

National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

Vito Borrello
President
EPIC-Every Person Influences Children

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The Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Enzi, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education,
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835 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Attention: Comments on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act from the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi,

Catherine Jordan
SEDL Program Manager
National Center for Family and
Community Connections with Schools

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (FSCE Working Group) appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Karen L. Mapp, Ed.D.
Lecturer on Education
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The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group is a group of leading researchers, funders, and expert practitioners whose purpose is to inform the development and implementation of federal policy related to family, school, and community engagement in education. It is dedicated to mobilizing cradle to career pathways and partnerships among families, schools, and communities to promote kindergarten and college readiness, improve schools, and increase student achievement.

Kavitha Mediratta
Program Officer, Education
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Susan Shaffer
Vice President
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Maryland State Parental Information
and Resource Center (MD PIRC)

The FSCE Working Group believes families play critical roles in student success. They support their children's learning, guide them through a complex school system, advocate for more and improved learning opportunities, and collaborate with educators and community organizations to achieve more effective educational opportunities. Strong family engagement is:

Steven B. Sheldon
Director of Research
National Network of Partnership Schools

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Continuous across a child's life, spanning from Early Head Start programs to college preparation high schools.
- Carried out everywhere that children learn – at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities.

Deborah R. Stark
Commissioner
First 5 Alameda County, CA

Heather B. Weiss, Ed.D.
Founder and Director
Harvard Family Research Project
Harvard Graduate School of Education

Research demonstrates that family engagement in a child's education raises student achievement, improves behavior and attendance, decreases drop-out rates, and improves the emotional and physical well-being of children. Effective family engagement is critical to closing the achievement gap, contributing to increased academic achievement, regardless of parents' education level, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background.¹ Family engagement is also cost-effective and can raise student academic achievement so substantially that schools would need to increase spending by more than \$1000 per pupil to gain the same results.² Ensuring that systemic family engagement in education is a core component of ESEA will help schools, districts, and states prepare all students for college and career.

The FCSE Working Group applauds the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions' bipartisan efforts to overhaul ESEA. We offer our recommendations to strengthen family engagement in ESEA by providing meaningful incentives and local capacity for proven, promising family engagement strategies that drive student success.

Recommended Changes to Current Law

TITLE I

1) Recommendation: Build statewide capacity for family engagement by authorizing uses of funds to support statewide family engagement initiatives. Eligible uses of the funds should encourage research-based and innovative approaches, such as:

- Establishment of an state education agency (SEA) office or dedicated staff for family engagement
- Development of statewide data collection and evaluation system on family engagement metrics
- Grants to local education agencies (LEAs) and schools that demonstrate a need for training and support on effective family engagement
- Grants to LEAs for professional development on effective family engagement
- Grants to Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) to provide technical assistance and training to parents, schools and LEAs on effective family engagement
- Collaboration with higher education, early childhood education, and community-based organizations to integrate and coordinate family engagement across a child's lifespan and in all learning settings. *(Add a new section to Section 1005)*

2) Recommendation: Require states to include a plan for strengthening family engagement in education in their state plan in order to help them develop a purposeful family engagement strategy, aligned with their educational goals and accountability system, which will provide targeted support to districts and schools. *(Amend Section 1111(d), Section 1111(h)(1)(C), Section 1111(h)(2)(B)(i), Section 1111(h)(4))*

¹ Henderson A. and Mapp, K. (2002). A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory and Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(1), 1-22. Jeynes, W. H. (2003). A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, 35(2), 202-218.

² Houtenville, A. and Conway, K. (2008). Parental Effort, School Resources, and Student Achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*, XLIII, 2. Pp-437-53.

3) Recommendation: Require LEA plans to include a description of the strategy the LEA will use to implement and assess family engagement in education programs and policies outlined in Section 1118. (*Amend Section 1112 (b) (1) (P)*)

4) Recommendation: Retain and strengthen the parental involvement provisions in Section 1118 by codifying research-based standards for family engagement to provide schools and districts with clear expectations for effectively partnering with families. (*Add new subsection to Section 1118*)

5) Recommendation: Provide incentives for the implementation of high-quality, research-based practices that engage families to improve student achievement by increasing the set-aside for family engagement from 1 to 2 percent. (*Amend Section 1118 (a) (3)*)

6) Recommendation: Provide guidance on proven and innovative approaches to family engagement to ensure that the set-aside is used for best practices. The FSCE Working Group has identified the following strategies and examples that research shows improve family engagement and drive student achievement:

- Support staffing and professional development focused on family engagement
 - Establish an office or hire personnel, such as family engagement coordinators within the LEAs and schools.
 - Partner with higher education and other entities to provide research-based pre-service training and ongoing professional development on effectively engaging families.
- Develop research, evaluation, and accountability systems that promote family engagement
 - Promote innovation, research, and evaluation of family engagement policies and practices, including implementation, replication, and impact studies.
- Working with districts, non-profit partners and institutions of higher education to align strategies to create cradle to career pathways for family engagement;
 - Strengthen and align family engagement policies and practices along a child's lifespan and in all learning settings from early childhood through higher education and workforce development programs.
- Engaging community- and faith-based organizations in working with schools and districts to increase family engagement
 - Collaborate with non-profit organizations and community-based organizations to support parent leadership trainings, family literacy programs, home visitation programs, family volunteerism programs, and other innovative programs that meaningfully engage families.
- Engaging families in planning and governance for shared decision making in schools and districts
 - Ensure representation of families on school advisory councils and related decision making bodies.
 - Share academic, attendance, and behavioral data with families to promote data-driven decision-making (*Amend Section 1118 (a) (3)*)

7) Recommendation: Add shared expectations for student behavior, attendance, and school climate and safety to school-parent compacts to support reasonable disciplinary policies and engage families in strength-based approaches to improving student outcomes. (*Amend Section 1118 (d)*)

8) Recommendation: Extend family engagement to youth in the juvenile justice and foster care system by requiring each SEA and LEA receiving funds under the Neglected and Delinquent Youth program to include a strategy for family engagement within their application and for each correctional facility to prepare an educational services and transition plan for each child or youth served. This would improve the educational outcomes of children involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, which are often extremely poor due to multiple educational placements and lack of discharge planning. (*Amend Section 1414 (a) (1) (C), Section 1114 (a) (c) (14), Section 1423 (8), and Section 1425*)

TITLE II

1) Recommendation: Build the capacity of school leaders and principals to partner with parents to increase student achievement by requiring states to describe how they will improve teacher knowledge and skill in effectively engaging families in their state applications. A recent study shows that teachers' relationships with parents are a key factor in retention and recruitment.³ (*Amend Section 2112 (b)*)

2) Recommendation: Authorize training principals and teachers in effective models of family engagement as an eligible use of funds. Several surveys of principals, teachers, and parents have demonstrated that educators need and want professional development on how to engage parents to drive student achievement and identify parental engagement as critical to education reform.⁴ (*Amend Section 2113 (c)*).

TITLE V

1) Recommendation: Safeguard and strengthen the Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) by tightening their purposes and assurances to scale-up research-based practices that drive student achievement. The Administration's blueprint and FY 11 Budget Request signals the elimination of the PIRCs, the sole program dedicated to engaging families in the education of their children. PIRCs' role should align with the research-based quality framework developed by the Department of Education, Harvard Family Research Project, and Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to focus on statewide leadership, capacity-building, training, and technical assistance to schools, LEAs, and SEAs. Annually, PIRCs serve over 16 million parents in all 50 states and territories, over 70% who are low-income and 60% who have children that are limited English proficient. (*Amend Subpart 16, Section 5561-5565*)

2) Recommendation: Pilot a local family engagement demonstration program that provides direct services, such as leadership training and family literacy, to families and removes barriers to family engagement. During the last reauthorization of ESEA, Congress determined a critical

³ Allensworth, E, Ponisciak S. and Mazzeo C. (June 2009). The Schools Teachers Leave: Teacher Mobility in Chicago Public Schools, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.p.27.

⁴ *The MetLife Survey of the American Teachers: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships* (NY: Harris Interactive, 2005)

need for direct services for families, which would be provided by community-based organizations. In response, Congress added a funding trigger that would establish Local Family Information Centers if PIRCs' funding reached \$50 million. Unfortunately, this threshold was never met. Establishing a separate program authorization and funding stream for local family engagement centers outside of the PIRC authorization would promote innovation and allow community-based organizations to meet the needs and leverage the strengths of local families to create demand and build capacity for change in their local school. (*Amend Subpart 16, Section 5566*)

TITLE IX

Recommendation: Include a research-based definition of family engagement in education. The FSCE Working Group defines family engagement in education as: a shared responsibility of families and schools for student success, in which schools and community-based organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development. This shared responsibility is continuous from birth through young adulthood and reinforces learning that takes place in the home, school, and community. (*Amend Section 9101*)

Recommended Changes to the Administration's Blueprint for Education Reform

COLLEGE AND CAREER READY STUDENTS

1) Recommendation: Ensure that college and career-ready standards and student assessment data are communicated to parents in a format they can understand and use to support and reinforce high expectations for learning at home.

2) Recommendation: The FSCE Working Group is in support of a rigorous and fair accountability system that provides support at every level. States, districts, and schools should share comparative school data not only on student achievement but also on student attendance, school climate, and teacher and principal quality in order to engage families in holding schools, districts, and states accountable for improving student achievement and driving education reform.

3) Recommendation: In order to articulate a clear strategy for engaging families to raise student achievement and turn around struggling schools, require schools receiving federal education funds to partner with parents to develop a Family Engagement Action Plan.

4) Recommendation: Include family engagement as a requirement for each of the intervention models in School Turnaround Grants: (1) Transformation, (2) Turnaround, (3) Restart, and (4) Closure. Recent research on school turnarounds identifies family engagement as one of the five "key ingredients" to school improvement in low-income, urban schools.⁵ By involving families in the school improvement process, schools and LEAs build capacity for systemic reform that will result in improved student achievement.

⁵ Anthony S. Byrk et al. (2009). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

GREAT TEACHERS AND LEADERS IN EVERY SCHOOL

Recommendation: Recruit, retain, and prepare effective teachers and principals by providing pre-service, in-service, and job-embedded professional development to teachers and principals on models of effective family engagement that raise student achievement. Several surveys of principals, teachers, and parents have demonstrated that educators need and want professional development on how to engage parents to drive student achievement and identify parental engagement as critical to education reform.⁶

EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL STUDENTS

1) Recommendation: Extend family engagement to youth served under the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth program by providing technical assistance to grantees on effectively partnering with parents through PIRCs.

2) Recommendation: Extend family engagement to youth in the juvenile justice and foster care system by requiring each SEA and LEA receiving funds under the Neglected and Delinquent Youth program to include a strategy for family engagement within their application and for each correctional facility to prepare an educational services and transition plan for each child or youth served. This would improve the educational outcomes of children involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, which are often extremely poor due to multiple educational placements and lack of discharge planning.

3) Recommendation: Extend family engagement to Native American Youth by providing funds for a National Indian Family Engagement Coordinating Council modeled on State-level Family Engagement Coordinating Councils and for Local Family Engagement Centers administered by the Bureau of Indian Education.

SAFE, HEALTHY, AND SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS

1) Recommendation: Engage families in assessing school climate and developing and implementing strategies to improve school climate, school discipline policies, school safety, and student physical and mental health and well-being. Parents are key stakeholders in determining the comprehensive needs of students and their community, and should be engaged in developing strength-based interventions that improve student achievement, motivation, attendance, safety, and behavior.

2) Recommendation: Provide incentives to phase-out of school suspension and zero tolerance policies and support proven classroom-based behavioral interventions like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Research has shown that school districts' use of "zero tolerance" policies has led to the near doubling of students suspended from school annually, increasing from 1.7 million to 3.1 million per year, between 1974 and 2003.⁷

3) Recommendation: Schools' or districts' school climate needs assessments that show high student absenteeism and disciplinary incidents and/or an additional need for increased family

⁶*The MetLife Survey of the American Teachers: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships* (NY: Harris Interactive, 2005)

⁷ Losen, D. and Wald, J. (May 2003). Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline: Framing Paper for the School to Prison Pipeline Research Conference. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard.

engagement should automatically trigger assistance from PIRCs to build local capacity for family engagement.

Additional Recommendations to Build the Capacity of Schools, Districts, and States to Engage Families

- 1) Recommendation:** Establish state-level Family Engagement Coordinating Councils, comprised of family members and other stakeholders, to coordinate and integrate systemic family engagement initiatives that support children from cradle to career.
- 2) Recommendation:** Support the development of research-based metrics for assessing effective family engagement in schools and their impact on improving student achievement by requiring the Secretary of Education to appoint a committee of leading researchers and expert practitioners to develop these metrics. These metrics should be aligned with state and district assessment systems of educational programs and policies, including surveys for the Safe, Healthy, and Successful Students Program, to provide additional support to districts and schools that demonstrate a need to strengthen family engagement.
- 3) Recommendation:** Encourage the replication of best practices and innovations in the field by requiring the Government Accountability Office to produce a report on the current status, barriers, and successful strategies in state and district implementation of parental involvement provisions in Section 1118.
- 4) Recommendation:** Reduce duplication and fragmentation and elevate family engagement in education and by establishing dedicated staff within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education to coordinate cradle to career family engagement in education initiatives within the Department and across federal agencies.

We appreciate the opportunity provided by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions to submit our recommendations for the reauthorization of ESEA. We believe that by making family and community engagement a critical component of the law, schools, districts, and states will be able to leverage systemic family engagement efforts to improve educational outcomes for all students from cradle to career. Please contact Mishaela Durán at mduran@pta.org or (202) 289-6790 Ext. 201, if further clarification on the comment is needed.

Sincerely,

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group