Setting the Stage: The Family Engagement Field

A strong body of research shows that family engagement matters for student success. Students do better in school and in life when their parents are engaged in their education. Family engagement contributes to a range of positive student outcomes, including improved student achievement, decreased disciplinary issues, and improved parent-child and teacher-child relationships.[1] Emerging evidence also suggests that family engagement can have important benefits for the inner-functioning of schools, including school staff having higher expectations for students, more shared ownership and trust across their faculty, and, ultimately, stronger school performance.[2]

All families can be capable guides, partners, and advocates in their child's education. Regardless of a parent's circumstances, family engagement is not a static enterprise - with the right interventions parents can change their behaviors in relationship to their child's education.[3] In focus groups conducted in 2009, District parents in all wards were clear that they cared about and wanted to support their child's learning but needed additional skills and knowledge to do so. Furthermore, they pointed out that they wanted schools to be more welcoming and responsive to their involvement.[4]

Families play specific roles that support student achievement. Although there is widespread consensus about the importance of family engagement, there is a diversity of opinions about what, exactly, family engagement means. Research about the impact of different types of family engagement help address this challenge. Meta-analyses find that, when it comes to how strongly parent involvement predicts student achievement, a parent's participation in school itself is a blip on the radar screen compared to a parent holding high expectations and setting goals for their individual child, monitoring progress and holding them accountable, and supporting learning at home, among other things.[5] Although many of these forms of family engagement are difficult for school staff to see, schools still play an important role in affecting them.

Family engagement strategies that research shows to be effective are not what most schools choose to invest in. Across the educational system, from teachers to policy-makers, decisions about family engagement are often based on popular opinion rather than what can move the needle on student achievement. For example, a study of family engagement in school improvement plans found that only 4% of schools have programs to foster high parental expectations for their children,[6] despite the importance of this strategy. A key reason for what one field leader calls "random acts of parent involvement"[7] is that, in the absence of training for school staff, antiquated ideas of family engagement as fundraising and volunteering prevail. The good news is that experts, drawing on the evidence base and lessons learned across the country, are converging on a set of family engagement recommendations that are more strategically aligned with instructional goals.[8]

Schools need guidance and support on how to use family engagement to drive student learning. Principals and teachers play important roles in engaging families, which influence if and how they choose to be involved.[9] Nationally, both principals and teachers rate the biggest challenge of their work – above maintaining discipline, getting sufficient resources, and preparing students for testing – as communicating with and involving parents.[10] In spite of this challenge, school staff receive little, if any, preparation and professional development about their roles and effective strategies for family engagement.[11]
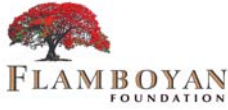
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