

Family Engagement in Education

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Introduction

Studies indicate that students are more likely to succeed in school when parents or other family members are engaged in their school life. “When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.” This finding holds true regardless of student grade level, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, or parent level of education.¹

Recent federal, state, and local laws and initiatives emphasize the school’s role in actively engaging families. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has specific requirements and provides some funding for family engagement in the schools. The Tennessee State Board of Education (SBOE) adopted a policy in 2003 to guide districts and schools on developing and sustaining family engagement. Tennessee school districts must implement policies and develop improvement plans to encourage family engagement. Tennessee’s districts and schools are focused on improving communication and assisting families to be more engaged with their children’s education.

This legislative brief describes and discusses:

- general definitions of family engagement;
- the importance of family engagement in education;
- effective ways to encourage family engagement;
- the role of families in education and how federal, state, and local education agencies and schools can promote family engagement;
- challenges to increasing family engagement;
- what Tennessee schools are doing to encourage family engagement; and
- how to evaluate family engagement efforts.

Key Points

- *Studies show a positive relationship between family engagement and student achievement.*
- *Family engagement can include traditional activities, such as attending school meetings and volunteering to help with school events, but also includes effective parenting, learning at home, communicating regularly with school officials, taking school leadership roles, and advocating in the community.*
- *Family engagement should link more directly with student learning, which often takes place at home and in the community, in addition to school.*
- *Complex challenges to family engagement exist, but schools can take steps to reduce obstacles and to encourage family engagement.*
- *Federal and state governments and agencies, school districts, and schools all have roles to play and should work together to encourage effective family engagement.*
- *State and federal laws and policies require schools and districts to promote family engagement.*
- *Tennessee schools have added some staff and implemented varied programs and services to engage families in their children’s education within the limited state and federal funding available.*
- *The Tennessee Report Card will soon grade schools on their level of family engagement; however, isolating the effects of family engagement on student achievement is very difficult.*

Report Terminology:

“Family” or “parent” includes a student’s parent(s), guardian(s), or extended family member(s). These terms are used interchangeably in this brief.

“Engagement” is used rather than “involvement” to emphasize the need for commitment and partnership between schools and families focused on student achievement.

“Community organizations” refers to businesses and government and nonprofit agencies providing resources or other services in support of schools, students, or their families.

Why is family engagement important?

Studies indicate that students with engaged families, regardless of socioeconomic status or demographic/cultural background, “were more likely to:

- earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- attend school regularly
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- graduate and go on to postsecondary education.”²

Parents are “first teachers,” and since children spend much of their time at home, parents significantly influence values, language, communication skills, decision-making, and social skills.³ Recognizing that the home can be a central learning place can help families make home more conducive to learning, both to improve school readiness and to raise student achievement.⁴

Although the mode of family engagement varies as a student ages, students benefit at all grade levels, from early childhood through high school. Early childhood family engagement includes reading to children and teaching them sounds and words. In elementary schools, effective engagement includes homework support and explanation of concepts as well as more hands-on participation in school activities. In middle and high school, parental focus includes monitoring academic and social activities, setting high academic expectations, and encouraging and assisting in college and career plans.⁵

What is meant by effective family engagement?

Family engagement is often thought of as parents attending or volunteering to assist with school functions. While those roles are important, research shows that family engagement that is more directly linked to student learning is more likely to have a positive impact on student achievement.⁶ Much of this type of engagement can take place at home or in the community rather than at school.⁷ Joyce Epstein, a leading national expert in family engagement in schools, has developed a framework of six types of school-family-community engagement that are important for improving student learning and development.⁸ Many educators rely on this framework for developing effective family engagement programs. (See Exhibit 1.)

Exhibit 1: Joyce Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of School-Family-Community Engagement

Parenting: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students

Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children’s progress

Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support

Learning at Home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework, and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning

Decision Making: Include parents in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives

Collaborating with Community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development

Source: Joyce Epstein and Associates, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, Third Edition*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press), 2009.

The initial energy and organization for implementing this framework must come from school system personnel, either at the school or district level, but ultimate success depends upon commitment from all of the parties involved. Education leaders, teachers, and parents must commit to the idea that families can contribute to children's success, and they must make engagement a priority. Although the primary goal is improved academic achievement, schools can use family engagement as a central strategy to achieve other accountability goals such as testing, attendance, and school safety.⁹

Research from the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools indicates educators need to change the focus from what schools can do to engage parents to what parents, schools, and communities can do together to support student success. Schools that are effective in engaging families (1) focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships, (2) recognize families' needs and cultural differences, and (3) share power and responsibilities. Moreover, family engagement can be most effective when it begins in preschool and persists through high school.¹⁰

What is an engaged family's role in children's education?

Family engagement can range from the very generalized, such as establishing positive attitudes about the importance of education and setting high expectations, to the very specific, such as assistance with homework or with college applications. Families also obviously play a role in the basic health, safety, and social development of children. The level of engagement can vary from participation to leadership roles in the school or in the community. Exhibit 2 highlights the varied roles and responsibilities for families.

What are the challenges to increasing family engagement?

Despite research pointing to the importance of family engagement and despite widespread support from policymakers and the public, the extent to which families are actually engaged in their children's education varies from school to school and district to

Exhibit 2: Role and Responsibilities of Families in their Children's Education

At Home:

- understand and relate the importance of education to their children
- set expectations for children to do well in school
- be sure children attend school and are ready to learn every day
- provide for the health, safety, and development of their children
- develop parenting skills that support learning
- provide a supportive home environment that encourages learning and good behavior in school
- supervise children and monitor how they spend their time out of school
- make sure out-of-school activities are constructive
- talk about school and what they are learning
- read and talk to young children
- monitor their child's academic performance regularly and work with teachers to address any performance concerns
- help with reading and math skills and check homework
- assist with plans for college or career opportunities

At School:

- attend school events and training to be informed and to improve parenting and teaching skills
- volunteer to help at school
- support school activities
- join parent organizations at school
- serve on school committees
- stay in touch and develop relationships with teachers and school staff
- take leadership and decision-making roles for school policies and programs

In the Community:

- advocate for laws, policies, funding, and services to improve the schools
- encourage community organizations to support the schools and students

Source: OREA compilation from various sources on family engagement as referenced in the bibliography.

district. Factors internal and external to the school can serve as challenges to increased family engagement.

A 2006 OREA survey of district and school officials in Tennessee's high priority schools indicated that garnering parental engagement is challenging.¹¹ Some challenges to effective family engagement in schools include:

- The struggles of low-income families to meet basic needs can take precedence over school engagement.
- Parents who are not proficient in English may have difficulty understanding school communications.
- Parents with disabilities may encounter difficulties in attending school events or understanding communications
- Families may lack transportation to school or child care for events and meetings.
- Working parents or parents with multiple children may have time constraints.
- Families may have varying cultural expectations, i.e., some cultures may teach parents not to question the authority of schools or may view family engagement as interference with the teacher or school.
- Parents may not feel that school staff welcome them. Parents may not understand a school's expectation for their engagement or how to become engaged.¹²

A nationally representative 2007 study by Civic Enterprises found that parents believe that engagement is central to children's academic success. However, many parents, especially those whose children were attending low-performing schools, did not feel engaged in their child's education. Parents of children in low-performing schools were less likely to talk with teachers and felt much less informed about their child's academic performance, graduation requirements, and college admission requirements. Less than half of parents with children in low-performing schools rated their schools as good or better in encouraging parents to be engaged.¹³

Spotlight on Glencliff High School: An Urban, Low Income, Multi-Cultural Challenge

Glencliff High School in Nashville has a culturally diverse student body. Students come from 40 different countries and speak over 44 different languages. Close to half of students attend for less than a full year. Most families are low income and a low percentage of parents have postsecondary education. Glencliff has a history of little community or parental support.

The school is taking steps to create more family and community engagement. Principal Tony Major's vision is to develop relationships and form partnerships among the school, families, and community organizations by bringing families and the community into the school and taking the school out into the community. In his view, addressing the academic as well as health and social needs of students will improve student achievement. Federal funding has been instrumental in this effort by providing personnel to concentrate on family and community engagement.

School staff have focused on engaging area businesses and organizations, as well as families. The school includes a community health care clinic and a YMCA aquatics program; services and programs are shared by students, families, and community members. To help parents develop connections to the school and to instill the importance of education, the school offers English Language Learner (ELL) classes, citizenship training, workforce development, and school computer lab access to parents. Glencliff has developed more student activities and smaller academies within the large 1,400 student school. In many instances, these are organized around student interests, and families are encouraged to participate with students.

Increased communication between school and home is a key strategy. This includes multi-language newsletters, phone messaging systems for absences and announcements, on-line grade access, and use of culturally diverse media outlets. School staff does much more specific ethnic outreach through community centers and area churches.

Principal Major notes that while these efforts have increased family engagement, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

How can federal, state, and local education agencies promote family engagement?

Federal, state, and local education agencies have leadership roles to play in strengthening school-based family and community engagement programs. These agencies can:

- promote strategies to engage families and community organizations in ways that support student learning;
- require policies and plans for districts and schools to encourage family engagement;
- provide training and information for educators, families, and community organizations focused on improved family engagement;
- set standards for teacher education programs and performance evaluations to include family engagement techniques;
- provide funding and staffing for family engagement programs at schools; and
- establish accountability measures to assess progress and performance.¹⁴

Exhibit 3 illustrates what these agencies have done to encourage family engagement in Tennessee in recent years.

2010 Tennessee Family-School-Community Engagement Summit

A coalition of over 20 Tennessee and national education and community organizations sponsored a summit on family, school and community engagement in Nashville on April 15, 2010. The summit brought together over 300 Tennessee educators, policymakers, families, and leaders from business, faith-based, and community organizations to discuss the issues and barriers to meaningful family, business, and community engagement in schools. The participants developed a wide range of recommendations designed to increase family engagement and promote student achievement and school success, including:

- enhancing school policies and staff training around fostering a family friendly, culturally competent, and welcoming environment in schools
- providing families with training and tools on how to partner with schools to improve student achievement and school success
- funding parent liaisons, social workers, and other positions in schools to allow school counselors more time to work with students on college and career plans
- integrating family engagement factors into the new teacher evaluation system under development

A complete report on the Tennessee summit is due later in 2010. The Tennessee coalition plans to continue to work to promote and implement the summit's recommendations on the national, state, and local levels.

Exhibit 3: Federal, State, and Local Government Actions Encouraging Family Engagement in Tennessee Schools

Laws and Policies

Federal

- The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 includes family engagement requirements for all schools and more specific requirements for high poverty (Title I) districts and Title III ELL programs.¹⁵
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has specific requirements for family participation in school-related decision-making for the education of their children.¹⁶

State

- In 2003, SBOE adopted a family engagement policy in line with NCLB outlining elements of effective programs by schools and districts and supporting professional development.¹⁷
- *Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.)* § 49-2-305 requires school districts to develop and adopt a policy consistent with the state board's policy.
- Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) directives require schools' and districts' policies and improvement plans to include input from families and provide information and services to engage families in their children's education.¹⁸
- T.C.A. 49-6-7002 requires two family-teacher conferences per year.
- T.C.A. 49-6-7001 allows supervisors to give state employees limited time off to volunteer in their child's school.
- House Joint Resolution 56 of 2000 urges employers to excuse parents from work for conferences with teachers.

Standards

- Tennessee teacher licensure standards require teacher professional education programs to provide evidence that their programs enable teachers to foster relationships with parents.¹⁹
- Tennessee SBOE's performance standards include criteria to rate teachers and principals on family engagement.²⁰

Monitoring

- TDOE developed a Family and Community Engagement monitoring instrument for district and school level family engagement plans in FY2005-06.
- U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and TDOE Field Service Consultants monitor districts' and schools' compliance with federal and state laws and policies on family engagement.²¹
- TDOE monitors districts and surveys parents for compliance with federal special education requirements.²²

Training and Information Dissemination

- TDOE's Family Friendly Schools Initiative in 2005 provided a framework and extensive training to district staff.²³
- USDOE awarded federal funds to Tennessee Voices for Children as the Tennessee Parent Information and Resource Center to work with schools, particularly Title I schools.²⁴
- TDOE central office and regional staff compiled and disseminated best practices for districts and schools to consider in 2005 and 2009.²⁵
- TDOE sponsors annual conferences and seminars that typically include panels on family engagement.
- Federal funds through the Tennessee State Improvement Grant (SIG) funded a guidebook in 2008.²⁶

Funding

- School districts receiving over \$500,000 in Title I federal funds must spend at least one percent of Title I funds on family engagement. An OREA survey of school districts found that districts designated over \$9 million in federal funds in FY 2009-10 for family engagement staff and programs, well over the requirement of about \$4.3 million.²⁷
- Family Resource Centers were authorized in 1993 to help Tennessee school districts coordinate services to meet the basic needs of families with children. Funding includes annual state grants of \$33,300 with a \$16,700 local match requirements for 104 Family Resource Centers serving 81 schools in 68 counties. State funding for family resource centers was made on a non-recurring basis for the FY 2009-10 and FY2010-11.²⁸

Accountability Measures to Assess Progress and Performance

- Public Chapter 154 of 2009 requires TDOE to develop standards for family engagement to include on the Tennessee Report Card in 2010-11.

Source: OREA analysis of family engagement laws and policies, and interviews and correspondence with program director in the Tennessee Department of Education.

How can schools better engage families?

A 2008 report by Civic Enterprises found that “regardless of incomes, education, and performance at the school, parents believe that their involvement is central to their child’s academic success. But parents need an access point — a way in — and many are not finding it in their child’s school.”²⁹

Four areas of focus for schools to develop meaningful family and community engagement include:³⁰

1. Developing the capacity of families in their role in education:

- Assist families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students.
- Guide or train parents to work with their children at home. Teach families how to help with reading skills and checking homework; to supervise children and to monitor how they spend their time out of school; to talk about school and what they are learning; and to talk about expectations such as college or career opportunities. Include assignments requiring parental input.
- Develop effective means for parents to monitor children’s academic and social performance at school and to work together with the school for improvement.

2. Developing the capacity of school staff to engage and interact with families:

- Train school staff on how to make families welcome at school.
- Require increased communication with parents, e.g., meeting face-to-face, sending materials home, keeping in touch about progress, and offering workshops for parents on helping at home. Schools should use multiple forms of communication. If parents cannot attend school events, schools should consider a home visit or phone call to inform parents and keep them engaged. School staff and teachers should ask parents about their situations and try to respond to their needs.

- Share school decision-making with families by including parents on advisory, school improvement, and policy development committees
- Address challenges to family participation in school events by meeting closer to homes and by providing food, child care, and transportation. Schools can address language barriers by providing materials in languages spoken at home, welcome signs in all languages spoken, and interpreters and translators for meetings and workshops. Schools should address disability barriers, such as impaired hearing or sight and physical limitations, and should work to understand and accommodate cultural differences.
- Expand the number and diversity of engaged families by seeking out parent volunteers, especially those not already engaged, and by including more fathers. Educators can develop lists of specific volunteer activities to recruit volunteers.

3. Developing the capacity of families to advocate for education:

- Encourage and assist families to participate in school improvement efforts for facilities, staffing, resources to improve teaching and curriculum, translation services, and health care.
- Seek parent input on school policies and programs and include families on school improvement committees.
- Provide training on skills needed for parents to take on leadership roles at school.

4. Addressing basic needs of families to allow more engagement:

- Provide information to help parents access and secure the health and social services they need for themselves and their families
- Train parents to better assist at home through parenting skill instruction, teaching non-reading parents to read, and helping families obtain suitable reading materials for home.

Spotlight on Caywood Elementary: Focusing Families on Student Academic Performance

Caywood Elementary School is part of the small, rural, lower-income Lexington City School district. Principal Angela Blankenship attributes the school's ability to stay in good academic standing to high, inclusive family participation.

A major area of focus has been to provide parents more detailed information on their children's academic performance. Instead of a traditional grade in each subject, K-3 teachers rate each child using a rubric describing the extent to which the child has mastered the skills required by the curriculum standards. The assessment's results show parents, as well as teachers, areas where additional attention is needed and how the parents can help their children improve. The school provides progress reports every three weeks and presents academic recognition awards every nine weeks.

To assist parents in helping their children at home, teachers have developed websites that include learning targets for the class and recommended websites for additional skill development. Because many parents do not have an Internet connection, the school now opens its computer labs on some evenings. This also allows parents to participate with their children in electronic learning programs.

Family participation is further encouraged through fun-centered special events such as Back-to-School Nights, Fall Festivals, and Literacy Nights. At monthly grade level events, teachers share class activities and provide resources to families to help their children succeed academically.

What are Tennessee schools doing to encourage family engagement?

Tennessee schools rely on various strategies to increase family engagement in their children's education at school, at home, and in the community. In the course of developing state-required school improvement plans, schools must engage parents and community organizations in planning, and must incorporate family engagement into action steps to meet school improvement goals.³¹ Although family engagement programs and activities vary from school to school, Exhibit 4 includes common school strategies noted by Tennessee schools to encourage family engagement.

Exhibit 4: Tennessee Schools' Strategies to Encourage Family Engagement

Provide information and workshops to guide families in helping students learn at home and preparing students to learn at school. Topics include reading and math tips, how to monitor and understand a child's progress, how to work with educators to improve academic achievement, and college admission procedures. Information for families includes changes in educational policies such as new academic standards and changes in curriculum.

Designate staff coordinators to organize and implement family engagement activities focused on academics. Topics and activities include literacy workshops, back-to-school events, and health fairs.

Include families as reading and math mentors, language translators, and mentors to other parents as part of a comprehensive effort to make schools more welcoming to families.

Better inform parents about school meetings, events, and volunteer opportunities by using multiple channels of communication such as websites, e-mail, automated calling, translation technology, and newsletters. Use parent portals on school websites for grades and other information.

Address families' needs such as classes or materials on parenting skills, child development, language classes, and GED classes. Make social service referrals available through family resource centers or designated areas with information for parents.

Address challenges to family engagement by offering day and evening open houses and varied locations for meetings.

Increase parent input and leadership by adding more parents to advisory committees, school programs, and parent teacher organizations (PTO) and conducting more parent needs surveys.

Sources: Tennessee Department of Education, "Family and Community Engagement Strategies and Best Practices, 2005, <http://tennessee.gov/education/fedprog/doc/FCEStratNBestPractices.doc> (accessed on April 19, 2010); OREA Survey of Tennessee School Districts' Family Engagement Liaisons, March 2010; and Tennessee State Improvement Grant, *Unlocking your School's Family Engagement Potential*, (University of Tennessee), 2008, pp.23,26,30,37,38 http://sig.cls.utk.edu/pdf/SIG_Unlocking%20Potential.pdf (accessed April 19, 2010).

Have Tennessee's efforts made a difference?

As required by Public Chapter 154 (2009), TDOE is working to develop standards to grade Tennessee's public schools' efforts in family engagement and to include that information in the Tennessee Report Card for Schools beginning in 2010-11. The Department plans to use the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) parental engagement standards as the basis for the Report Card grades, subject to the approval of the SBOE. The Department's Office of Accountability will monitor the schools' efforts in family engagement.³²

PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships is a framework of how schools, families, and community organizations should work together to support student achievement. The standards are derived in part from Joyce Epstein's six areas of parental engagement as well as other research on effective family and community engagement on student achievement. The framework also provides an assessment guide, including a rubric to help determine the degree to which a school's particular programs, policies, and practices for family engagement align with the PTA standards. The standards include the need for feedback from family and community members as well as increased participation to evaluate whether the activities have had the desired results.³³

Conclusion

Planned assessments in 2010-11 by TDOE of schools' family engagement efforts should help schools focus on research-based techniques. Family engagement is one of many factors that contribute to improved student achievement. Programs, events, and policies that foster family engagement can lead to more coordination among school personnel, students, families, and community participants focused on improving student achievement.

Family Engagement in Tennessee's Race to the Top Plan

TDOE's 2010 application for federal Race to the Top funds for innovative education reform initiatives includes a strategy to expand the availability of academic growth data for educators and to make the data available to families as well. Pilot projects in Metro Nashville Public Schools and Memphis City Schools use this data to monitor students' academic growth and progression and see projections of how well students are likely to do on future assessments. The application states that early warning data allows schools and teachers to have better informed discussions with parents about children's academic progress and how families can assist.

Source: Tennessee Race to the Top – Application for Initial Funding, p.69, http://www.state.tn.us/education/doc/TN_RTTP_Application_2010_01_18.pdf (accessed June 4, 2010).

TDOE provided technical comments on a draft of this brief, which OREA incorporated prior to publication.

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An OREA survey of school district family engagement coordinators in February 2010 gathered information on staffing, funding, and the focus of school districts' family engagement programs and activities.



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