

Family and Community Engagement in Every School for Every Child

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In 1975, a group of parents founded the Federation for Children with Special Needs with the belief that every child has something unique and special to contribute to his or her community. Every time a child fails to reach his or her potential, the world we all share becomes a little less rich, and the future a little more grim. Leaving no child behind, however, is easier said than done. Fortunately, work in the special needs community has taught us some valuable lessons about what really works. The first lesson is that all families want the best for their children. Families know their children best, sacrifice for their future, and support them as they live, grow, and learn. When educators forget this fact, they lose their most valuable resource. The second lesson is that families, schools, and communities can do a lot more working together than separately. We believe that schools must engage families and community members as partners in the education of *all* children. When effective family and community engagement is an integral part of the work that schools do, *every* child gets the support he or she needs to succeed.

Over the past several decades, educational research has confirmed the connection between family engagement and student success. In *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp found that students with engaged families are more likely to succeed. This is true no matter how you measure success. Students get better grades. They behave better. They have a more positive attitude. They are more likely to graduate. They are more likely to go to college. Schools also do better when they engage families and communities as partners. An influential study of Chicago schools identified strong “parent and community ties,” as one of five “essential supports,” for successful school reform. Without this critical pillar of support, the most well executed improvement efforts are likely to fail.

Of course, all schools interact with families. Every school sends report cards home, holds open houses, and solicits volunteers. So what, exactly, do we mean by “family and community engagement?” A recent paper from the Harvard Family Research Project, *Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform*, offers this description:

Effective family and community 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.

Each of these concepts is worth expanding on briefly.

Sharing responsibility for learning and achievement

First and foremost, sharing responsibility means working together and not pointing fingers. With this in mind, there are many ways schools can get started. A good first step is to make information about curriculum, instruction, assessments, and policies easily accessible. Schools should also be welcoming. They should encourage families to learn about the school and to participate in learning activities. Once schools share information and establish rapport, family

and community leaders should be empowered to participate in meaningful decisions about school policy. Their insight can inform decisions ranging from broad educational goals to specific disciplinary policies or budget priorities. Educators must also reach out to families where they live and work in order to build trust, improve communication, and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges different families face. In everything they do, schools and families must stay focused on improving student outcomes.

Continuous family and community engagement from birth to young adulthood

We now know that a child's first few years have a powerful effect on his or her future. Even after those crucial years are past, children must overcome a variety of social, emotional, and academic challenges to reach adulthood prepared for a successful life. When the strands of family, school, and community are woven together with caring and frequent communication, they form a safety net to catch struggling children and offer support before it's too late. Families, teachers, peers, guidance counselors, and countless other people affect a child's life. To do their jobs well, these people must learn from a child's past and be invested in the child's future. Family, school, and community partnerships that support children from birth to young adulthood can help make that possible.

Family and community engagement across multiple settings

When we think about education, we usually think about classroom instruction. In truth, children only spend a small fraction of their lives sitting at a desk listening to a teacher. Research has shown that children who engage in learning activities outside the classroom often make gains, and children who don't, usually fall behind. One of the best ways schools can reduce achievement gaps is to fill every child's life with rich learning opportunities in school and out. There are many ways schools can facilitate learning outside the classroom. They can work with parents to align out-of-school-time learning with class work. They can provide families and students with expanded access to libraries and computers. They can offer supports like after-school homework help. They can also be a crucial link between families and community resources like public libraries, museums, and community centers. It takes more than high quality classroom instruction for all children to reach their potential; a truly outstanding educational system must take advantage of every opportunity to educate its children.

This article only scratches the surface of the ways family and community engagement can help schools prepare our children for success in the 21st century. But, no matter how they do it, families, schools, and communities must share responsibility for the education of every child, from birth to young adulthood, in school and out.

The Massachusetts Parent Information Resource Center

In 1999, the Federation established Parents' PLACE (now known as the Massachusetts Parent Information Resource Center, or Mass PIRC) to support family and community engagement in every school for every child. Mass PIRC provides technical assistance to school districts and schools across the state, educates families and professionals, and maintains a fact-filled Web site. In order to break down linguistic barriers to family and community engagement, Mass PIRC has translated its Web site, publications, and workshops into at least three languages. Moreover, in order for each dollar spent to have the maximum possible impact, Mass PIRC has formed partnerships with numerous community-based and faith-based organizations. Regrettably,

despite widespread and growing demand for Mass PIRC's services, budget cuts at the Federal Department of Education will eliminate funding for Mass PIRC and 61 other PIRCs across the nation in September of this year.

In spite of this disappointing news, the Federation is still committed to family and community engagement in every school for every child. We will continue to support schools that have begun working with Mass PIRC to implement Solid Foundation – a research based process for improving family and community engagement. Additionally, the Federation will create a family and community engagement team. At the district level, this team will support strategic planning. At the school level, it will help implement Solid Foundation, and offer professional development for school personnel. For individual families, the team will train volunteers to present Mass PIRC's most popular workshops. We know firsthand the power of families, communities, and schools working together, and we will not rest until it touches the life of every child.

Visit the Mass PIRC Web site at www.pplace.org for a variety of materials about preparing for back-to-school, educational rights, educational standards, resources for English Language Learners, and more.
