: A Tool for California School Districts*, 2011.

18 El Nokali, Nermeen E., et al. "Parent Involvement and Children's Academic and Social Development in Elementary School." *Child Development*, Vol. 81, Issue 3, pp. 988-1005, May/June 2010.

19 Darsch, Craig, Miao, Y. and Shippen, P. "A Model for Involving Parents of Children with Learning and Behavior Problems in the Schools." *Preventing School Failure*, Vol. 48 (3), pp. 24-35.

"We acknowledge that what goes on in school is important," said study coauthor Toby L. Parcel from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at North Carolina State University. "But the evidence suggests that what goes on between the parent and child at home is much more important." Parents, she added, often "don't realize how important they are."¹⁶

The literature also underscores the importance of even basic communication between school and home, including activities such as parent-teacher meetings, attending school events, and even "one way" communication like regular progress reports, all of which are associated with higher student achievement.¹⁷

Improved In-School Behavior and Attitudes

Parent involvement is also related to improved student behavior in school and improved attitudes about schoolwork generally.¹⁸

When students report feeling support from both home and school, they have more self-confidence, feel school is more important and as a result tend to do better in school.

Improved communication between teachers and parents is associated with increased student engagement as measured by homework completion rates, on-task behavior and class participation.¹⁹

Greater Teacher Satisfaction and Improved Instruction

Teachers reported greater job satisfaction in schools with higher levels of parent involvement, and they received higher ratings of their teaching skills from both parents and principals.²⁰

Reduced At-Risk Behaviors

Parent involvement in schools is associated with lower alcohol use and other at-risk behaviors.²¹ A 2007 report from UCLA's Center for Mental Health in Schools, for example, found that interventions that involved parents and community resources of some kind were "especially promising" in targeting at-risk behaviors.²²

Improved School Climate

The wide range of effects associated with parent involvement explains why many researchers view it as an indispensable ingredient in building or sustaining effective schools. It creates trust and removes barriers among principals, teachers, students and parents. These points are well-documented in nationally recognized studies such as *Taking Leadership, Innovating Change: Profiles in Family, School, and Community Engagement*²³ (2010) from Harvard University's Family Research Project, as well as *The Essential Supports for School Improvement*²⁴ (2006), published by the Consortium for Chicago School Research.

The Consortium study asserted not only that parent involvement spurs academic improvements for schools, but that it also helps establish an environment that makes other types of improvements possible. "Partnership and cooperation among teachers, parents and community members," wrote lead author Penny Sebring, "provide the social resources needed for broad-based work on conditions in the school and the challenges involved in improving student learning."²⁵ For instance, schools with strong parent support are more likely to attract effective teachers and principals, who prefer to work in schools with effective support networks.²⁶ Parents, too, will volunteer and provide support in greater numbers in schools that make them feel welcomed and respected.²⁷

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

Parent involvement is important in all schools, but it is particularly crucial in low-income communities. Epstein's research highlights three key points that must be considered by any district as it develops its plans for parent involvement:

- Schools in low-income communities need to ensure that they contact parents and families more often about positive accomplishments of their children to offset other contacts that focus on behavior or academic problems at school.²⁸

NOTES

20 National PTA, October 28, 2005.

21 Reid, J.B. and Eddy, J.M. "The prevention of anti-social behavior." *Handbook of Antisocial Behavior*, 343–356, 1997.

22 Center for Mental Health in Schools at the University of California-Los Angeles. "Youth Risk Taking Behavior: The Role of Schools," June 2007.

23 The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group. "Taking Leadership, Innovating Change: Profiles in Family, School, and Community Engagement." Harvard Family Research Project, March 2010.

24 Sebring, Penny Bender, Allensworth, Elaine, Bryk, Anthony S., Easton, John Q. and Luppescu, Stuart. "The Essential Supports for School Improvement." The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, September 2006.

25 Ibid, p. 2.

26 Ibid, p. 46.

27 Ibid.

28 Epstein is noting a phenomenon anecdotally reported by parents, that teachers and administrators only contact them when a student is in trouble and never to report high achievement or other good news.

- Schools need to work harder to involve parents who have traditionally been more challenging to involve in school activities such as single parents, those who live far from school, households where both parents work, and fathers.
- Most teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive programs and are consequently fearful about trying.

THE “HOW” OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Barriers to Parent Involvement

The research also describes a range of barriers standing in the way of parent engagement. These include: a lack of time among working parents; negative prior experiences with schools; an inability of parents to help children with their homework; limited funding to support parent engagement activities; teachers and administrators connecting to parents primarily when their children misbehave; and a lack of staff training in different strategies to engage parents.²⁹ Furthermore, parents may face language barriers, may not be aware of school procedures and may not have transportation or childcare.³⁰

An EdSource survey³¹ of 1,000 California parents in November 2013 provides insights into how parents rank these obstacles. Parents overwhelmingly listed lack of time followed by work schedules as the major barriers to being involved in their schools. A substantial minority also cited other reasons for not participating, including transportation and the absence of translation services. Almost half of the parents surveyed said a lack of childcare was an obstacle. Although most said they felt welcome in their children’s schools, about one in five said they felt their children’s school was not interested in what they had to offer. One in six parents said they didn’t feel welcome at the school.

Principals Key To Parent Involvement

Especially in light of these barriers, principals are key to providing leadership in their schools—including sending the clear message that parents are welcome.³² Mark Warren and his co-authors from the Harvard Graduate School of Education looked at three schools, including one in Los Angeles. They described the crucial role of principals in launching a range of successful strategies including offering workshops for immigrants on the U.S. education system; teacher-led workshops on math, science and computers on the weekends; and workshops for all parents on effective discipline at home and how best to help students with their homework.³³

NOTES

29 Horvatin, Lindsay J. “Perceived Barriers to Parental Involvement in Schools.” A research paper, The Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Stout, December 2011.

30 Barnyak, Natalie Conrad and McNelly, Tracy A. “An Urban School District’s Parent Involvement: A Study of Teachers’ and Administrators’ Beliefs and Practices.” *The School Community Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2009.

31 EdSource. “Parents know little about funding law, but want to get involved, EdSource survey finds.” Dec. 5, 2013.

32 Sebring, Penny Bender, Allensworth, Elaine, Bryk, Anthony S., Easton, John Q. and Luppescu, Stuart. “The Essential Supports for School Improvement.” The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, September 2006.

33 Warren, Mark. R., et al. “Beyond the Bake Sale: A Community-Based Relational Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools.” Harvard Graduate School of Education, *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 111, No. 9, pp. 2209-2254, September 2009.

Broader Community Organizing Initiatives

Little controlled research exists describing the impact of parent involvement in trying to implement or change policies at their school or district through school site councils, PTAs or school boards. However, the research literature does describe the impact of some community organizing efforts that have been effective in implementing programs and policies at a school or district level.

Elena Lopez with the Harvard Family Research Project, for example, has identified some gains that have resulted from successful community organizing efforts—new school facilities, the creation of small schools, health and safety programs, new academic programs in math and science, and increased professional development opportunities for teachers.”³⁴

MEASURING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In 2014, the State Board of Education will issue guidelines or “rubrics” for how schools will be assessed in the eight “priority areas” outlined in the Local Control Funding Formula law, including parent involvement.

But how will parent involvement, and its effectiveness, be assessed? Since 1965, involvement of parents has been mandated as part of federal law—without necessarily being carried out effectively. However, a number of tools have been developed to solicit the views of parents and to monitor the effectiveness of parent involvement both at home and at school.

For example, the 71-question survey³⁵ developed by the survey firm SurveyMonkey with researchers at Harvard Graduate School of Education is intended to provide information in response to questions such as these:

- How much help are students getting at home?
- How engaged are parents in their child’s schooling, and what potential barriers exist?
- How confident are parents in supporting their child’s schooling?
- How do parents view their school regarding academic and social standards?
- How well do a school’s academic program, social climate and organizational structure match a student’s needs?
- How do parents view their roles as well as teachers’ roles in different aspects of their child’s schooling?

Another similar survey was developed by the Appleseed Network, with support from the Kellogg Foundation. The instrument attempts to categorize a school’s overall parent engagement efforts on a scale of 0 to 260 that measures levels of parent involvement from “inadequate” to “exceptional.” It was based on input from the Center for the Study of School Climate, academics from Teachers College at Columbia University, and a gathering of 100 parent involvement groups, teachers and principals.

NOTES

34 Ibid.

35 Mapp, Karen. Harvard Graduate School of Education with SurveyMonkey. [“Parent Survey for K-12 Schools.”](#)

In light of the multiple ways parents can be involved in their schools, there are correspondingly multiple ways to measure the extent of their involvement and whether they are having an impact. For example, California’s 2011 *Family Engagement Framework* (Section 4.03) provides some guidance for how to keep track of “measurable or observable” examples of parent involvement. The challenge for schools is to not get too bogged down in a bureaucratic exercise of tracking and assessing parent involvement at the expense of placing their energies into making it happen in the first place.³⁶

CONCLUSION

Our review of the literature on parent involvement shows that it can be a powerful tool associated with improved student and school outcomes, reduced high-risk behavior, and a positive school climate, among several other outcomes.

But supporters of the new school funding law, such as Liz Guillen, director of legislative and community affairs for Public Advocates, caution that given the absence of guidance from the state on how best to involve parents and the slow pace of outreach in many areas, there is a danger that districts may engage largely the same individuals that they have in the past.

“If there are not more training opportunities to engage, this (the new school funding law) will never achieve its promise,” Guillen said.

What is clear is that parent involvement is a continuous process that is most effective when it starts with helping parents contribute to their children’s own education—at an early age. After that link to a school has been made, it can then be extended to related school activities, to involvement with school and district committees, and the more policy-oriented involvement envisaged by the Local Control Funding Formula.

The new state law ties a school’s success at involving parents directly to how it will be held accountable for the additional funds it receives to meet the educational needs of low-income students, English learners and foster children. Schools could view this requirement as another onerous state mandate—or, as this report indicates, as one that has the potential to yield considerable payoffs to individual students and the entire school community in the short and long term. 

NOTES

36 California Department of Education. *Family Engagement Framework; A Tool for California School Districts*, Sacramento, p. 40, 2011.



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