



NATIONAL POLICY FORUM FOR  
FAMILY, SCHOOL, &  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

*Beyond Random Acts*  
*Family, School, and Community Engagement*  
*as an Integral Part of Education Reform*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Family, school, and community engagement in education should be an essential strategy in building a pathway to college- and career-readiness in today's competitive global society. Research repeatedly correlates family engagement with student achievement, yet this strategy is rarely activated as an integral part of school reform efforts. Now is the time to transform family engagement strategies so that they are intentionally aligned with student learning and achievement.

Education reform is headed towards preparing students for the twenty-first century. Family engagement needs to be aligned with this new direction, which involves disrupting the current state of practice. Educators tend to treat parents and families as bystanders rather than as partners, and often overlook their strengths and their capacity to transform public education. Family and community engagement is siloed into disparate programs that are disconnected from instructional practice and school turnaround strategies. This state of "random acts of family involvement" has to give way to systemic and sustained approaches.<sup>1</sup>

The transformation from random acts of family involvement to an effective strategy to promote student success begins with a broad reframing of what it should look like. Family engagement is a *shared responsibility* of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement; it is *continuous* from birth to young adulthood; and it *occurs across multiple settings* where children learn.

Although family involvement in education is not an original idea, a systemic and integrated approach to family engagement represents an innovative strategy in education reform. This thinking embodies a dramatic shift in framing family engagement and reorganizing its practice. It taps into an overlooked strategy that can leverage improvements in student learning.

### ***Purpose of the forum***

The policy forum brought to the center what is now on the periphery of education reform: family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) as a strategy to support student success. The forum sought to serve as a catalyst for reframing what FSCE should look like in the twenty-first century, and for repositioning this engagement as a major contributor to twenty-first century learning and school turnaround efforts. There is a substantial amount of innovation intentionally linking family engagement to learning, as well as a strong base of practice experience on which to build more systemic, integrated, and sustained approaches.

This paper set the stage for the forum by presenting a research-based framing of family engagement. It examines the policy levers for change in promoting systemic FSCE, and focuses on data systems as a powerful tool to engage families for twenty-first century student learning. Because education reform will succeed only when all students are prepared for the demands of the twenty-first century, the forum also aimed to examine the role of families in transforming low-performing schools.

This paper aims to start the conversation and to help shape what role federal policy will play in supporting FSCE efforts in schools across the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Gill Kressley, K. (2008). *Breaking new ground: Seeding proven practices into proven programs*. Paper presented August 1, 2008 at the National PIRC Conference in Baltimore, MD.

## INTRODUCTION

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The United States needs to prepare our students for the demands of a twenty-first century global society. Unfortunately, as many as one-third of American students fail to graduate from high school on time. Only 60 percent of high school graduates go on to college full-time the following fall, with only one-fifth of these students earning an associate's degree within three years and a bachelor's degree within six years.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, many students that do graduate lack the world-class knowledge and skills needed to advance their careers and sustain America's economic leadership.

Education leaders recognize the many challenges of our current system of education, and major policy shifts are occurring in tandem with entrepreneurial ventures. Policy initiatives such as Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), Promise Neighborhoods, and efforts to turn around low-performing schools have all been designed to raise student achievement and stimulate innovation. Public-private partnerships are taking the lead on "next generation learning," with its emphasis on creative solutions to respond to the expectations of a global, knowledge-based economy.<sup>3</sup> Together with these developments, student data systems are being used to drive decision-making within a new paradigm of learning and continuous improvement.

Preparing students for the twenty-first century demands the full spectrum of society's resources to support all students, and especially the disadvantaged and disengaged. A disproportionate percentage of students who drop out of high school and college are low-income, of ethnic minority status, or have disabilities. Ensuring that all students are able to achieve at high levels will require a comprehensive set of learning supports, beginning in early childhood and continuing all the way to high school and beyond. Over 40 years of research confirms that family engagement improves school readiness, student academic achievement, and graduation rates.<sup>4</sup> FSCE in education should become an essential strategy in building this pathway to college- and career-readiness in today's competitive global society.

In fact, rigorous empirical research on school reform provides a compelling case for elevating FSCE as an educational strategy. A Chicago study of low-performing elementary schools concluded that five essential supports work together as a system to transform low-performing schools. Leadership is the first support and the driver of four other essential supports: (1) instructional guidance; (2) teacher professional capacity; (3) school climate; and (4) parent, school, and community ties. No single essential support can make a sustained impact by itself; thus, individual programs—whether to improve curriculum, train teachers, or involve parents—often fail to live up to their potential. Just like baking a cake, all key ingredients must be present to successfully create the whole.<sup>5</sup>

The current state of family involvement, though, is not aligned with this systemic framework or with emerging trends in education reform. Educators tend to treat parents and families as bystanders rather than as partners, and often overlook their strengths and their capacity to transform public education. Family engagement efforts are siloed into disparate programs that are disconnected from instructional practice and school turnaround strategies. Kate Gill Kressley,

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<sup>2</sup> Pathways to College Network (2004). *A Shared Agenda*. Boston: Pathways to College Network.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Chief State School Officers (n. d.). *Next Generation Learners: A Framework for Action*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL); Weiss, H. B., Bouffard, S. M., Bridgall, B. L., & Gordon, E. W. (2009). *Reframing family involvement in education: Supporting families to support educational equity* (Equity Matters: Research Review No. 5). New York: The Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College.

<sup>5</sup> Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2009). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

senior researcher at RMC Associates, coined the phrase, “random acts of family involvement”<sup>6</sup> to describe these distinct, uncoordinated engagement efforts. As a result, family engagement has not been used strategically to impact student outcomes. As Christopher Cross, former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education, pointed out, “While federal policy has attempted to deal with parent involvement...those efforts have been halfhearted, unfocused, and ineffective.”<sup>7</sup> The research base on family engagement repeatedly correlates family engagement with student achievement, and therefore it is time to transform family engagement strategies so that they are intentionally aligned with student learning and achievement.

The transformation from random acts of family involvement to an effective strategy to promote student success begins with a broad reframing of what it should look like. Family engagement is a *shared responsibility* of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement; it is *continuous* from birth to young adulthood; and it *occurs across multiple settings* where children learn.

As a reform strategy, family engagement should be *systemic, integrated, and sustained*. *Systemic* family engagement is purposefully designed as a core component of educational goals such as school readiness, student achievement, and school turnaround. *Integrated* family engagement is embedded into structures and processes designed to meet these goals, including training and professional development, teaching and learning, community collaboration, and the use of data for continuous improvement and accountability. *Sustainable* family engagement operates with adequate resources, including public-private partnerships, to ensure meaningful and effective strategies that have the power to impact student learning and achievement.

Community engagement refers to the support, services, and advocacy activities that community-based organizations—including businesses and faith-based institutions—provide in order to improve student learning and promote family engagement. While an important function of these organizations consists of outreach to community members, they also assume broader roles. Community schools, for example, consist of partnerships between schools and local organizations to provide comprehensive supports such as tutoring and service learning for students, and leadership training, parenting education, and health and social services for families. Community-based organizations build social relationships and bring together resources to achieve collective goals. They are often the implementing arm of national education initiatives such as those for high quality early childhood education, extended learning, and dropout prevention. Although community engagement is a vital component in education reform, this paper will focus primarily on family engagement.

## **POLICY FORUM TO ADVANCE A NATIONAL STRATEGY ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

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The policy forum brought to the center what is on the periphery of education reform: FSCE as a strategy that leverages improvements in student learning. The forum sought to serve as a catalyst for reframing what family and community engagement should look like in the twenty-first century, and for repositioning this engagement as a major contributor to twenty-first century learning and school turnaround efforts. There is a substantial amount of innovation intentionally linking family engagement to learning, as well as a strong base of practical experience on which to build more systemic, integrated, and sustained approaches. The forum posed these four questions:

<sup>6</sup> Gill Kressley, K. (2008). *Breaking new ground: Seeding proven practices into proven programs*. Paper presented August 1, 2008 at the National PIRC Conference in Baltimore, MD.

<sup>7</sup> Cross, C. (2004). *Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age* (p.157). New York: Teachers College Press.

- 1. What does family and community engagement look like in a new era of education reform?**
- 2. How can federal, state, and local stakeholders leverage existing and emerging legislation and programs to create systemic family engagement?**
- 3. How can educators and other stakeholders use student performance data to connect families and schools in meaningful ways?**
- 4. What are the opportunities for engaging families in transforming low-performing schools?**

In serving as a discussion piece for the forum, this paper begins with a research-based framing of family engagement. It examines the policy levers that can drive change in promoting systemic family engagement, and focuses on data systems as a powerful tool to engage families for twenty-first century student learning. Because education reform will succeed only when *all* students are prepared for the demands of the twenty-first century, the paper will also examine the role of families in transforming low-performing schools.

#### **A FRAMEWORK OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION**

Today’s policy environment, with its focus on innovation and outcomes in challenging the status quo, paves the way to reframe family engagement in education for the twenty-first century. This policy environment puts students at the center of “next generation learning.”<sup>8</sup> Next generation learning is personalized and tailored to individual learning needs. It prepares students for the acquisition of world-class knowledge and skills, and engages them in directing their educational experience. One example of this next generation learning is the New York City public schools’ Innovation Zone initiative (iZone), which will be working with 200 schools over the next three years to design and prototype models that move schools from a classroom- to a student-centered approach. Such personalized learning individualizes the education experience by focusing on the pace at which a student learns, as well as how they learn best, while ensuring they gain the competencies needed to succeed in college and the workplace. Teachers, parents and students use tools to help students develop a learning plan that will demonstrate mastery. This approach fosters what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset” that is continuously learning and growing from every experience. Individuals with a growth mindset see their life as a work in progress that they can shape at every level. Barriers and challenges become opportunities, and effort and resilience make for success.<sup>9</sup> By connecting family engagement purposefully to learning and achievement, a systemic approach paves the way for this next generation learning.

Schools and communities can leverage family assets to support personalized learning and cultivate a growth mindset, as illustrated in Poway School District’s approach (see Textbox 1). Families need the support of schools and communities to fully understand what it means to be educated in the twenty-first century. Teachers and administrators also need families to support, monitor, and advocate for their children’s progress. Community organizations can function as intermediaries, building on families’ knowledge and connecting them with new resources to help students develop a growth mindset. Systemic, integrated, and sustained FSCE helps to create a solid foundation for communication between families and school staff, enabling their collaboration in creating a set of support systems—both within and outside of the school—to help students meet their educational goals. Through participation and dialogue with schools and community organizations, families co-create meaningful roles in student learning.

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<sup>8</sup> Council of Chief State School Officers, n. d.

<sup>9</sup> Dweck, C. S. (2006). *The New Psychology of Success*. NY: Random House.

**Textbox 1**

The Poway School District in California adopts an individualized student learning approach. Regular assessments measure student growth and encourage students to set goals for their own learning. After elementary students receive their assessment scores, teachers work with each student individually to develop goals that will help him or her reach the next level of learning. For example, a child who struggles with reading comprehension might set the goal of always summarizing the meaning of each paragraph after she reads it. Parents can attend workshops that explain the assessments; resource materials are also sent to parents and are available through the district website. Not only do parents review their child's data but they also receive the student's goals, and they create "family goals" to support learning at home (e.g., setting a limit for time on video games, creating a time and space for homework and reading). Goal-setting helps children and parents see the connections between what children can do and what they need to do to reach the next level of success. Beginning this process in kindergarten and first grade sets the trajectory for developing a habit of continuous collaboration and improvement in order to succeed in school and in life.<sup>i</sup> With the adoption of a new assessment system and related policies to increase student learning, the district's Academic Performance Index has increased, schools are no longer in "program improvement" status, the community has passed a school bond, and students are more motivated.<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Harvard Family Research Project. (2010). Data for Measuring Growth: Poway Unified School District. *FINE Newsletter* 2(3). Cambridge, MA: Author. Retrieved from <http://hfrp.org/DataForMeasuringGrowth>

<sup>ii</sup> Collins, J., & Wilson, R. (2009) *Students and teachers measuring growth: A strategy to focus on learning and supporting student success* (Powerpoint presentation). Retrieved from <http://www.schoolwisepress.com/seminar/archives.html>

Thus, *the first element of reframing family engagement lies in understanding that engagement is a shared responsibility*. Shared responsibility represents a shift from an attitude of blame—teachers and school staff blaming parents and vice versa—when things go wrong. Instead, both families and schools should acknowledge their complementary roles in a child's educational success. Furthermore, shared responsibility is not only about the ideas and practices of families and their relationships with schools and other educational institutions, but also about these institutions' expectations of, outreach to, and partnerships with families on behalf of a child's learning and development.<sup>10</sup>

Family engagement based on a foundation of shared responsibility strengthens four key roles that families play in their children's educational success:

- **The role of supporting learning:** When early childhood programs and elementary, middle, and high schools impart knowledge about how to support a child's development and learning, families are better equipped to carry out these responsibilities. Positive parenting—including engagement in children's play, shared book reading, showing high expectations, and having conversations about a student's occupational and educational aspirations—is linked to improved academic and behavioral outcomes.
- **The school partner role:** Family involvement with the school—including attendance at parent-teacher conferences, communication with teachers, and volunteer involvement in school activities—provides families with information to make educational decisions and demonstrate support for children, both of which are associated with positive academic outcomes.

<sup>10</sup> Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009.

- **The role of advocate for school improvement:** Advocacy, in the form of collective organizing and mobilization, has several positive outcomes, including increased family engagement, improved school climate and policies, and improved student achievement and behavior.<sup>11</sup>
- **The decision-maker and leadership role:** Although research is not conclusive on whether students benefit from parent participation in school leadership and governance (school councils and school boards), this role builds parent social networks that can influence school climate and give voice to historically underrepresented families. A positive school climate is a key factor in school improvement.

As the Poway example demonstrates, personalized, student-centered learning begins at an early age and sets the foundation for a lifelong quest to develop one’s knowledge, skills, and talents. The second element of reframing family engagement emerges from this developmental perspective: Family engagement is *continuous from birth through young adulthood*. Although it is often associated with practices in early childhood and the elementary grades, family engagement continues to be important in middle school, high school, and college. When schools and communities support sustained family engagement—including transitions from preschool to school and from one grade level to the next—students benefit. Students with engaged parents throughout childhood and adolescence are more likely to graduate from high school.<sup>12</sup> Even if youth do well academically and behaviorally, those with poor relationships with parents are more likely than those with strong relationships to drop out of high school. This suggests that positive and supportive parenting is important for the educational attainment of all youth.

A dominant assumption behind much of educational policy and practice is that school is the *only* place where and when children learn. This assumption is wrong: Learning happens in the home as well as in early childhood centers, afterschool and summer programs, community schools, museums, libraries, parks and recreation offerings, faith-based institutions, and other community settings, and increasingly, through various new technologies. As such, the third element of reframing recognizes that *family engagement reaches across and reinforces student learning in multiple settings*. Families, for example, play a pivotal role in helping children and youth access afterschool and community resources for enrichment or assistance in addressing learning challenges. Among low-income families, parents often seek to overcome negative neighborhood conditions that threaten their children’s lives through “community bridging strategies” that link students to mainstream institutions (e.g. libraries, museums) and expand their web of peers and supportive adults.<sup>13</sup>

In the coming years, families are likely to experience greatly amplified opportunities for engagement outside the classroom. Leading educational experts predict that “the most vibrant innovations in education are likely to take place outside traditional institutions.”<sup>14</sup> Such innovations will come from new media, games and play, afterschool programs, and community-based learning programs. These sources of learning for students also become sources of family guidance and participation.

The reframing of family engagement—as a shared responsibility, continuous from birth to young adulthood, taking place wherever and whenever children learn—suggests that new investments in the FSCE field should focus on a systemic and sustainable approach. A handful of districts are already beginning to adopt this approach by building family engagement into the district’s instructional goals and creating the administrative structures to provide standards of practice;

<sup>11</sup> Mediratta, K., Shah, S., McAlister, S., Fruchter, N., Mokhtar, C., & Lockwood, D. (2008). *Organized communities, stronger schools: A preview of research findings*. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

<sup>12</sup> Englund, M., Englund, B., & Collins, W. A. (2008). Exceptions to high school dropout predictions in a low-income sample: Do adults make a difference? *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(1), 77–93.

<sup>13</sup> Jarrett, R. L. (1999). Successful parenting in high-risk neighborhoods. *The Future of Children*, 9(2), 45–50.

<sup>14</sup> Knowledge Works. (2008). *2020 Forecast: Creating the Future of Learning*. Cincinnati, OH. Retrieved from [www.knowledgeworks.org](http://www.knowledgeworks.org)

aligned professional development; outreach and community partnership; and assessment for learning, improvement, and accountability<sup>15</sup> (see Textbox 2).

### Textbox 2

Boston Public Schools have adopted multiple approaches to embed family engagement in the educational system. The district promotes family engagement as a strategy to improve student outcomes through increased attendance, decreased suspension rates, and other indicators linked to student achievement. It requires all content-area staff members to address how they involve families in their instructional practices. Curriculum development includes tools to help parents understand the content areas their children need to master on a grade-by-grade basis and to help parents use practice tips at home. The district has modified the National PTA standards to serve as a blueprint for professional development and assessment of school progress in family engagement. A Parent University will centralize the district's educational offerings to parents of students in pre-K through grade 12. Over 500 parents attended Parent University sessions in the 2009–2010 school year.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009.

## POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

### *The policy landscape*

Since the 1960s, the commitment to family engagement in learning has been manifested in several pieces of legislation and several federal programs. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires districts to spend 1% of their Title I funds on family involvement activities and includes mandates and opportunities for family involvement at the local level. Under ESEA, underperforming schools are required to include family involvement provisions in their school improvement plans. Several early childhood programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Even Start family literacy program, include mandates for family involvement, as does the 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool program. Family involvement is also part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and federal special education initiatives.<sup>16</sup>

With family involvement funding streams and programs spread across federal departments, it has been difficult to develop systemic, integrated, and sustainable efforts. Scattered activities and events fail to make the connection between family engagement and student outcomes, and give the impression that family engagement is an “add-on” rather than integrated into academic goals. In addition, family involvement often consists of short-term activities rather than a sustained pathway running from early childhood programs through high school. While it is critical that family engagement remain a cornerstone of federal law, ESEA and related programs and legislation should focus on providing incentives, guidance, and capacity to scale up research-based and innovative practices at the local level.

### *Next steps for federal, state, and local policy*

Systemic family engagement is possible: it is being adopted in Boston, Oakland, Federal Way, Wichita, and other school districts around the country.<sup>17</sup> To bring these emerging efforts to scale,

<sup>15</sup> Westmoreland, H., Rosenberg, H. Lopez, M. E., & Weiss, H. B. (2009). *Seeing is Believing: Promising practices for how school districts promote family engagement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

<sup>16</sup> Weiss, H. B., Little, P. M., Bouffard, S. M., Deschenes, S. N., & Malone, H. J. (2009). *The Federal Role in Out-of-School Learning: After-school, summer learning, and family involvement as critical learning supports*. Commissioned by the Center on Education Policy, Washington, DC. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

<sup>17</sup> Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009.



policy levers can build awareness and interest and engage stakeholders to take steps toward systemic family engagement. These levers include leadership, capacity building, training and professional development, innovation, and learning and accountability. Empirical research on policy implementation, however, suggests that federal mandates alone will not ensure policy success where it matters most: in schools, districts, and communities.<sup>18</sup> It is the people on the ground who ultimately implement policy. Systemic family engagement will depend on the extent to which those charged with carrying out this work see merit in proposed or enacted policies and programs—and if they are willing to change their beliefs, skills, and behaviors. These changes, which are necessary in order to catapult FSCE to a new era of education reform, will require substantial support at each level of the policy process, from federal to state and local levels.<sup>19</sup>

**Leadership.** Using its leadership role, the federal government can put the spotlight on the importance of family engagement as a core element of a new generation of learning, and adopt a clear definition and common framework for family engagement. The U. S. Department of Education can develop a long-term strategy for FSCE, beginning with tighter coordination and alignment of programs within the Department and across other federal agencies. The systemic change that is being seeded in this document will develop deep roots through capacity building, incentives, and funding for innovation, and mechanisms for learning and accountability. This can be facilitated at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Education’s leadership in providing incentives for state and local education agencies to meaningfully engage families, and in capacity building to scale up and replicate effective research-based practices. Similarly, at the state and district levels, leadership and capacity must be in place to develop and implement proven family engagement practices that raise student achievement.

**Capacity building.** Capacity building is crucial because individuals often lack the knowledge and skills to implement effective family engagement, and thus intended policy outcomes are not met. There is a need for well-designed and high quality training and technical assistance in the development, implementation, and evaluation of FSCE initiatives. State and local education agencies are more likely to benefit from such assistance when it is sustained over time until results are achieved.

Intermediary organizations—such as associations of education professionals and volunteer non-profit organizations—play an important role in translating policy into practical tools and tailoring technical assistance to meet the different needs of districts and schools. These intermediaries help districts and schools plan outcome-oriented family engagement strategies. Through documentation and evaluation, they compile best practices that can be shared broadly for adaptation and replication. Intermediary organizations also convene a wide range of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, and help build networks. Information sharing among these entities builds their respective capacities to strengthen family engagement practice and better serve families.

**Training and professional development.** Much more can be done to strengthen the foundation of those entering the teaching profession. Teachers know that family involvement matters and believe that it is one of the top strategies to reform schools. However, they do not receive adequate training and professional development to support efforts to engage families. Higher education policies can take into account the immediate and long-term needs of building an educational workforce where working with families is a core professional competency of teachers and school administrators. Teacher preparation programs that offer training in family partnerships usually deliver it related to early childhood education and special education. However, FSCE is important across all educational

<sup>18</sup> Mclaughlin, M. (1987). Learning from experience: Lessons from policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 9(2), 171-178.

<sup>19</sup> Weiss, H. B., & Stephen, N. C. (2010). From periphery to center: A new vision and strategy for family, school, and community partnerships. In S. L. Christensen & A. L. Reschly (Eds.) *Handbook of School-Family Partnerships*. New York: Routledge.

levels. It benefits parents and teachers as well as schools. Where teachers are able to communicate with parents and develop trusting relationships, they are more likely to remain teaching in their schools.<sup>20</sup>

### Textbox 3

Project EAGLE Community Programs of the University of Kansas Medical Center provide families with children aged 0–4 with answers to their two most important questions: *Is my child developing normally?*, and *What can I do to help him become more school ready?* Routine child screening and parent engagement to promote healthy child development is a key tenet of all early childhood programs run by Project EAGLE. These programs include Early Head Start (serving pregnant women and children aged 0–4) and Healthy Families (a program for Spanish-speaking pregnant women and families with children). All families who come into contact with Project EAGLE receive rapid feedback on child assessments and specific guidance about how they can support their child’s development. For example, when a child is identified as having a language delay, Project staff impart to families tips about reading to their child. Project EAGLE uses a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach to early identification and support of children with learning and behavior needs. Research shows that in other programs, RTI has been effective for identifying children at risk of developing learning disabilities and for providing specialized interventions, either to ameliorate or to prevent the occurrence of learning disabilities.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (2010). *Taking Leadership, Innovating Change: Profiles in Family, School, and Community Engagement*. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/TakingLeadershipInnovatingChange>

**Innovation.** Federal leadership is demonstrated in promoting state and local innovation. Social innovation refers to “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions.”<sup>21</sup> Although family involvement in education is not an original idea, a systemic and integrated approach to family engagement represents an innovative strategy in education reform. This thinking embodies a dramatic shift in framing family engagement and reorganizing its practice. It taps into an overlooked strategy that can leverage improvements in student learning, as the Chicago school reform study has fully demonstrated.

Unlike other fields in which innovation might be a technology or product, innovations in education tend to take the form of creative uses and sharing of resources and opportunities to create new practices (see Textbox 3). Productive innovations can be co-developed by researchers, practitioners, and social entrepreneurs who can bring them to scale.<sup>22</sup> In this model of research and development, or R&D, innovators develop prototypes, and then test and refine them as part of a continuous improvement process. In addition, there is a federal role in helping to create communities of practice, sharing the lessons from ongoing innovations to support state and local efforts to create systemic approaches to FSCE. Communities of practice—groups of people that come together to share expertise on a common endeavor—can generate new models of FSCE, spread promising practices, and develop stakeholders’ professional skills for high quality family engagement.<sup>23</sup> Federal departments can encourage the formation of communities of practice, especially across agency programs that seek to strengthen family engagement, and help organize and support them as part of capacity-building activities. Lastly, there is a federal role in facilitating the use of information about effective initiatives through mechanisms

<sup>20</sup> Allensworth, E., Ponisciak, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2009). *The Schools Teachers Leave: Teaching mobility in Chicago public schools*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Phillips, J. A., Deiglmeier, K., & Miller, D. T. (2008). Rediscovering social innovation. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 6(4), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Bryk, A. S., & Gomez, L. (2008). Reinventing a research and development capacity. In F. Hess (Ed.), *The Future of Educational Entrepreneurship: Possibilities for School Reform*, 181–206. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

<sup>23</sup> Wenger, E. C., & Snyder, S. (2000). Communities of practice: The organizational frontier. *Working Knowledge for Business Leaders*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School. Retrieved from <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/1317.html>

such as the What Works Clearinghouse, technical assistance providers, webinars, grantee meetings, and so forth.

**Learning and accountability.** Since ESEA was enacted in 1965, requirements have been in place for state and local education agencies to implement and report on federally mandated family involvement activities.<sup>24</sup> Federal monitoring of these requirements over the years has represented an important first step in ensuring that family involvement provisions are enacted; however, we now have an opportunity to move beyond compliance monitoring to a more comprehensive accountability system to assess the implementation and impact of these provisions. Creating a three-tier accountability system whereby the federal government, along with states, districts and schools, all apply meaningful measures of implementation and impact can ensure that family engagement provisions are not only enacted, but are actually meeting their goals.

The first tier could include a common set of standards and leading indicators for family engagement identified by the federal government that would provide guidance on research-based family engagement strategies. Second, state and local educational agencies would work with families, schools, and communities to develop or expand indicators against which they can benchmark their progress and identify areas where additional support and training are needed. An additional tier of accountability would reside at the school and community level where staff performance assessments would include family engagement indicators. With input from families, these indicators will measure how families' capacities for supporting their children's learning are being increased and how their involvement in school improvement dialogue is actively supported.<sup>25</sup> As evidenced below in Textbox 4, teachers and parents in the Creighton School District use student data to become mutually accountable for children's learning progress in order to leverage the capacity of both families and educators to raise student achievement.

## DATA DRIVEN EDUCATION REFORM

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has made data a vital component of education reform with the commitment to help states refine and expand what they have in place.<sup>26</sup> To be useful, data systems need to be "learner-centered" rather than "institution-centered," according to Education Sector.<sup>27</sup> Data systems should move away from compliance with federal reporting and expand to provide actionable information that enables teachers, students, and families to set goals, track progress, and take specific actions to promote learning and achievement. Furthermore, a data system that begins in early childhood creates a pathway focusing on the trajectory toward college and career readiness.

A data pathway provides families with facts and figures about children's development and learning from early childhood through young adulthood so that they are on the right track to graduation and college and career preparation. The data can be used for short-term, (e.g. helping a child increase vocabulary) and long-term (e.g. monitoring a child's progress across grade levels to be on track for high school graduation within four years) goals. This pathway consists of concise and simple data that families can easily access and understand as they relate to school expectations, academic standards, and continuous improvement. Additionally, the information has to be

<sup>24</sup> Fege, A. (2006). Getting Ruby a quality public education: Forty-two years of building the demand for quality public schools through parental and public involvement. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(4), 570–586.

<sup>25</sup> National Working Group on Family, School, and Community Engagement (2009). *Recommendations for Federal Policy*. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/WorkingGroup>

<sup>26</sup> Duncan, A. (2010). *Unleashing the Power of Data for School Reform: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the STATES DC 2010 Data Conference*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/unleashing-power-data-school-reform-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-stats-dc-2010-data>

<sup>27</sup> Tucker, B. (2010). *Five design principles for smarter data systems to support student learning*. Washington, DC: Education Sector. Retrieved from <http://www.educationsector.org/publications/five-design-principles-smarter-data-systems>

actionable: families turn to data to guide their child’s learning goals and to avail themselves of school and community resources that can enrich student knowledge or address learning challenges (see Textbox 4).

#### Textbox 4

Arizona’s Creighton Elementary School District has nine K–8 schools serving 6,800 students; 93% are on free and reduced-price lunch, and 45% are English-language learners. The district organizes Academic Parent–Teacher Teams as an alternative to the traditional parent–teacher conference.

In three group meetings throughout the year, teachers share with parents aggregate and individual student performance data. Each parent receives a folder with his or her child’s data and learns how to set parent–student academic goals, interpret individual benchmark assessment data and quarterly assessments, and understand the child’s standing in relation to the entire class. Teachers model reading and math skills and parents are able to practice before applying them at home. Parents also participate in one individual parent–teacher meeting to review performance data.

Although teachers were at first hesitant to coach parents, they now welcome their new teaching partners. The pilot in 12 classrooms has grown nearly seven-fold after one year. Parent attendance averages 92%, higher than in regular conferences. Maria Paredes, the Director of Community Education, claims that the parent–teacher teams focus on purposeful communication that demands parents’ engagement and measurable accountability. Parents love this challenge.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Paredes, M. C. (2010), Academic Parent–Teacher Teams: Reorganizing Parent–Teacher Conferences Around Data. *FINE Newsletter 2*(3). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/CreightonAPPT>

Creating a data pathway demonstrates in concrete and practicable ways the key elements of a reinvented framework of family engagement:

- **Family engagement is a shared responsibility:** Through data sharing, school districts and schools are responsible for communicating student performance with families. Beyond providing access to data, schools also provide training and assistance to ensure that families grasp the meaning of the data so that they can partner with teachers to take action and support a student’s learning goals.
- **Family engagement is continuous across a child’s life:** As student data become available across grade levels, families are equipped with the information to support academic progress throughout a child’s school years. The data enable them to focus on the trajectory of high school graduation and college and career readiness.
- **Family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn:** Equipped with data about a student’s learning goals, families are able to direct students to learning resources such as afterschool and homework-help programs. School districts that are sharing data with families are also providing them with tips and tools, often through web-based formats, so that parents can help their children at home.

Data sharing with families can transform the way family engagement is organized, helping to keep the focus on those activities that align with student academic progress and achievement. Rather than being a checklist of activities, family engagement is systemic and linked to specific educational goals. Rather than being an “add-on” to what teachers already do, family engagement is integrated into teaching and learning by providing teachers with a partner who supports and monitors student learning. Rather than being activity driven and dependent on time-limited funding, family engagement is more likely to be sustained when it is outcome-oriented and tied to

the instructional goals for a student, with specific benchmarks across the school year. The power of data as a tool for student learning and meeting school goals is illustrated in Textbox 5 about the Washoe County School District.

## TRANSFORMING LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The need for systemic family engagement is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the efforts to turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Both Congress and the Administration have trained their collective eyes on the bottom 5 percent of America's public schools and have dedicated funding streams and programmatic initiatives to facilitate turnaround efforts.<sup>28</sup> Yet these efforts have revealed some hard truths: we still do not fully understand what causes these schools to slide into such a deep decline or why their low performance remains so entrenched, despite decades of various reform efforts.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, evidence is scant for turnaround success at scale,<sup>30</sup> suggesting that there is a great need for new and innovative solutions.

What *is* clear is that there is no one way to address the problems of low-performing schools, no "magic bullet" approach that will work across all grades and all settings. There is, however, emerging evidence of some of the critical elements that must be in place if turnaround efforts are to work, one of which is strong, strategic FSCE.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, it is important to recognize that many low-performing schools exist in extremely disadvantaged communities in which parents themselves have likely had negative schooling experiences. This makes it even more imperative that schools and districts strengthen their capacity to meaningfully reach out to and engage families, understand the barriers to involvement, and partner with families and other community members to enlist their help in revitalizing struggling schools. Sustainable change in low-performing schools is most likely to occur when it is facilitated and supported by the families and communities who have the biggest stake in the outcomes of such efforts.

### ***Engaging Families and Communities in Turnaround Efforts***

Most of the existing turnaround efforts focus on some combination of instructional/curriculum reforms, changes in staffing, intensive professional development, and reorganizations of the structure of the school. Efforts to engage families complement these elements of turnaround movements, helping to strengthen instructional improvements and staff development by increasing families' knowledge of academic goals and demonstrating how they can partner with school staff to reinforce learning in the home and in the larger community. One study of successful turnaround efforts among eight failing Chicago schools reported that parent engagement was not only a core element in helping to dramatically improve student achievement, but: "The results clearly reveal that the existing staff and parents...form a large and untapped reservoir of energy, ideas, and commitment that is ready to transform the quality of their schools, and do it quickly."<sup>32</sup> Yet engaging families and communities doesn't always come naturally to school personnel, who often lack training and preparation for family partnerships, or who might be wary of reaching out to parents if most of their school-family interactions are problem-focused, thus creating tension between families and school staff. This points to the need for more innovative approaches to bringing families and schools together to identify common goals and learn how to collaborate to improve student learning.

<sup>28</sup> The U.S. Department of Education's Title I School Improvement Grants Fund governs more than \$3.5 billion dedicated to efforts to turn around low-performing schools.

<sup>29</sup> Gewertz, C. (2009). Restructuring under NCLB found lacking. *Education Week*, 29(15), 1-10.

<sup>30</sup> Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Kash, D. (2007). *The turnaround challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst performing schools*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute.

<sup>31</sup> Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Strategic Learning Initiatives. (2010). *An education success story: How eight failing schools in Chicago were turned around within three years*. Chicago: Author. Retrieved from <http://207.5.19.126/education-success-story.html>

Informed advocacy can be a very effective mechanism for change by empowering parents to demand excellence in local public schools; however, families need to know *how* to identify high-quality schooling so they can understand which areas need improvement, the types of reforms that best meet the needs of the students, and how to assess the impact of enacted reform measures. Families' abilities to understand and use data on school performance can help focus their advocacy efforts, and for those parents who might not be aware of the school's conditions or the need for change, community organizations and advocates can act as intermediaries to both inform and

empower parents to demand excellence from their children's schools.

#### Textbox 5

Washoe County School District in Nevada is working to raise its 56% high school graduation rate through a multi-pronged strategy that includes active family engagement. Although it is essential for parents to know about high school graduation requirements, the district was not effectively communicating this information with parents, many of whom are immigrants and unfamiliar with the U.S. school system and education terminology.

Working with technical support from the Nevada Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), Parent Involvement Facilitators (PIFs) in the district's high schools reach out to and train parents about using the online student data system. Typically, these are parents of students eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch program and who are Limited English Proficient. The PIRC training is targeted toward families who have never used a computer before or do not have internet access at home.

Workshop facilitators train parents about graduation requirements and how to interpret student data so that their children are on track in terms of attendance, grades, and credit accumulation. D'Lisa Crain, Administrator for Washoe's Department of Family-School Partnerships, says that "Families leave these computer workshops empowered from knowing how to access their student's data and where to go for help if there is a problem with attendance or grades." They also know where to find computer kiosks in the 96 community locations that display special banners.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Crain, D. (2010). "For the first time I understand what it takes for my own child to graduate." *FINE Newsletter* 2(3). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from <http://hfrp.org/WashoeCounty>

Effective FSCE in low-performing schools often must begin with intensive efforts to rebuild trust and promises of accountability (factors that other communities can sometimes take for granted) given longstanding dynamics of miscommunication and distrust between these schools and their surrounding communities. Community and faith-based groups serve as a bridge between schools and families, and are often able to act as intermediaries with families who feel alienated from the school or who are simply unaware of improvement efforts and how they can contribute to the process by becoming more actively involved in school reforms. These organizations help to facilitate improvements in school-community relationships and foster a sense of trust and collaboration among families and school staff, providing the necessary foundation on which to build meaningful home-school partnerships.

#### **Identifying Critical Junctures in Achievement Drop-offs**

While low-performing schools span all grade levels, the high school "dropout factories"—where only a small minority of students graduate on time—have received the most attention. A number of studies have found that effective family engagement is a crucial factor in keeping students engaged in their education as they progress through the middle and high school years.<sup>33</sup>

One of the key issues in addressing the problems of low-performing schools is

<sup>33</sup> Furger, R. (2008, January). How to end the dropout crisis. *Edutopia Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/student-dropout-retention-strategies>; Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, J., & Morison, K. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

identifying the critical juncture points at which achievement tends to decline, and targeting intensive efforts at those periods. For instance, research has shown that the ninth grade is the most critical year for putting students on the path towards on-time graduation and post-high school success.<sup>34</sup> Targeting efforts toward this time period—including the transition into ninth grade—helps to catch attendance, behavioral, and academic problems before they become entrenched and threaten students’ ability to successfully navigate the requirements and rigors of high school.<sup>35</sup> This need to focus on the ninth grade year has further implications for the value of strengthening FSCE efforts, because family engagement tends to drop off as children become adolescents. At this juncture, parents often simultaneously feel less competent about their ability to help with their teen’s academic work and more distanced from—and intimidated by—large, complex high school environments.<sup>36</sup> Efforts to provide parents with clear, actionable information about their students’ academic performance, such as the work done by New Visions for Public Schools in New York (see Textbox 6), can help break down these barriers and foster productive school–home communication.

### Textbox 6

In 2007, New Visions for Public Schools (New Visions) was selected by the New York City Department of Education to become a Partnership Support Organization responsible for working with 76 public schools (mostly high schools). New Visions focused its parent involvement efforts on ninth-grade students and families and created both school- and student-level performance data tools and four core ninth-grade college readiness benchmarks that would help communicate critical information to students’ families. The ninth grade benchmarks for each student included attendance rates of 92% over the course of the year, course grades of 80% or higher, completion of eleven or more credits by the end of the year, and passing one or two New York State Regents exams with a score of at least 75%. These benchmarks were widely disseminated to school staff, parents, and students through a parent-friendly publication, *Is Your 9th Grader on Track to College?*, and at the New Visions “Aiming Higher” parent and train-the-trainer workshops.

The College Readiness Tracker is an additional one-page tool developed as a way for all stakeholders, and especially parents, to quickly and easily determine individual students’ progress in various academic areas as they move beyond ninth grade. To leave school ready for college, students are expected to earn 44 credits in core subject areas, 80% or better in all courses, 92% or better daily attendance average, and 75% or better on 8 Regents exams. The trackers are often mailed with report cards, or distributed at parent–teacher conferences. For the 2010–2011 school year, parents will also be able to access the tracker electronically.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Taveras, B., Douwes, C., Johnson, K., Lee, D., & Caspe, M. (2010) New Visions for Public Schools: Using Data to Engage Families. *FINE Newsletter 2*(2). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/NewVisions>

### Enhancing Turnaround Efforts through Data Sharing

Advances in student and school performance data systems and efforts to make such data available and accessible to families are of particular importance in efforts to turn around low-performing schools. Experience has shown that the families of students in high-poverty schools are more likely to need assistance in understanding how to interpret performance data, and in particular, how to *act* on such information in ways that benefit not only their own child’s achievement, but the performance of the school overall.

<sup>34</sup> The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. (2007). *Freshman Year: The make-it or break-it year*. Retrieved from <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/downloads/8354whatmatters-parentfinal.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Balfanz, R. (2007). *What your Community Can Do to End Its Drop-out Crisis: Learnings from research and practice*. Baltimore: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University. Retrieved from [http://web.jhu.edu/bin/y/r/Final\\_dropout\\_Balfanz.pdf](http://web.jhu.edu/bin/y/r/Final_dropout_Balfanz.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Hill, N. E., & Chao, R. K. (Eds.). (2009). *Families, Schools, and the Adolescent: Connecting research, policy, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

The use of data to address the problems of low-performing schools should also move beyond basic report cards that simply chronicle the deficits of the school system. Focusing on negative school performance data can exacerbate the tension and anger that often exist in communities with low-performing schools and work against schools' and families' ability and inclination to come together to understand where difficulties lie and how to work together to identify concrete steps to take to improve students'—and thus the schools'—performance. Data sharing in the spirit of building strategic partnerships between families, schools, and communities holds enormous potential in addressing the persistent poor achievement evidenced in low-performing schools.

Engaging families in systemic, integrated, and sustainable ways in turnaround efforts draws on a number of reform areas that impact student achievement: strengthening parents' ability to support their students' learning at home, at the school, and in the community; providing opportunities for strategic and collaborative uses of data; and embedding family engagement into professional development and instructional goals so that low-performing schools don't have to “go it alone,” but rather gain an invested and effective partners in improving student learning—families.

## CONCLUSION

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This paper was designed as a companion piece to the National Policy Forum on Family, School, and Community Engagement, held on November 9, 2010 in Washington, D.C. The paper laid the foundation for a conversation about the role of FSCE in education reform by offering a framework based upon four decades of research and emerging innovations in the family engagement field.

At the forum, over two dozen experts engaged in dynamic, interactive discussions about the role of FSCE in education reform, providing insights based on their own work and identifying new directions for family engagement in the coming years. Everyone present—from the panelists to the participants to special guest speakers from the U.S. Department of Education (USDE)—agreed that FSCE is a key component of successful education reform that needs to be implemented in a systemic, integrated, and sustainable way. The forum emphasized the fact that the essential elements of successful school reform—which include a focus on teaching and learning, a rigorous curriculum, teacher and principal effectiveness, a positive school climate, and family and community engagement—operate as parts of an interconnected system. This system of mutual dependencies requires sustained commitment to each element; for example, schools can't work well if their relationships with families and communities don't work well. This makes it critically important that we invest in efforts to better engage families and communities in order to maximize their value in school reform efforts.

Several cross-cutting themes emerged on how this work could be accomplished, which focused on policy levers for change and the use of data to create meaningful partnerships between schools, families and communities:

- At the federal level, attention to family engagement must move from a checklist orientation to a full engagement plan with outcome tracking to assess whether these efforts are impacting student outcomes. The USDE's proposed increase in Title I set-aside dollars for family engagement needs to be accompanied by clear expectations of what should be done with these dollars as well as accountability measures to show the benefits of how the funds are used. Policymakers must identify meaningful indicators of FSCE that are correlated with student outcomes, and create accountability models that assess how well schools and communities are engaged with one another.
- Better coordination of family engagement efforts at the federal level will model the type of collaboration and integration that needs to happen on the ground. The impending reauthorizations of Head Start, IDEA, and ESEA all provide opportunities to build in



methods of integration so that regulations and laws don't impede efforts to coordinate and blend programs and funds.

- Given the shifting nature of federal funding streams, it's unlikely that schools and districts will have guaranteed adequate dollars to dedicate to family engagement, thus making it imperative that stakeholders focus on innovations that can help change the system from within. Schools and districts need to rethink the way schools are organized as a system—the role of the teacher, the management of time and space, the relationship with families and communities—so as to reap the value of FSCE. This could entail hard decisions about what to let go and what to focus on with respect to FSCE.
- Sharing student learning and performance data with families changes the conversation between families and schools. Data provide the content that engages families to understand where students are, where they need to go and the options for getting to their goals. When data use involves parents in this way, it becomes meaningful: it gives parents a voice in the educational process and empowers them to partner with educators to promote their child's academic growth.
- Families and communities can be a force for turning around low-performing schools. Family engagement entails thoughtful effort on the part of districts and schools, so that evidence-based frameworks and practices are adopted, external resources such as community and intermediary organizations are used, and student data become a tool for honest and transparent conversations between families and schools. Underlying these strategies must be a continuous effort at relationship building so that trust binds families, schools and communities to change the trajectory of underserved students.

In her closing remarks at the forum, Carmel Martin, the Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development at USDE, discussed the proposed increase in set-aside dollars for family engagement, noted that the Department plans to embed family engagement throughout its grant proposals, and asserted that family engagement in student learning is an outcome in and of itself, in addition to serving as a “critical, non-negotiable component in terms of a comprehensive strategy to improve our schools.” Education reform initiatives will focus on a comprehensive early childhood-to-college family engagement agenda that can support innovative practices, scale up what works, and empower families to play a greater role in their children's learning. The insights and recommendations generated from the policy forum will continue to inform and refine the development of these initiatives at the federal level.