

*Tightening Up Title I*

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# Title I and Parent Involvement

Lessons from the Past, Recommendations for the Future

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# Introduction and summary

What role should families play in raising the achievement levels of children and in the efforts to reform our nation's schools?<sup>1</sup> This question has been a part of our federal, state, and local policy discourse for more than 35 years, and has recently reached a new level of prominence. More than five decades of research confirms that the engagement of families in their children's education improves school readiness, student academic outcomes such as higher gains in reading and math achievement, and graduation rates.<sup>2</sup>

In his January 2011 State of the Union speech, President Barack Obama discussed the shared responsibility of the home, school, and community in enhancing our country's education system, stating, “the question is whether all of us—as citizens and as parents—are willing to do what's necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities.”

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan defined his vision for how parents can and should be engaged in their children's education in his keynote address at the MOM Congress on Education and Learning in May 2010:

*My vision for family engagement is ambitious. ... I want to have too many parents demanding excellence in their schools. I want all parents to be real partners in education with their children's teachers, from cradle to career. In this partnership, students and parents should feel connected--and teachers should feel supported. ... we need parents to speak out and drive change in chronically-underperforming schools where children receive an inferior education. With parental support, those struggling schools need to be turned around now—not tomorrow, because children get only one chance at an education.*

The president's and secretary's remarks define a robust and comprehensive view of the role of families in their children's schooling. Instead of the involvement of parents being seen as a peripheral, compliance-driven aspect of whole school

improvement, their vision calls for parents to be *full partners* with school staff and other members of the community in the work of creating and sustaining excellent schools. A symbol of this expanded view of the family's role is represented by the research-informed shift in terminology from "parental involvement," representing supportive activities that occur primarily in the home between parent and child, to "family engagement," broadening the role of families from at-home activities to full partnerships with school staff and other parents and community members in the overall improvement of schools.<sup>3</sup>

This broader definition requires that family engagement be a *shared responsibility* among families, school staff, and community members where families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development, and school personnel and community members are committed to engaging and partnering with families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways. This shared responsibility must be continuous across a child's lifespan, from cradle to career. And it must occur in multiple settings where children learn: at home, at school, and in community settings.<sup>4</sup>

Given this more comprehensive vision of family engagement, this paper examines the role federal policy can play, specifically, within the parent involvement provisions of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, in moving this more comprehensive vision of family engagement from theory to practice as well as fulfilling the president's and secretary's family engagement goals of shared responsibility and the cultivation of parent capacity to demand excellence in their schools. This analysis focuses most directly on the national dialogue concerning the current and proposed use of Title I set-aside funds, or funds specifically designated by Congress for family engagement in their children's education.

The most recent reauthorization of Title I of ESEA in 2002, known more familiarly as the No Child Left Behind Act, addresses family engagement in a number of sections, most notably in Section 1118 of Title I. Through Section 1118, districts receiving more than \$500,000 in Title I funds must set aside at least 1 percent for family engagement activities and distribute at least 95 percent of those funds to Title I schools.<sup>5</sup> In May 2010 Secretary Duncan announced the Education Department's proposal to double the set-aside from 1 percent to 2 percent as well as create an optional Family Engagement and Responsibility fund for state departments of education to build with existing Title I funds. The new fund would be used to launch state-run competitions to support innovative and effective local family engagement initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to review the history and evolution of the Title I parent involvement provisions and to use the lessons learned from this history to assess the efficacy of these provisions and the latest U.S. Department of Education proposals for reauthorization. Through data collected from interviews with seven key informants,<sup>7</sup> alongside a review of the history of the parent involvement language in Title I, this paper identifies five major themes that reveal shifts over time in the intent and purpose of the law as well as recurring challenges that impede the application of the law in practice:

- A decrease in the focus on and commitment to building the capacity of families and school personnel to create and sustain partnerships that support children’s learning and development
- The promotion of “random acts” of family engagement versus systemic initiatives
- A focus on a *compliance* versus an *improvement* mindset for family engagement
- A shift in the emphasis of family engagement from collective growth to individual development
- A limited commitment to monitoring and evaluation

Using these themes as a foundation, this paper offers five recommendations for consideration for the reauthorization of ESEA. Several of the recommendations are aligned with those in the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2011, a proposal crafted by the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, a nationwide team of family and community engagement researchers, advocacy groups, practitioners, and policymakers. The five recommendations provided here are designed to complement, not repeat, those offered in the Family Engagement in Education Act:

- Make permanent the increase in the minimum set-aside figure from 1 percent to at least 2 percent, and revise the statutory language in Section 1118 to direct this set-aside funding and the proposed Family Engagement and Opportunity Fund toward the design and implementation of initiatives that build the capacity of families and school staff to partner to improve student achievement and school quality.
- Reconsider the allocation formula for the distribution of the family engagement set-aside funds to the districts and schools in order to promote systemic, districtwide forms of engagement.
- Change the statutory language to require that schools involve Title I parents in governance and decision making.

- Revise the statutory language regarding parent involvement policies and compacts to assure alignment with whole school improvement goals of the district and schools.
- Provide support to monitor and research innovative family engagement strategies and initiatives to build the knowledge base on best practice initiatives and strategies.

The next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will be introduced in the House of Representatives and the Senate later this year. The analysis and recommendations in the pages that follow underscore for members of both chambers of Congress the critical need for education reform that embraces parents and community members fully as partners in children's education and school improvement.



# The genesis of parent involvement language in Title I of ESEA

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Sowing the seeds of parent activism and engagement—  
the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty programs

Pushed by the civil rights movement and the tide of unrest in the country in the 1960s, the federal government, particularly under the Johnson administration, proceeded with the War on Poverty programs. These initiatives ushered in federal support for the engagement of citizen participation in the planning and execution of these programs. From the federal perspective, the support of citizen participation aimed to:

- Make the services delivered to the poor more responsive to their needs
- Integrate the bottom segments of the urban population into community life, thus quieting unrest and promoting stability<sup>8</sup>

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, for example, required citizens served by EOA to have “maximum feasible participation” in the poverty program’s planning. EOA was the centerpiece of the “War on Poverty,” which in turn was a major thrust of the “Great Society” legislative agenda of the Johnson administration. EOA provided for job training, adult education, and loans to small businesses to attack the roots of unemployment and poverty. EOA also established thousands of Community Action Agencies throughout the country. Many of these agencies, supported by federal dollars, opened neighborhood centers that provided technical assistance and training, spawning a generation of community leaders and activists, many of whom were parents.

Head Start and Follow Through, two education-related initiatives that were a part of the arsenal of antipoverty programs, also operated on the concept that “the poor should participate in planning and carrying out of programs designed for their benefit.”<sup>9</sup> From its inception in 1965, Head Start emphasized parent participation and provided detailed language for how parents would be engaged in decision making. Parent engagement in Head Start began with parent advisory councils. When Head

Start was moved from the Office of Economic Opportunity to the Office of Child Development in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1970, these councils were upgraded to policy boards and given substantial authority, similar to the kind associated with a governing board. Wide variations were reported in the effectiveness of these policy boards, with some evidence that the public school pushback on the full engagement of parents on these boards was significant.<sup>10</sup>

Another example of an education-related program was Follow Through, designed as a comprehensive attack on poverty where the local school would serve as a focal point for coordination of services to the poor community. Follow Through stressed both individual and collective forms of participation. Along with Head Start and other economic opportunity efforts, the vision of Follow Through was social change and collective empowerment. The goal of the program was to enable local institutions, parents, and community residents to be responsible for and bring about the needed changes in their communities.<sup>11</sup>

When the Follow Through program was shifted in 1969 from the Office of Economic Improvement to the Office of Education at HEW, the program's focus shifted from one with an emphasis on social change to one with a concentration on evaluation and improvement of academic achievement. The Office of Education continued to support the program's original intent to involve parents, but parental involvement became a means to improve the quality of the program's educational impact, *not* as a way of developing community leadership and collective strength. Even with this shift in focus, the parent involvement requirements for Follow Through suggested more citizen influence and engagement than any of the other Office of Education programs.<sup>12</sup>

An interesting episode occurred during the Office of Education's administration of the Follow Through program that raised questions about the federal role in empowering parents to be engaged in education reform. In an attempt to affirm its recognition of the importance of parent engagement, the Office of Education contracted with Afram Associates, led by Harlem activist and supporter of community control Preston Wilcox, to organize and advise a group of Follow Through projects.<sup>13</sup> Afram's support and assistance to those programs was based on a strong ideological belief about parent engagement:

*Families have a natural nonnegotiable right/responsibility to guard/protect the right of their children to be perceived as human/educable, as being members of a community and to be involved in shaping the content/policy of their children's*

*educational programs. The failure of school systems to effectively provide educational justice to all children shifts the exercise of parental decision-making from a right/responsibility to an absolute necessity.*<sup>14</sup>

Afram and the Office of Education ran into difficulties when Afram staff rejected the evaluation of their projects based on standardized test scores and other measures of student performance, and in 1976 the government agency made the decision not to refund Afram. A 1977 Center for New Schools report stated:

*The position of the Federal funders was that Afram refused to follow proper procedures and that services being provided by Afram at that point were unclear. Afram's perspective was that it was not refunded because it refused to put the maintenance of relations with funders above its direct work with parents, because it pressed for more parent control of Follow Through, and because it encouraged local sites to take primary credit for their successes rather than fostering dependency and claiming major credit for Afram.*<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between Afram and the federal education agency raised questions about whether the federal government would fund initiatives that sought to transfer power to poor people, that emphasized preeminent roles for parents and community members, and that sought to utilize measurement and accountability tools that focused on parent and community empowerment outcomes rather than on more traditional academic achievement measures.<sup>16</sup>

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## Parent involvement and Title I

Unlike the other antipoverty programs that contained specific language about citizen participation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 created the Title I program without any mention of parent participation in the program.<sup>17</sup> Senate Education Committee members struggled with identifying the role of parents during hearings on the bill, and by 1966 federal officials looking to implement Title I began urging local officials to involve parents. By 1967 the Office of Education required local school officials to create “appropriate activities and services” in which parents could be involved.<sup>18</sup> This language was expanded in 1967 in a government program guide where the goal of parent involvement was defined as building “the capabilities of parents to work with the school in a way that supports their children’s well being, growth, and development.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1968 the requirements for involving families grew in focus and intensity and were more explicitly stated in the Title I regulations developed by the Office of Education. These regulations required parents to be involved in the planning, operations, and evaluation of Title I projects. These new regulations also gave districts the option of establishing parent advisory councils to meet these requirements. The momentum for even stronger language continued to build. In the General Education Provisions Act of 1969, Congress gave the commissioner of education the power to strengthen parental involvement language, and in 1972 the agency acted on the discretionary powers granted by Congress and issued regulations that *required* each state department of education to establish a district-wide parent advisory council.<sup>20</sup>

As the parent involvement language was being strengthened in Title I, activist organizations began to recognize the power of the law and became interested in the opportunity to encourage greater parent participation and voice in how Title I funds were being spent in schools and districts. The Quakers' American Friends Service Committee, for example, had been working in the southern states on issues of school desegregation.<sup>21</sup> In collaboration with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, AFSC formed the Southeastern Public Education Program. SEPEP's work included:

- Providing community groups and citizens with information, leadership development, organizing skills, and legal assistance
- Working with federal agencies to ensure accountability to the communities they served
- Alerting the federal government of challenges to congressional mandates<sup>22</sup>

In doing so, SEPEP learned what was working and what wasn't in southern elementary and secondary schools at the time. As early as 1967, a SEPEP representative reported to Congress that:

*The lack of community involvement in the creation of ESEA Title I programs often results in great misunderstandings, and even hostility, between the Negro community and school officials. Unfortunately, school officials seem to take little time to fully explain to the community how the ESEA funded programs work and the extent of their limitations. ... there needs to be some mechanism, hopefully created voluntarily by local school officials, but if necessary, created by law or required by the U.S. Office of Education, that will allow parents and community leaders to express their ideas and opinions, and to know their rights and responsibilities under ESEA funded programs.*<sup>23</sup>

As the Title I requirements for parent involvement began to strengthen, particularly the language requiring parent advisory councils at the district level, groups like SEPEP began to turn their attention to working on the election of parents to these advisory councils and the building of parents' capacity to understand the law and assure that their school systems were in compliance with Title I parent involvement mandates.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to SEPEP, organizations such as the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the National Committee for Citizens in Education began to provide workshops and various training opportunities for parents in urban and rural areas around the country. As a result of the capacity-building efforts on the part of these organizations, the number of poor, African American, and Latino parents willing and able to participate as parent advisory council leaders grew substantially.

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### The birth of the National Coalition of ESEA Title I Parents

William H. Anderson from Wilmington, DE, a Title I parent advisory council chairman and activist, had been working closely with staff from the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund on the training and organizing of other Title I parents. In 1972 Anderson learned that the National Advisory Council for the Education of Disadvantaged Children, a council appointed by President Johnson to oversee the administration of ESEA, was holding a meeting in Washington, D.C., for Title I state administrators. Anderson also learned that a portion of the meeting would focus on parent involvement. Seeing that this was an important opportunity for parents to meet members of the NACEDC and state Title I coordinators, Anderson organized and arranged for a group of 14 parents to attend the meeting.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to presenting several resolutions and recommendations for strengthening the parent involvement provisions of Title I, the group pushed for the NACEDC to sponsor a national conference for Title I parents. The council agreed, and on January 4, 1973, 50 Title I parents from across the country met to discuss the challenges to parental involvement in Title I. The conference resulted in the formulation and passing of several dozen resolutions, with one calling for the establishment of the National Coalition of ESEA Title I Parents.<sup>26</sup>

The National Coalition functioned as a small group of activist Title I parents who focused on monitoring pending Title I legislation as well as building the capacity of other parents to become more involved in the education of their children. The group regularly testified in hearings on parent involvement legislation and was instrumental in pushing through, in 1974, Public Law 93-380, which stated that parent advisory councils were *required* for each district and school being served by Title I. The coalition also testified on a number of occasions in favor of additional resources for parent training and leadership development.

In 1976 the Carnegie Corporation of New York awarded the National Coalition a two-year grant of \$200,000 to establish the National Parent Center in Washington, D.C. The new center became the premier training, information, and resource center for parents as well as schools and districts. Robert Witherspoon, who began as a trainer for the center and later became its director, stated that he and other coalition members led hundreds of trainings around the country for parents on their rights and responsibilities under Title I. The trainings focused more on parents' understanding of the legislation, the specifics of the law, and leadership training rather than on "parenting" classes and workshops. Witherspoon stated that the classes were highly interactive, with parents often "quizzing each other" on the law.

Some workshops also taught parents about their eligibility for other federal initiatives such as Head Start and the free-lunch programs. One parent, Susanne Jackson, in a talk at a National Coalition meeting in 2003, described the early parent capacity-building efforts of the coalition:

*We studied budgets, federal, state and local regulations, elections, learning techniques and programs, methods of evaluation, impacts of early childhood education and computer learning and much more. We taught each other. We brought in experts from education, government and other groups to help us learn. We used what we learned to train others in our regions and in our school districts. We believed "Knowledge is Power." We were determined to exercise our Power – to act on behalf of all the children.<sup>27</sup>*

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## The 1978 parent involvement amendments

The most substantial victory for the National Coalition of ESEA Title I Parents and other parent advocacy groups came with the passage of the Educational Amendments to ESEA in 1978. Two full sections of the amended law were dedicated to ensuring parents would be included in the governance of the program. The

first section required that districts give parents the opportunity to be engaged in the establishment of the programs and required that parents be kept informed of and permitted to make recommendations to the instructional goals of the program. The second section of the law addressed the establishment and role of the advisory councils, requiring that parents be involved in the “planning, implementation, and evaluation” of programs.<sup>28</sup> Councils could veto district plans for the use of federal funds; state and local departments of education had to provide councils with relevant laws, guidelines, regulations, and any other relevant documents; and training had to be provided for both local and district parent council members.<sup>29</sup>

Even after the strengthening of the language in 1978, many schools and districts remained resistant to engaging parents. In one of the limited number of studies conducted on the impact of the Title I parent provisions, the late political science professor Marilyn Gittell at the City College of New York found that the impact of the parent advisory councils was disappointing.<sup>30</sup> The study revealed that, overall, few Title I parents were aware of the existence of these parent councils, schools dominated the advisory councils, and parent members were seldom involved in the planning of the Title I projects.

Indeed, in following up on complaints lodged by parents, the National Council discovered that deceased parents’ names appeared on the rosters of parent advisory councils, or that parents’ names were put on rosters without their knowledge. Elected members of these councils also complained that it was difficult to get information from their districts and schools on how the Title I money was being spent or to receive the training and support that districts and schools were supposed to provide.

Despite the fact that the parent advisory councils struggled, many, especially those in large urban districts, gained strength, power, and control over the programming. This increase in the power and voice of poor parents of color resulted in significant pushback from district and state school officials, teachers’ unions, and superintendents.<sup>31</sup>

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## The weakening of the parental involvement provisions

In 1981, under the Reagan administration, almost all parental involvement provisions in Title I were eliminated when ESEA was repealed and replaced with the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act.<sup>32</sup> Title I became Chapter 1, and the parent involvement language was reduced to a single requirement that schools

and districts hold an annual meeting of Title I parents to inform them about the program. In most cases, the repeal of the 1978 provisions led districts to abolish both district- and school-based parent advisory councils. Some of the more active and powerful district councils, such as those in Detroit, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles, hung on, but many were eliminated.

According to Arnold Fege, director of public engagement and advocacy for the Public Education Network, despite the repeal of the 1978 provisions, the five-year opening of the policy window that strongly supported parent involvement in the governance of Title I resulted in:

- Training that was developed by and for parents
- Parents learning about and executing planning, evaluation, and programmatic authority
- The cultivation of a new generation of poor parents who were educated on how to use the educational system and press for educational and institutional change<sup>33</sup>

These parents continued to travel to Washington to lobby for and support the reinsertion of parental involvement language into future reauthorizations.

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### From 1988 to 2001—the reemergence of parent involvement language in Title I

Despite the repeal of the 1978 requirements, groups like the National Coalition of Title I ESEA Parents, the Center for Law and Education, the Children’s Defense Fund, and the National Committee for Citizens in Education continued to push for the reinsertion of stronger parent involvement language in the law. With each reauthorization of ESEA after 1981 came some attempt to strengthen the Title I parent involvement provisions. The Hawkins-Stafford Amendments of 1988, for example, provided language that required state and local departments of education to write policies to ensure parent involvement in program planning, design, and implementation; provide timely information about the program to parents; and provide information to parents in a language and form they could understand.

Then, in 1994, President Clinton signed into law the “Improving America’s Schools Act.” This reauthorization of ESEA ushered in a more comprehensive model of parent involvement. The changes in language under Section 1118 required Title I schools to develop a written parent involvement policy and school-parent compacts, developed with and approved by parents, that would



outline how students, parents, and school staff would work as a team to meet academic standards, and required multiple types of parent involvement. The 1994 law introduced the set-aside that required Title I schools to spend at least 1 percent of their Title I funds on parental involvement.<sup>34</sup>

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## Parent involvement and the No Child Left Behind Act

The current version of ESEA, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, mentions parent involvement in several sections of the law, but most notably in Section 1118 (see text box on page 14). Even though advocates lobbied and provided Congress with language outlining an increase in the set-aside from 1 percent to 5 percent, the NCLB reauthorization language emerged with no increase to the set-aside dollars.

Yet, for the first time, ESEA included a definition of parent involvement. It stated that:

*... the participation of parents in regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including ensuring that:*

- *Parents play an integral role in assisting their children's learning;*
- *Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education at school;*
- *Parents are full partners in their children's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child;*
- *The carrying out of other activities, such as those described in Section 1118.*

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## Tensions within the current regulations

Though the current law provides guidance on the implementation of Section 1118 of ESEA, research and federal monitoring reveals that, once again, state education agencies, districts, and schools are struggling to fulfill the parent involvement requirements.<sup>36</sup> Case in point: A recent report from the U.S. Department of Education concluded that the parent involvement requirements, including compacts, are one of the weakest areas of Title I compliance.<sup>37</sup>

Districts also report that the current language for the distribution of Title I parent involvement dollars, where 95 percent of the set-aside must be allocated directly

## Six key leverage points for parent involvement

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Section 1118, as amended in 2002, includes these six key leverage points for parental involvement:<sup>35</sup>

- (1) Every Title 1 school must have a written parent involvement policy, developed with and approved by parents. This policy should spell out how parents will be involved in a meaningful way and how they will be involved in the school. The policy must be updated periodically to reflect the changing concerns of parents.
- (2) Every Title 1 school must have a school-parent compact, developed and approved by parents, that describes how the school and parents will build a partnership to improve student achievement. This compact should explain how the school will meet the needs of its students so that they will achieve high standards.
- (3) Every school district must have a written Title 1 parent involvement policy that is developed with and approved by parents, and evaluated every year. This policy must spell out how the district will engage parents in developing its Title 1 plan and how it will help parents gain the knowledge and skills to be involved effectively in decisions about the program and in the schools.
- (4) The school district must distribute a report card specifying how every school and the district as a whole is performing. This applies to Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools, as well as to charter schools.
- (5) If a Title 1 school has not made adequate progress over the past two or more years, parents have two options. They can ask to transfer their children to a school that is making adequate progress, or they can request supplemental services and become involved in improving the school.
- (6) The state education agency must monitor the school districts' Title 1 programs to make sure they carry out the law. If the district is not involving parents, parents and community members should appeal to the state.

to schools, prevents the use of these funds for districtwide, more systemic family engagement initiatives. In 2010 and 2011, respectively, the Boston and Baltimore Public School districts were restricted from using their Title I parent involvement funds for broader, more coherent districtwide family engagement initiatives because of the allocation language in the law.

In addition, the current law does not require schools to link their school-parent compacts to achieving the goals of their school improvement plans, thus missing an opportunity to stimulate teacher-parent collaboration on a powerful mutual interest: achieving student progress in a given school year. In a review of school compacts, for example, the Connecticut Department of Education in 2008 found that many were gathering dust and had not been revised in years. Few compacts described home-school initiatives that could have a direct impact on learning. Most of the compacts parroted the general language in the law about parents' responsibility to support children's learning, such as monitoring attendance, homework completion, and TV watching.<sup>38</sup>

# Emerging themes from the history of the Title I parent provisions

This recounting of the history and evolution of the parent involvement provisions of Title I reveal five compelling themes that shape and undergird any future recommendations to the law:

- A decrease in the focus on and commitment to building the capacity of families and school personnel to create and sustain partnerships that support children’s learning and development
- The promotion of “random acts” of family engagement versus systemic initiatives
- A focus on a *compliance* versus an *improvement* mindset for family engagement
- A shift in the emphasis of family engagement from collective growth to individual development
- A limited commitment to monitoring and evaluation

Let’s now examine each in turn.

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A decrease in the focus on and commitment to building the capacity of families and school personnel to create and sustain partnerships that support children’s learning and development

Harvard University education professor Richard Elmore, in his “theory of reciprocity,” states that for every increment of change in performance that is expected, there is an equal responsibility required to provide the capacity to meet that expectation.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the history of the parental involvement provisions, parents and school staff have been asked to engage in ways for which neither side is prepared.

The antipoverty programs of the 1960s provided technical assistance and capacity building to poor communities and communities of color, resulting in the cultivation of a cadre of parents who were ready and able to participate in district and school councils. Over the past few decades, however, the overall federal

emphasis on capacity building has dissipated, and for Title I there has been a steady decrease in the focus on the capacity-building side of parental involvement.<sup>40</sup> Section 1118 of ESEA, for example, places a heavy emphasis on the role of parents in the development of parent involvement policies at the district and school levels and the development of school-parent compacts, but lacks an equal and corresponding emphasis on the type of capacity building required for parents to fulfill these roles.

Similarly, state-, district-, and school-level staff receive little to no training on the skills and competencies required to partner with families. Heather Weiss and Naomi Stephen at the Harvard Family Research Project report that “there has been and continues to be little leadership from any source demanding or providing pre- or in- service training of teachers in this area.”<sup>41</sup>

Teachers are also unprepared to work with families in supporting these roles. The 2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that new teachers identified working with families as their greatest challenge and the area where they feel least well prepared.<sup>42</sup>

The limited capacity of both parents and state, district- and school-level personnel to partner with each other and share the responsibility of improving student performance factors heavily into the relatively poor execution and oversight of the Title I parent provisions.

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### The promotion of “random acts” of family engagement versus systemic initiatives

An unintended outcome of the provisions has been the creation of conditions resulting in “random acts” of parent involvement versus systemic family engagement initiatives.<sup>43</sup> Family engagement that is systemic is purposely designed as a core component of whole school improvement; in other words, all initiatives are linked to student learning and school improvement. These initiatives are focused on improving educational outcomes for all children, are aligned and coherent with the overall improvement goals of the districts and schools, work to mobilize stakeholders from diverse settings to share the responsibility for the work of improvement, and are not “standalone” or “boutique” projects but initiatives that are integrated across all educational settings.<sup>44</sup>

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## A focus on a *compliance* versus an *improvement* mindset for family engagement

Throughout the history of the Title I parent engagement language, there has been an emphasis on a *compliance mindset* versus an *improvement mindset*. The compliance mindset views the role of the Title I parent as the “compliance officer” or “watchdog” of the school system, placing parents in the position of making sure the law is followed and schools are in compliance. Although this role may be a necessary component of parent involvement, it is not sufficient. The heavy emphasis on this compliance orientation exacerbates an “us versus them” dynamic between parents and school staff rather than a dynamic of shared responsibility. This mindset also pulls parents away from the work of whole school improvement, making parental involvement appear to be more of a nuisance and an “appendage” than an integral part of the school improvement process.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast, an “improvement mindset” would see parents as vital contributors to the work of improving schools. As their children’s first teachers, parents often bring valuable “funds of knowledge” to the school that inform teaching and learning strategies.<sup>46</sup> Parents are also key informants about community strengths and challenges, information that is vital for any comprehensive school improvement process. In order for improvement strategies to be fully implemented and sustained, the families affected by these changes must be directly engaged as partners in the process.

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## A shift in the emphasis of family engagement from collective growth to individual development

A noticeable shift over the years in the Title I parent involvement language has been from an emphasis on ensuring the delivery of equitable and effective programming *across* Title I districts and schools to an emphasis on a parent’s ability to oversee the program’s impact on their own child’s or children’s development. In the early parent involvement language, an emphasis was placed on oversight of how the Title I dollars were being spent in districts and schools and the level and type of programming. Those parent involvement provisions enabled parents to question how the money was being used. This authority led to the reporting out by parents to organizations such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund about the improper use of Title I funds in the South, which led to the groundbreaking report by Phyllis McClure of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

about the supplanting of Title I dollars.<sup>47</sup> Thus, parents did influence programming decisions made by districts and school staff that impacted not only their children but also multiple children and communities across the districts and schools.

In contrast, Section 1118 places more emphasis on the parent's role as a chooser of services and schools for their own child rather than on the overall improvement of the school. Fege of the Public Education Network states that while there had been some strengthening of the parental involvement language in the most recent reauthorization of ESEA in the NCLB Act from previous versions of the law, the emphasis "has been on choice rather than political organizing and mobilization ... and while choice may improve the education of some children, it drains the responsibility that parents and communities have in working together to improve their public schools."<sup>48</sup>

This focus on the individual rather than on the collective may also have an impact on incentivizing families to be engaged in initiatives. Social capital research states that a key incentive in any mobilization effort is the participation of other members of the community who one knows and trusts.<sup>49</sup> In a research study by the author of this report on how and why low-income, Title I-eligible parents were involved in their children's education, parents indicated that the school's emphasis on relationship building with school staff and other parents was key.<sup>50</sup> The process of "joining"—welcoming, honoring, and connecting families to each other, to staff members, and to their children's learning—served as powerful incentives for family engagement. Thus, individualized approaches for involving families fail to recognize research-informed strategies for how to connect and sustain educational partnerships with Title I parents.

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### A limited commitment to monitoring and evaluation

Sadly, few lessons about best or promising practice family engagement strategies and initiatives can be derived from the Title I program. With the exception of a few studies, such as the one conducted by education policy experts Arthur Reynolds and Melissa Clements on the impact of the Chicago-based Child-Parent Center program,<sup>51</sup> few in-depth evaluations have been conducted recently on the range of family engagement initiatives that have emerged from Title I. In addition to the lack of investment in research on the parent involvement aspect of the program, there has been relatively little effort made to monitor states and districts for accountability and compliance.<sup>52</sup>

# Recommendations

Using the themes from the history of the Title I parental involvement provisions as a foundation, this paper offers five recommendations for consideration for the reauthorization of ESEA. Several of the recommendations are aligned with those in the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2011, a proposal put forth to Congress in the fall of 2010 by the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, a nationwide team of family and community engagement researchers, advocacy groups, practitioners, and policymakers (see Appendix). The five recommendations provided here are designed to compliment, not repeat, those offered in the FEEA:

- Make permanent the increase in the minimum set-aside figure from 1 percent to at least 2 percent, and revise the statutory language in Section 1118 to direct this set-aside funding and the proposed Family Engagement and Opportunity Fund toward the design and implementation of initiatives that build the capacity of families and school staff to partner to improve student achievement and school quality.
- Reconsider the allocation formula for the distribution of the family engagement set-aside funds to the districts and schools in order to promote systemic, districtwide forms of engagement.
- Change the statutory language to require that schools involve Title I parents in governance and decision making.
- Revise the statutory language regarding parent involvement policies and compacts to assure alignment with whole school improvement goals of the district and schools.
- Provide support to monitor and research innovative family engagement strategies and initiatives to build the knowledge base on best practice initiatives and strategies.

In this section we will detail each of these recommendations in turn.

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### Make permanent the increase in the minimum set-aside and revise the statutory language in Section 1118

The language in the law must incentivize states, districts, and schools to develop innovative capacity-building initiatives for parents and school staff to enable them to carry out the various family engagement provisions outlined in Title I. The language should *require* states and districts to partner with community-based organizations with expertise in leadership development and capacity-building initiatives. Partnering with community-based organizations with this expertise will reconnect and integrate more collective capacity-building outcomes into the intent and goals of the law.

In order for parents to be active and effective participants in the school-reform process, these capacity-building efforts must enable them to be collaborative agents of change in support of student achievement and school improvement.<sup>53</sup> The set-aside funds must be directed to support the enhanced capacity of families to engage in all five of the following roles at home, school, and in the community:

- As supporters of learning
- As effective decision makers
- As leaders
- As advocates
- As partners in shared accountability

Teachers, paraprofessionals, and district, state, and school leaders are in great need of pre-service and in-service “intensive and continuing” professional development opportunities to help them create and sustain, with families as their partners, systemic and comprehensive initiatives.<sup>54</sup>

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### Reconsider the allocation formula for the distribution of the family engagement set-aside funds to the districts and schools

Even with an increase of funding to a 2 percent set-aside, the requirement for districts to direct 95 percent of the funding to individual schools prevents the implementation of systemic, integrated, and sustainable systemic districtwide



initiatives. In many cases the direct allotment to schools is too small to support a systemic approach to family engagement.

The funding language instead should be flexible enough so that district family and community engagement planning teams, consisting of parents, school staff, and community members, can design initiatives that are linked to learning and improvement, rather than continue to run random, standalone projects that have little to no connection to school improvement and teaching and learning.

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### Change the statutory language to require that schools involve Title I parents in governance and decision making

Schools receiving Title I funds should be required to have Title I parent representation on their governing bodies. Most schools have a school site council or local school council, and Title I parents should occupy at least 50 percent of the seats reserved for parents. If the capacity-building efforts are enacted, then a number of parents who can effectively serve on these governing bodies will be available.

Having Title I parents as members of school and district governance groups that are responsible for strategic decision making connects them to, rather than separates them from, the work of improving schools.

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### Revise the statutory language regarding parent involvement policies and compacts to assure alignment with whole school improvement goals of the district and schools

The research on family engagement indicates that when strategies to engage families are linked to student learning, these strategies have a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be effective, family engagement strategies must be focused on improving achievement and be designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills.<sup>55</sup> The statutory language about the creation of school-parent compacts should require that compacts be linked to achieving the goals of the whole school improvement plan.

The Connecticut Department of Education, for example, recently undertook a major initiative to help Title I schools transform their school-family compacts from boilerplate documents to action plans laying out how parents, school staff,

and students will collaborate over the coming year to achieve key goals for student achievement. At a minimum, the language should require that compacts focus directly on student learning (not behavior or dress, which can be covered in the school handbook), be linked to the student achievement goals in the school improvement plan, and be developed collaboratively by parents and school staff each year.<sup>56</sup> This recommendation ties in with one of the education priorities of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to provide information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children's schools, and to educators to help them improve children's learning.

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### Provide support to monitor and research innovative family engagement strategies and initiatives

The Title I funding for family engagement, if directed to support not only the creation of innovative family engagement initiatives that support whole school improvement but also proper evaluation of these initiatives, could be used as a research and development opportunity to add to what we know about best practice in this area. State and local departments of education need support and guidance in the identification of appropriate metrics and tools to measure the impact of family engagement across multiple domains.

Instead of monitoring and evaluation being seen as only a tool of compliance, federal support can incentivize states and districts to engage in monitoring and improvement research to inform and strengthen the field of family engagement.

# Conclusion

In their groundbreaking longitudinal investigation of the internal and external conditions that impact elementary school improvement, the Consortium on Chicago School Research identified five essential supports for school improvement. They are strong leadership, instructional guidance, professional capacity, a student-centered learning climate, and last but not least, *strong parent and community ties*, which together were identified as ingredients that interact with one another and drive the school improvement process.

Schools with strong family engagement were four times more likely to improve student reading over time and were 10 times more likely to improve student learning gains in mathematics.<sup>57</sup> This research underscores the need to elevate the role of families from backstage to front and center in the school reform policy, research, and practice discourse.

Too often, family engagement is seen as an afterthought—an “add-on” activity that is separate from the *real* work of creating systems of effective schools. Building the awareness of the essential role that families play in the reform of America’s schools as well as the capacity to create and sustain effective educational partnerships between families and schools requires a new level of commitment and support to the development, execution, oversight, and evaluation of current and future federal policy in the area of family engagement.

# Appendix: Highlights of the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2011

## Purpose:

- (1) Incentivize districts and schools to use best practices for family engagement:
  - Provide recommended, research-based national standards for family school partnerships and providing guidance for the use of the set-aside.
  - Incentivize school districts to meaningfully engage families by increasing the local set-aside from 1 percent to 2 percent and providing additional training and technical assistance on family engagement best practices.
  - Engage parent leaders in developing and assessing the implementation of family engagement policies and practices.
  
- (2) Build local and state capacity for effective family engagement in education by establishing a 1 percent set-aside for a “Family Engagement and Responsibility Fund.” The fund would resource:
  - Local Family Engagement Centers that would provide innovative programming and services, such as leadership development and family literacy.
  - State Family Coordinating Councils comprised of parents, educators, early learning and high education institutions, and business and community organizations to coordinate systemic family engagement initiatives that support children from cradle to career.
  - State capacity for developing, assessing, and evaluating family engagement Initiatives.
  
- (3) Restructure Parental Information and Resource Centers to provide high-quality services and reach more families:
  - Shift scope from providing information and limited services to providing capacity building, training, and technical assistance to state and local departments of education.
  - Establish a minimum grant award of \$500,000 to assure baseline family engagement and rename Parental Information and Resource Centers “Statewide Family Engagement Centers” to better reflect their role.

- (4) Improve professional development in family engagement in education.
- (5) Extend family engagement in education to neglected and delinquent youth.
- (6) Build national-level capacity for family engagement:
  - Require the secretary to convene a body of family engagement researchers and expert practitioners to develop recommended metrics to assess the impact of family engagement policies and practices.
  - Require the Government Accountability Office to conduct studies on the use of funds for family engagement, the barriers to implementing provisions, and the innovative policies and practices supported by Section 1118 of Title I.

# Endnotes

- 1 The terms “family(ies)” and “parent(s)” will be used in this article to mean any adult caretaker of children. This can include biological parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, other relatives, or fictive kin.
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- 24 *Ibid.*
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**Karen L. Mapp** is a lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the faculty director for the Education, Policy, and Management master's program. Her research and practice expertise is in the areas of educational leadership and partnerships among educators, families, and community members that support student achievement. Ms. Mapp joined HGSE in January of 2005 after serving for 18 months as the interim deputy superintendent for family and community engagement for the Boston Public Schools, or BPS. While working with the BPS, she continued to fulfill her duties as president of the Institute for Responsive Education, or IRE. Ms. Mapp joined IRE in 1997 as project director for the Boston Community Partners for Students' Success initiative, and served as president from September 1998 to December 2004.

Ms. Mapp holds a doctorate from HGSE and a master's in counselor education from Southern Connecticut State University. She is the author of "Making the Connection between Families and Schools," published by the *Harvard Education Letter* (1997) and "Having Their Say: Parents Describe How and Why They Are Engaged in Their Children's Learning" in *The School Community Journal* (2002). She co-authored with Anne Henderson "A New Wave Of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement," published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in January of 2002, and with Anne Henderson, Vivian Johnson and Don Davies, "Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships" published by The New Press in 2007. Ms. Mapp's recent publications include the 2010 article, "Debunking the Myth of the Hard to Reach Parent," with Soo Hong, and the 2011 publication (in press), "A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform," with Mark Warren.

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