

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

DRAFT POLICY STATEMENT ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
FROM THE EARLY YEARS TO THE EARLY GRADES

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy statement is to provide recommendations from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education (ED) on systematically engaging families¹ in their children's development, learning, and wellness, across early childhood and elementary education settings.

Families are children's first and most important teachers, advocates, and nurturers. Strong family engagement is central- not supplemental-- to promoting children's healthy development and wellness, including social-emotional and behavioral development; preparing children for school; seamlessly transitioning them to kindergarten; and supporting academic achievement in elementary school and beyond. Research indicates that families' engagement in children's learning and development can impact lifelong health, developmental, and academic outcomes. When families and the institutions where children learn partner in meaningful ways, children have more positive attitudes toward school, stay in school longer, have better attendance, and experience more school success.

Both Departments recognize the critical role of family engagement in children's success in the early and elementary education systems. As such, both agencies have developed research-based family engagement frameworks to guide the development of effective family engagement policies and practices: HHS' Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and ED's Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. This policy statement identifies common principles from the frameworks that drive effective family engagement across the prenatal to age eight continuum, and inform recommendations to local and State early childhood and elementary education systems.

We refer to "family engagement" as the systematic inclusion of families as partners in children's development, learning, and wellness. Engagement is enabled by positive relationships between families and staff in the institutions where children learn. The goal of family engagement is to support family wellness and children's learning and development.

It is the position of the Departments that all early childhood programs and schools recognize families as equal partners in improving children's development, learning and wellness across all settings, and over the course of their children's developmental and educational experiences. This joint HHS-ED statement aims to advance this goal by:

1. Reviewing the research base that supports effective family engagement in children's learning, development, and wellness;
2. Identifying core principles of effective family engagement practices from HHS' and ED's frameworks to drive successful policy and program development;
3. Providing recommendations to States, LEAs, schools, and community-based early childhood programs to implement effective family engagement; and
4. Highlighting resources for States, LEAs, schools, and early childhood programs to build capacity to effectively partner with families.

¹ The term "family" is used to include all the people who play a role in a child's life and interact with a child's early childhood program or school. This may include fathers, mothers, grandparents, foster parents, formal and informal guardians, and siblings, among others.

OVERVIEW

Research Highlights

Families' engagement with their children has strong and sustained impacts on children's development, learning, and wellness. Studies indicate that warm, responsive and sensitive parenting promotes social-emotional competence and academic success.² Fathers' positive engagement in their children's learning, in particular, has been found to have positive effects on children's cognition, language and social emotional development.³ Other studies find that specific learning activities, such as reading and talking to young children, are associated with positive outcomes. For example, infants and toddlers who are read to more often have better language and cognition skills than their peers who are read to less often.⁴ High-quality verbal interactions between young children and their caregivers, predicts vocabulary size and school readiness later in life.⁵ Children of families who engage in these early learning activities at home, and have materials available to enrich these experiences, show more advanced vocabulary and literacy skills.⁶ Mutually promoting these and other learning activities in the classroom and in the home, facilitated by all of the adults in children's lives, is a central component of effective family engagement and contributes to children's learning and developmental outcomes.

Mutually reinforcing learning at home and in the community is enabled by positive relationships between families and teachers and providers.⁷ Positive relationships enable strong partnerships, two-way communication, and coordination about children's goals, progress, and strategies to promote learning and development across settings. Research indicates that families' positive attitudes about schools are associated with children's improved performance at school.⁸

In order to form the strong relationships that are the foundation of effective family engagement, both family and early childhood staff wellness must be taken into account. Families' secure housing, health care, and access to nutritious food have positive effects on children's development and lack of access to these basic resources can have adverse effects.⁹ Parental health and mental health impact parenting and children's outcomes. For example, parental depression may contribute to less responsive parenting and is associated with anxiety and depression in children.¹⁰ Other parental mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, trauma, and substance abuse can also contribute to children's behavioral and academic challenges.¹¹ Financial stability is also key to family engagement. Increased family income during the early childhood years has been found to improve children's academic achievement, behavior, and foster

² Thompson, R. (2008). Early attachment and later development: Familiar questions, new answers. In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment* (2nd ed., pp. 348-365). New York: Guilford

³ Cabrera, N., Shannon, J., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. (2007). Fathers' influence on their children's cognitive and emotional development: From toddlers to pre-k. *Applied Developmental Science*, 11(4), 208-213.

⁴ Raikes, H., Green, B. L., Atwater, J., Kisker, E., Constantine, J., & Chazan-Cohen, R. (2006). Involvement in Early Head Start home visiting services: Demographic predictors and relations to child and parent outcomes. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 2-24.

⁵ Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

⁶ Rodriguez, E., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. S. (2011). Trajectories of the home learning environment across the first five years: Associations with children's language and literacy skills at pre-kindergarten. *Child Development*, 82(4), 1058-1075.

⁷ Porter, T., Guzman, L., Kuhfeld, M., Caal, S., Rodrigues, K., Moodie, S., Chrisler, A. & Ramos, M. (2012). *Family-provider relationship quality: Review of existing measures of family-provider relationships*, OPRE Report #2012-47, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁸ Morrison, E., Rimm-Kauffman, S., & Pianta, R. C. (2003). A longitudinal study of mother-child interactions at school entry and social and academic outcomes in middle school. *Journal of School Psychology*, 41(3), 185-200.

⁹ *Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes: Family Wellbeing*. (2014). National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement. Retrieved at

¹⁰ Meadows, S. O., McLanahan, S. S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2007). Parental depression and anxiety and early childhood behavior problems across family types. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(5), 1162-1177.

¹¹ Waylen, A., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2010). Factors influencing parenting in early childhood: A prospective longitudinal study focusing on change. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 36(2), 198-207.

¹² Mensah, F. K., & Kiernan, K. E. (2010). Parents' mental health and children's cognitive and social development. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 45(11), 1023-1035.

mental health.¹³¹⁴ It is much more difficult to engage in children's learning if a family's basic needs are not met. This research indicates that the institutions where children learn cannot ignore family wellness if they want to meaningfully engage families and fulfill their mission to prepare children for school and academic success. While some of these needs may be met in schools and early childhood programs through onsite comprehensive services, others can be met through partnerships with organizations and specialists in the community. Meeting families where they are, promoting their wellness alongside their children's through connections to community resources, and partnering with them on their children's learning and development, will result in optimal outcomes for children.

Policy Highlights

Many of the Federal laws that govern the early childhood and elementary education systems reference the importance of family engagement. For example:

- ***The Head Start Act*** has consistently emphasized the role of families in children's learning and development since 1965 when the program was founded. Families have continually been participants in the governance of Head Start programs. Families have been welcomed to participate in classroom activities and parent-teacher home visits; prioritized as potential employees; afforded opportunities to participate in adult development and parent education activities. Families receive supports related to critical needs, family aspirations; and community resources.
- ***The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)*** lists *promoting parent and family involvement in children's development in child care settings* as one of its purposes. The law further indicates that States must provide consumer education to parents and families, on a variety of issues, including research and best practices concerning meaningful parent and family engagement. In addition, the law outlines a set of activities that States may engage in to improve the quality of child care. Among those allowable activities is providing professional development opportunities that address engaging parents and families in culturally and linguistically responsive ways, to expand their knowledge, skills, and capacity to become partners in supporting their children's positive development.
- ***The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*** emphasizes the need to support families to participate in the education of their children. Part C of IDEA provides early intervention services for eligible children from birth to three years, and requires the development of an Individualized Family Service Plan in order to provide services to infants, toddlers, and their families. Part C emphasizes in its structure and requirements that infants and toddlers with disabilities are best served in the context of their families, and services provided through Part C enhance the capacity of families to meet their children's developmental and learning needs. Part B of IDEA, for preschool and school-aged children, contains requirements to include parents as part of the Individualized Education Program teams. Both Parts C and B of IDEA have provisions in place to protect children's and families' rights under the statute. In addition, IDEA funds discretionary grants to improve educational and developmental outcomes for children, including a system of parent training and information centers to help families learn about services for their children and their children's disabilities, and how they can support their children's development and education.

¹³ Duncan, G. J., & Magnuson, K. (2011). The long reach of early childhood poverty. *Pathways*, 22-27. Publication of the Stanford Center for the study of Poverty and Inequality.

¹⁴ Costello, E. J., Compton, S. N., Keeler, G., & Angold, A. (2003). Relationships between poverty and psychopathology: A natural experiment. *JAMA*, 290(15), 2023-2029.

- *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* requires that states and school districts engage parents and families in the work of ensuring positive outcomes for all students. School districts are required to have written parent and family engagement policies with expectations and objectives for implementing meaningful parent and family involvement strategies. They are required to involve parents and family members in jointly developing district plans and to provide technical assistance to build school capacity to plan and implement effective parent and family involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance. The requirement for implementing effective parent and family engagement activities to improve student outcomes can be found throughout ESEA including Title I, sections 1010 and 1116, Title III, Title VI, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers among others.

In addition, HHS and ED have released family engagement frameworks. HHS' framework was developed for Head Start programs as a tool for implementing related Head Start Performance Standards (HSPS) and best practices. The Head Start Parent Family and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework uses a research-based, organizational development approach to high performance family engagement. It specifies the structures and functions in early childhood organizations that can be integrated to bring about continuous learning and improvement, and to institutionalize and sustain effective family engagement practices. Like the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, there is a strong emphasis on engagement that is systemic, embedded and integrated across organizations. The PFCE Framework was developed with input from researchers, training and technical assistance providers and parents, and it defines optimal family engagement outcomes for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. The PFCE Framework can be adapted for use in other early childhood programs, such as child care or pre-k programs, and some States are using it to guide statewide family engagement goals and outcomes.

ED's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships offers guidance to states, districts and schools for providing opportunities to build both staff and family capacity to work as partners to improve student outcomes. The framework outlines both process and organizational conditions that support implementation of effective family engagement practices. Such conditions include engagement that: is systemic, embedded and integrated across an organization; builds relationships between families and school staff; is linked to student learning; and works to create collaborative partnerships to support positive student outcomes. The framework serves as a compass for guiding effective family engagement practices. It is currently being used by states, districts and schools to guide their family engagement efforts.

Despite the demonstrated importance of family engagement and its emphasis across the statutes and policies, family engagement is not equally valued or implemented across the early childhood and elementary systems for a variety of reasons, including:

- The perception that family engagement practices are supplemental, rather than necessary for successfully promoting children's learning and development. Institutions that serve young children may place low priority on family engagement because they perceive their mission as narrowly focused on the child and miss the notion that children, especially very young children, live in the context of their families and their experiences are not independent of- but intertwined with- those of their families.
- There are few requirements and limited official guidance at the local, State and Federal levels to support implementation of these policies and practices, with some exceptions. Many State, program, district and school policies make ambiguous reference to "family engagement" and do not provide concrete definitions, or guidance on practices and policies that promote family engagement.

- Resources may not be appropriately allocated or there may not be sufficient resources to support systemic family engagement.
- Systems may attempt to foster family engagement, but do so without intentional regard to cultural or linguistic responsiveness. A lack of culturally and linguistically responsive practices can result in a lack of engagement between educational settings and a large and growing population of diverse families of young children.
- Teacher and provider workforce preparation programs do not typically include professional development around working with parents.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that early childhood programs and schools cannot reach their full potential in preparing children for school success without partnering with families. Systems must implement policies and incorporate practices that ensure that all families have the opportunity to be engaged across all aspects of their children’s learning, development, and wellness. “High-quality” early childhood programs should systematically include specific, measurable, and evidence-based family engagement strategies that are attuned to the needs and interests of a diverse array of primary caregivers, including but not limited to fathers/male caregivers, mothers/female caregivers, young parents, grandparents, foster parents and others. President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative has placed an important emphasis on prioritizing the role of parents and caregivers, and especially fathers and father figures, in supporting children’s development and education at home and school so that children’s learning experiences are reinforced in positive ways. By taking this call to action, we can ensure that children are learning across settings and that all adults who teach and care for them are strong partners with shared expectations and aligned strategies.

States, LEAs, schools, and community-based early childhood programs each play a critical role in developing effective family engagement policies and practices that enable educators, providers, and families to work together to improve child outcomes across early childhood and elementary school settings. Within those systems, each and every staff member, from principals and directors to teachers, support staff, and related service providers, must play an active role in engaging families. Family engagement is a shared responsibility that requires prioritization, sufficient investments of time and resources, and a willingness to both assess and change related attitudes, practices, and policies.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

The first step in systemically embedding effective family engagement practices in educational settings is to establish a culture where families are seen as assets and partners in children’s development, learning and wellness. States, LEAs, schools, and early childhood programs should adopt a set of principles that guide the work of each interrelated level of the system. The Departments consider the following principles foundational to implementing the recommendations that follow. They are drawn from our respective frameworks, and aligning, integrating, and coordinating these principles will amplify their effects.

1. **Create continuity for children and families.** Implement a vision for family engagement that begins prenatally and continues across settings and throughout a child’s developmental and educational experiences.
2. **Value equal partnerships between families and professionals.** Combine professional expertise with familial expertise to promote shared learning and responsibility for children’s healthy development, learning and wellness. Encourage two-way communication by valuing family input on all aspects of the child’s life and development, including their culture, traditions, and home language.

3. **Develop goal-oriented relationships that are linked to development and learning.** Goal oriented relationships are based on mutual respect and trust and are developed over time, through a series of interactions between staff and families. Successful relationships focus on families' strengths and are grounded by a shared commitment to children's well-being and success. Jointly develop, monitor, and work on children's goals with families, and identify specific strategies that support children's development and learning at home and in the classroom.
4. **Prioritize engagement around children's social emotional and behavioral health.** Engage families around children's social-emotional and behavioral health. Ensure constant monitoring and communication regarding children's social-emotional and behavioral health. Ensure that children's social-emotional and behavioral needs are met and that families and staff are connected with relevant community partners, such as early childhood mental health consultants and children's medical homes.
5. **Ensure that all family engagement opportunities are culturally and linguistically responsive.** Culture is at the foundation of parenting, family dynamics and family-teacher, school, and program partnerships. Ensure that the environment, children's curricula and learning, and all family engagement opportunities respect, reflect, and embrace families' cultures and are linguistically accessible to all.
6. **Build staff competencies in engaging with families.** Prioritize professional development that helps staff engage parents as capable, competent partners. Strengthen staff's ability to form positive, goal-oriented relationships with all families. Develop professional responsiveness in working with multicultural and linguistically diverse communities and in partnering with families who have children with disabilities, special healthcare needs, or other unique needs.
7. **Build families' capabilities and connections.** Provide opportunities for families to build their knowledge and skills and engage in shared learning with other families on governance or organizational family leadership and advocacy; fostering children's development, learning and wellness; and other topics of interest. Ensure families are connected to each other for peer support and social capital, and to services in the community as needed.
8. **Systemically embed effective family engagement strategies within programs, schools, and with community partners.** Align, integrate and coordinate family engagement strategies across communities and all aspects of programming, including but not limited to: involving families in governance; establishing positions that focus exclusively on family engagement; identifying specific family engagement responsibilities and professional development opportunities for all roles across the system; providing families with multiple and diverse opportunities for involvement; creating inviting physical environments that are welcoming and culturally and linguistically responsive; and establishing formal partnerships with community partners, such as social service agencies, medical homes, and libraries, that promote family wellness and adult learning and enhance children's learning.
9. **Continuously learn and improve.** Continuously improve integrated family engagement practices by collecting and analyzing data to guide decision-making and policy change and to inform technical assistance and professional development.

Implementing effective family engagement practices to promote positive child outcomes will require bold leadership and dedication from all institutions where children learn. The principles identified above are the foundation of the following recommendations at the State and local level. The

recommendations are not an exhaustive list; rather, they are a selection of actions that can be taken to promote effective family engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ACTION

States play a critical role in promoting family engagement. State policies and investments directly influence program and district investments, policies, and practices. In turn, program and school policies drive the teacher and provider practices that enable strong partnerships and ultimately influence young children's outcomes. Together these policies and investments create the conditions for effective family engagement. The following recommendations build on the *Principles of Effective Family Engagement Practices* and provide concrete action items for States. Aligning, integrating, and coordinating these strategies will amplify their effects.

Plan and prioritize

Family engagement should be emphasized as a critical component of children's learning and development across settings and services. As such, States should adopt family engagement principles that drive the development of state early childhood and early elementary school policies. State plans should include specific family engagement goals and strategies implementation efforts, and evaluation plans. Policy makers should develop outreach strategies to ensure that families have input in the plan development, partnering with trusted community-based organizations that have existing connections and relationships with families. Consistent with the requirements for each program, specific and concrete family engagement efforts should be incorporated into:

- Child Care and Development Fund State plans;
- IDEA Part C and Part B 619 policies;
- Head Start State Collaboration Office strategic plans;
- ESEA Title I district parent and family engagement policies;
- State or local preschool expansion plans, such as Preschool Development Grant plans.

Invest and allocate

Family engagement is central to children's development, learning and wellness, and should be reflected as such in State budgets and in States' uses of federal and non-governmental funds. States should allocate investments dedicated to research-based family engagement practices through public-private partnerships, State initiatives, and using Federal funds such as ESEA formula grant funds (including Title I), IDEA funds, or Child Care and Development Fund quality funds. Specific investments will vary based on State and community needs, and program requirements, but may include:

- **Supporting administrators, teachers and providers** in participating in sequenced, credit bearing, professional development opportunities centered around effective family engagement practices;
- **Establishing or enhancing statewide technical assistance** for early childhood programs and elementary schools focused on family engagement. Family engagement efforts may expand parent leadership and advocacy or enhance existing professional development opportunities, coaching, or consultation efforts for early childhood staff. For example, expand early childhood mental health consultation efforts, ensuring that family engagement is a strong component;
- **Implementing evidence-based parenting interventions** across early childhood programs. Parenting interventions should be based on communities' needs and strengthen families' roles as children's first and most important teachers, advocates, and nurturers. (See Appendix for a compendium of parenting interventions.)
- **Rigorously evaluating** family engagement strategies to identify and scale best practices.

- **Establishing parenting and family engagement hubs** across the State that could serve as platforms to bring educators and families together to plan for, implement, and continuously improve family engagement practices. They would be centralized locations where families, providers, and teachers could engage in shared learning and access information, professional development, and parenting interventions.

Establish policies that support family engagement

States should conduct a policy review and identify policies where effective family engagement practices could be considered, strengthened or further promoted. For instance, States could use the Title I, Sec. 1116 one percent set-aside to support more robust, research-based parent and family engagement.

States can also leverage their early childhood quality rating systems to ensure that they include tiers of measurable, and research informed family engagement indicators. Indicators may address relationship-based workforce competencies; family friendly, culturally and linguistically responsive environments, and the use of valid family engagement measures (e.g. Family Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality Measures, FPTRQ).

Communicate consistent messages that support strong family engagement

Clear and consistent communication helps establish a culture of partnership between families and schools or programs. States agencies should provide clear messages to their staff, and to local schools and early childhood programs, emphasizing the principles of effective family engagement, and reinforcing that all families must be treated with respect and valued as experts and equal partners in their child's learning and development.

States should align messages across child-serving agencies, like Head Start, public and private school systems, child care programs, early intervention, WIC, after school programs, and other social service providers. Consistent messaging across systems signals that family engagement and family wellbeing are valued and critical for children's success.

Cultural and linguistic responsiveness should be emphasized as a cornerstone of effective family engagement. States should work with partners to ensure that all communication, outreach, and informational materials, such as enrollment announcements, parent handbooks or newsletters, for example, are accessible to all families including those who are limited in their English proficiency. The unique role of fathers and male caregivers in family engagement efforts should be highlighted, as well as the role of non-traditional primary caregivers like grandparents, foster parents, and extended family members.

In addition, States should highlight the central role families play in supporting their child's brain development and the practical strategies they can implement in everyday routines to impact their child's future school success. States can provide this information through their consumer education efforts; by using national, state, or local public information campaigns; or through partnerships with the many non-profit national and local organizations engaged in advancing this awareness.

Establish workforce capacity building that supports family engagement

Systemically incorporating family engagement into all aspects of programmatic functioning requires knowledge, skill and organizational support across all levels. States should support and encourage leaders, teachers and providers, specialized staff, and support staff, to receive ongoing training and coaching in implementing effective family engagement across policies and practices. States should incorporate core competencies specific to family engagement into existing competency frameworks. States can support the development of these competencies through professional development systems, training and technical assistance, and ongoing coaching and consultation efforts.

States should also partner with institutions of higher education to ensure family engagement is included in early and elementary educator degree programs and practicum experiences. Graduates should have the knowledge and concrete skills necessary to form strong culturally and linguistically responsive relationships with families. Institutions of higher education may also be strong partners in implementing statewide training, coaching, and consultation efforts.

Develop and integrate family engagement indicators into existing data systems

States should collect data about the extent to which early childhood programs and schools are engaging families, the strategies that they are using, and their effectiveness. States can use this data to better understand current practices and policies, strengthen those that are working, and modify those that are not. States can collect and analyze family engagement data found in:

- Child care licensing or quality rating and improvement systems with a focus on indicators on family engagement policies, pre-service training and in-service coaching, or programs’ cultural and linguistic responsiveness to the families they serve;
- Professional development registries that identify whether and to what extent the workforce has access to or received family engagement focused training;
- Higher education coursework to determine which family engagement practices are included in teacher and administrator preparation programs; and
- Family surveys that assess family experiences alongside data on children’s development.

Data collection efforts should help States monitor progress toward their goals, and these efforts should ensure family privacy and administrative clarity and transparency in how data will be used to improve family engagement efforts.

Establish incentive structures that promote sustained effective family engagement practices

States can set up incentive structures that promote the implementation and sustainability of effective family engagement practices, such as ensuring that family engagement is included across all levels of professional development and quality rating and improvement systems; ensuring there is a large supply of affordable, credit bearing family engagement pre-service and professional development opportunities; and publically recognizing and rewarding LEA, program, and school exemplars of effective family engagement practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL PROGRAMS, WHICH INCLUDE LEA, SCHOOLS, CHILD CARE NETWORKS, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Systematic family engagement at the local level begins with an organizational culture that is welcoming to all, values family expertise and partnership, and recognizes families’ central role in preparing children for success in school and beyond. This culture undergirds the strong policies, clear communication, and research-based practices that promote effective family engagement. Building on the *Principles of Effective Family Engagement Practices*, the following are concrete recommendations for LEAs, schools, child care networks and early childhood programs.

Plan and prioritize

LEAs, schools, child care networks, and early childhood programs should send a strong message that family engagement is a priority

<p>LEAs, schools, and programs can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Ensure families are informed about learning goals, curriculum, assessment, instructional approaches, and approaches to promote social-emotional and behavioral development✓ Offer families leadership training, parenting interventions, and training on understanding child assessment and achievement data✓ Use family volunteers strategically, focusing on their strengths, such as fluency in another language✓ Encourage family networks
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