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November 2009

Family Engagement: A Shared Responsibility

Heidi Rosenberg, M. Elena Lopez, Helen Westmoreland

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Harvard Family Research Project
Commentary

Harvard Family Research Project's M. Elena Lopez, Heidi Rosenberg, and Helen Westmoreland discuss how families, schools, and communities can create a shared responsibility for children's learning and academic success. The three dimensions of this approach include creating opportunities for family engagement, building co-constructed roles that outline families' and schools' responsibilities, and learning about effective ways to engage families in children's learning.

To enable the United States to excel in a global economy, education policymakers are raising expectations that all students should be prepared for careers, college, and lifelong learning. Meeting this expectation is a collective effort and, at the local level, a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities.

Unfortunately, many educators still hold the view that learning happens only in schools and, as such, is solely the school's responsibility. Many schools, for

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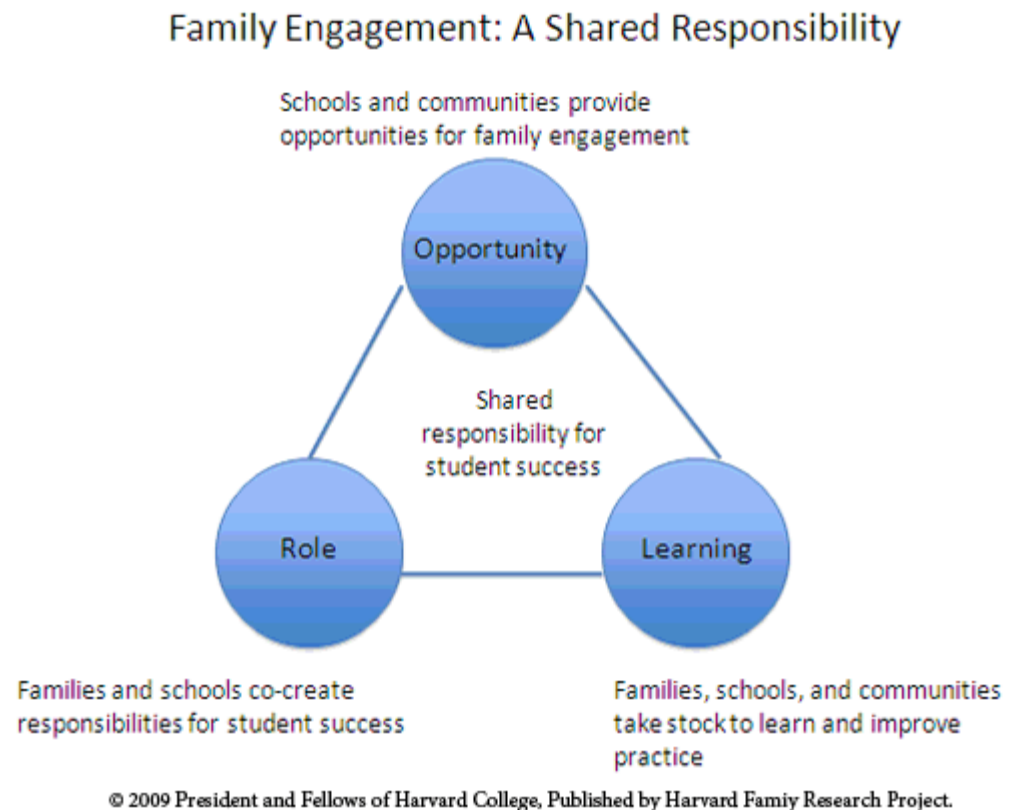


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example, make little effort to reach out to parents and, when they do, often define “engagement” as the need to support school goals and priorities rather than to create a mutual responsibility for supporting students’ academic success. Given that learning happens even before children enter school, and that it also takes place beyond the school walls, a shared responsibility for children’s learning is the foundation for a new approach to family engagement.

Figure 1: Family Engagement: A Shared Responsibility



As illustrated in Figure 1, the concept of shared responsibility has three dimensions:

Providing Opportunities

First, family engagement consists of the opportunities that schools and communities offer parents and other family members to support and enrich their children’s learning. Many school policies define family engagement as in-school activities and provide opportunities in the form of attending open houses, parent–teacher conferences, and parent committees. Many families, however, define their engagement primarily in terms of what they do at home: sharing their values and aspirations with their children, and supporting and monitoring their schoolwork. It is our view that family engagement occurs wherever student learning occurs—at home, in school, and in the community—and that school and program leaders should provide opportunities for engagement in these multiple contexts.

Establishing Co-constructed Roles

Second, family engagement as a shared responsibility consists of mutually agreed upon, or co-constructed, roles. Families and schools should actively engage in dialogue about their complementary responsibilities and strive to reach agreement on family roles as consumers of education, partners in student learning, and advocates for high performance. [Parent–teacher conferences](#) illustrate one arena of co-construction and partnership for student learning, whereby school leaders communicate their goals and mechanisms to teachers and parents, teachers review student work and prepare an agenda, and parents share their thoughts about

their child and ask how best to support their child's progress.

The development of co-constructed roles also extends to efforts to transform low-performing schools. Parents and community members in [Dover Elementary in Dallas, Texas](#), for example, demonstrated their roles as consumers and advocates of high quality education. They placed their support behind a visionary principal's efforts to restructure their public school, and their partnership has transformed the school into a top performer in the state.

It's important to note that family engagement roles vary across the school system. For example:

School administrators

Superintendents and principals set the districtwide and schoolwide tone and expectations for partnerships with families. As one assistant superintendent explained, "We ask parents to make sure that their child comes to school every day. We know that attendance is tied to learning and increasing achievement. We let parents know that we are also accountable and assure a year's growth in a child's academic performance."

To demonstrate the value and importance of building family engagement, administrators must establish clear expectations, policies, accountability standards, and processes for staff.^{[1](#)} Such activities include writing and regularly updating family engagement policies, tying family engagement efforts to school improvement plans, hiring administrators and school-level staff focused on family engagement, and including family outreach and engagement opportunities in assessment rubrics for principals.

Teachers and other educators

Among teachers and other educators—including early childhood educators, after school staff, and coaches—regular and responsive communication is particularly important because it lays the foundation for strong partnerships. Preschool and K–12 teachers, for example, can facilitate this communication by providing information about what each child should be able to learn for kindergarten preparation or at each school grade level, informing families about each student's progress, and giving them tips on how to help with learning at home. Out-of-school time staff can share information about their programs and the ways that they promote academic, leadership, and social skills among children and youth. Finally, educators can give parents opportunities to be engaged in decision making about the program or school (e.g., parent engagement policies) and about individual students (e.g., enrichment activities, course selection).

Families

All families can support their children's learning in some way, even if it is as simple as asking their child, "What did you learn in school today?" Family activities that support children's success can include establishing a stable daily routine for homework, household chores, reading, meals, and bedtime; monitoring out-of-school activities by checking children's whereabouts and enrolling them in after school programs; setting clear and age-appropriate expectations about school performance, behaviors, and manners; and motivating lifelong learning by supporting children's interests and talents and showing interest in school and educational activities.^{[2](#)}

Learning How to Engage Families

The third dimension of family engagement as a shared responsibility consists of learning from personal experience, peers, research, and other sources about effective and appropriate ways to engage families in children's learning. Gaining insights and lessons learned from practice can energize family engagement efforts and invite new avenues of partnership

among families, schools, and communities. Some pathways to learning include [parent-teacher conferences](#), where the parties involved take stock of a student's standing and how the child can make progress; teacher and school staff home visits to support learning and development; parent workshops offered by schools and communities that provide opportunities for learning among participants; and community forums that invite information sharing, dialogue, and action.

We invite readers to consider: What are my beliefs about how families, schools and communities support learning? What is my role as a family, school, or community member to support children's school success? What are my expectations of others? We welcome your ideas by contacting us at fine@gse.harvard.edu.

¹ Weiss, H.B., Kreider, H., Lopez, M.E., & Chatman, C.M. (In press). *Preparing Educators to Engage Families*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

² New Mexico Highlands University. (2007). *Working Together: School-Family-Community Partnerships, a Toolkit for New Mexico School Communities*. Albuquerque: New Mexico Public Education Department. Available from <http://www.cesdp.nmhu.edu/toolkit/index.html>.

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