

High-Impact Family Engagement: A Core Strategy for School Improvement

Anne T. Henderson,
National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement

Over thirty-five years have passed since the publication of *A Nation At Risk* (1981), the landmark report warning that “a rising tide of mediocrity” in the U.S. education system imperils our international competitiveness and undermines the foundations of our democratic society. In the interim, Congress has overhauled the Elementary and Secondary Education Act four times, most notably in the No Child Left Behind amendments of 2001, triggering a host of school improvement initiatives around the country.

The United States now has a standards-based system to hold states and local school districts accountable for raising test scores and reducing achievement gaps among groups of students. A whole school reform industry has developed, using data-based approaches that draw on the enormous assessment systems that the law has spawned. States are developing new systems of teacher evaluation that use gains in student performance as a leading criterion for judging teacher quality.

How are we doing?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the test administered by the U.S. Department of Education, shows that in 2013, just over a third of 4th and 8th graders in the U.S. are proficient in reading and math. We are far from the national goal of 100% of students proficient in both subjects by 2014 -- and making slow progress. The situation is the same in other mature western economies, notably the UK.

U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress 2013 Nation’s Report Card

Subject	4th Grade Proficient	8th Grade Proficient
Reading	35%	36%
Math	42%	35%

Largely ignored in the world of school reform is a persuasive body of research showing that engaging families can have powerful impacts on student academic achievement and other outcomes. (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Jaynes, 2005)

A notable example of this disregard occurs in *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, a 2008 report from the U.S. Department of Education's “What Works Clearinghouse,” which identifies practices to improve chronically low-performing schools and is still in wide circulation. The report recommends that schools do the following:

- Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership

- Maintain a sharp focus on improving instruction by using data to set goals for instructional improvement, make changes to directly affect instruction, and continually reassess student learning and instructional practices to refocus goals.
- Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins), which can rally staff and overcome resistance and inertia.
- Build a staff committed to the school's improvement goals and qualified to carry out school improvement. (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=7>)

Note that no strategies for engaging families are given. Even though these recommended practices are in wide use, the report rates the evidence level for them as “minimal.”

What if schools added high-impact strategies for engaging families to other practices for improving learning?

Research strongly suggests that engaging families in the following ways can have a significant, sustained and positive impact on student learning:

- Building personal relationships and mutual understanding with families via class meetings, informal one-on-one conversations, and home visits
- Sharing data with families about student skill levels
- Modeling high-impact teaching practices such as dialogic reading and hands-on math activities so families can use them at home
- Listening to families’ ideas about their children’s interests and challenges, and using this input to differentiate instruction
- Incorporating content from families’ home cultures into classroom lessons. (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies, 2007)

Several studies have found that integrating such family engagement practices into programs to improve instruction can accelerate and sustain student gains, particularly if the practices are combined. For example, a study of 71 high-poverty elementary schools compared the relative effects of standards-based improvements such as visibility of standards, basic or advanced teaching techniques, teacher preparation, teacher ratings of professional development, and a focus on assessment and accountability. The study found that when teachers added outreach to families to the learning strategies, student’s reading and math scores improved at a 50 percent faster rate in reading and a 40 percent faster rate for math. (Westat and Policy Studies Associates, 2001) (See table in References)

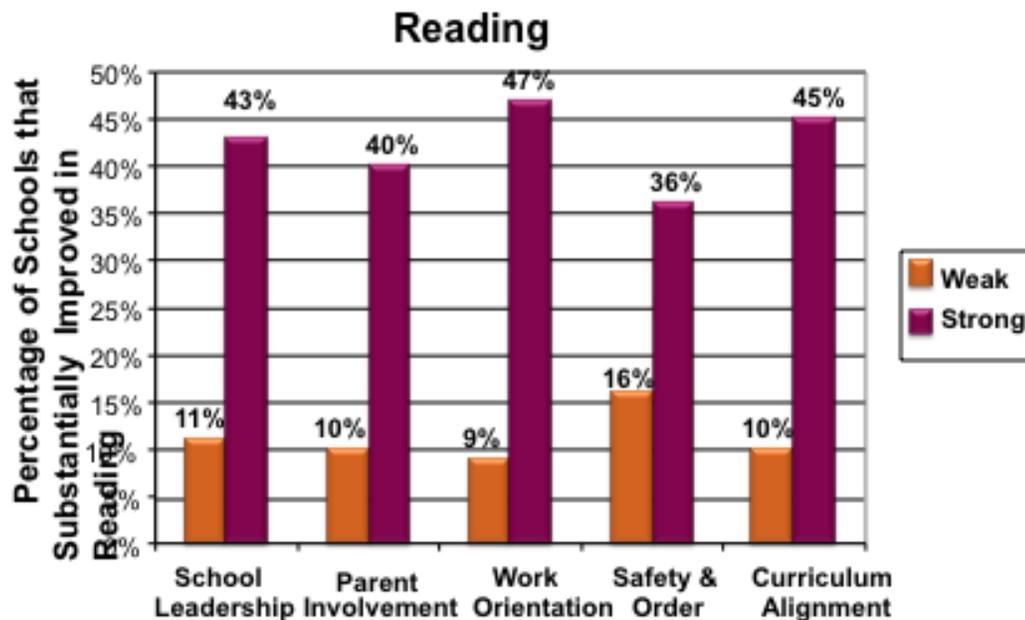
Outreach to parents was measured by the extent to which teachers communicated with parents of low-achieving students through:

- Meeting face-to-face
- Sending materials to families on ways to help their children at home
- Telephoning both routinely and when their children were having problems.

Another landmark study of low-income schools in Chicago that had made substantial improvement found that strong ties to families and the community increased four-fold the likelihood that the school would make significant gains in reading and math. (Bryk et al,

2010) Strong ties included being knowledgeable about community issues and families' home cultures, inviting families to observe in the classroom, using community resources, working as families with partners to improve learning, and responding to families' concerns about their children.

How Likely Is Major Improvement, Given Weak or Strong Supports



(Bryk et al., 2010)

Two examples

Let's look at a program recently implemented in the Washington, DC public schools (DCPS), one of the lowest-performing school districts in the U.S. The Flamboyan Foundation, in partnership with DCPS, trained teachers to make relationship-building home visits with families of their students, using the Parent-Teacher Home Visiting Program (PTHVP) developed in Sacramento.

In addition, teachers also received training to hold deep conversations with families to share data on student performance and co-construct strategies to help students develop skills that need to be strengthened. Home visits built trust and a culture of collaboration that serves as the foundation for including families in the school's "academic team" dedicated to improving student learning. (O'Brian, 2012)

What happened? At Stanton Elementary, the lowest-performing school in the city, reading scores improved 10 percentage points to 19 percent proficient and math scores increased 19 percentage points to 28 percent proficient, in a single year. Other schools in the pilot program made similar gains. DCPS is planning to scale up the program across the city.

In another innovative program, *Achievement for All*, which is sponsored by the Department for Education in the United Kingdom, engaging parents with their children’s learning has improved performance dramatically for children with special needs and disabilities. The linchpin of the program is collaborative ‘Structured Conversations’ between teachers and parents, targeted on students’ reading and math skills. In a pilot cohort totaling 454 schools, special needs students not only made gains above the national average, but surpassed gains for students without special needs. (Humphrey and Squires, 2011)

On average, the students in the program progressed 3.66 points in a year, .66 points beyond the target national average of 3.0 points. Not only did the program yield significant gains, it also narrowed the achievement gap between special needs students and their peers without special needs.

The chart below compares gains over one school year in the subsequent national roll out of the program across students in elementary, middle and high school.

How did Gains of Special Needs Students in the AfA program compare? (2011-2012)

	English Language Arts	Math
Points Gained/National Average of All Students	3.28	3.09
Points Gained/Average of Special Needs Students in the AfA Program	4.20	3.83
Points Gained/National Average of all Special Needs Students	2.86	2.57

The British not-for-profit, Achievement for All/3As, is now rolling the program out nationwide in the UK. GEMS Education Solutions is working in partnership with Achievement for All/3As to introduce a version, to be known as the Parent Engagement and Partnership Program (PEPP), to the United States this year.

What needs to be in place for such high-impact family engagement practices to spread?

- **A commonly accepted and expansive definition of high-impact family engagement:** Family engagement must be seen as everything family members do to

support their children's learning -- guiding them through a complex education system, advocating for them when problems arise, and collaborating with educators and community groups to achieve more equitable and effective learning opportunities. This definition must be systematically integrated into school reform legislation, programs, professional development, technical assistance, and monitoring efforts.

- **Improved teacher capacity:** According to a national survey of teachers in the US, engaging families is the number one area where teachers feel least well prepared and represents their greatest challenge. (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2005) Clearly, systematic efforts must be made to help teachers connect with families in ways that are meaningful and effective, and ensure that criteria for teacher quality (both for hiring and evaluation) include proficiency in culturally competent family engagement that is closely tied to improving student learning.
- **Family-school partnerships that are designed to support student achievement and school improvement:** This requires school districts to develop capacity in school and program staffs, so that they can honor and recognize families' funds of knowledge, connect family engagement to student learning, and create a welcoming, inclusive and inviting culture in every school and classroom.
- **Tools to cultivate school-family partnerships:** A collaborative process to assess the school's climate and academic culture can help school leaders to identify areas that need work using a walk-through procedure accompanied by parents, community members and students. Protocols for open-ended conversations between teachers and families focused on learning and designed to strengthen students' skills can help teachers share data and develop collaborative relationships with families based on their shared interest in student success.
- **A substantial commitment to parent and family engagement as a core element of the work of the school:** Engaging families is not an add-on to what schools do. For parent engagement to be truly effective, it must be central to their core mission, influencing the way schools are physically designed, the style and tone of reporting on student progress, and the culture within which all parent-teacher-student communications take place. Above all family engagement needs to focus on improving student learning. (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

It is time to recognize that engaging families must be a core strategy for school improvement and that there is ample research and practice to guide us in how to do that well. There is no excuse for delay.

References

Bryk, Anthony S. et al. (2010) *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Goodall, Janet and Vorhaus, John (2011) *Review of best practice in parental engagement*. London: Department for Education

Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2007) *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. NY: The New Press

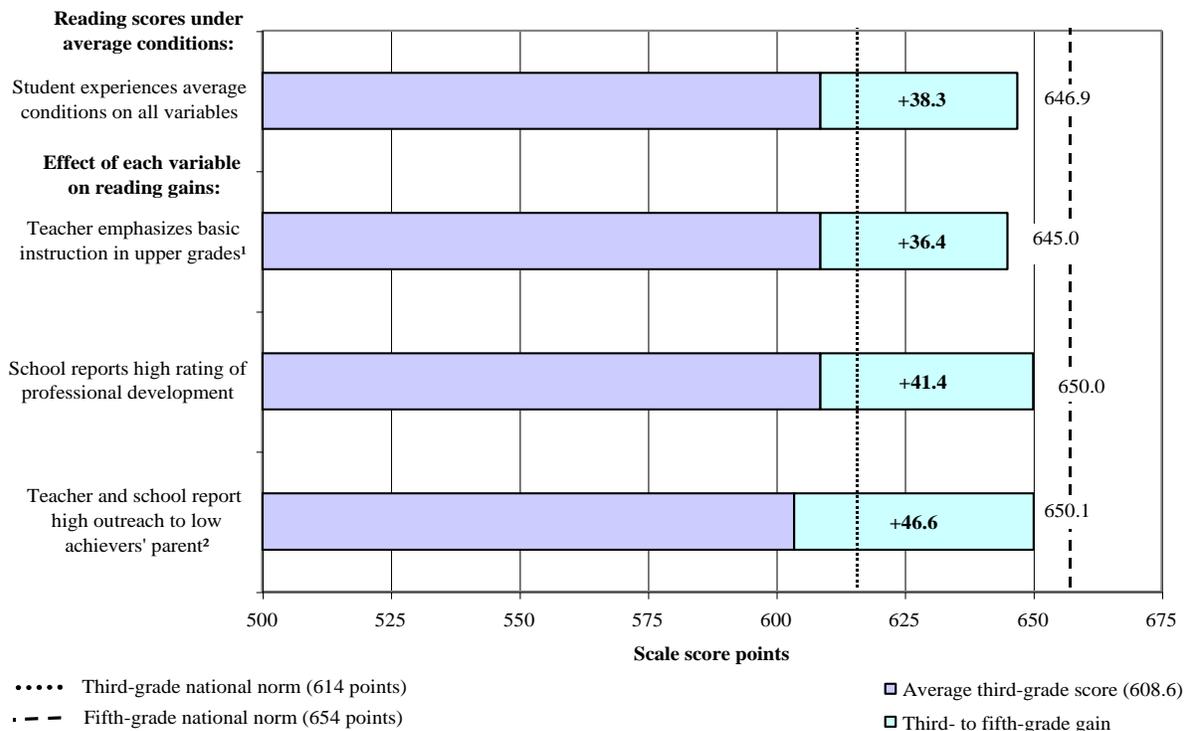
Humphrey, Neil and Gary Squires (2011) *Achievement for All National Evaluation: Final Report*. London: Department for Education
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR176>

Jeynes, William H. (2005) *Parental Involvement and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis* Boston: Harvard Family Research Project Digest
<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/digest/meta.html>

O'Brien, Anne. The Power of Academic Parent-Teacher Teams. *Edutopia*. (11/26/2012)
<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/academic-parent-teacher-teams-anne-obrien>

Westat and Policy Studies Associates (2001) *The Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance in Title I Schools, Volume I: Executive Summary*, Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service
www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lesc_highlight.html See following page for chart showing relative value-added of various teacher practices, including outreach to families.

Figure 5. LESCP student achievement gains on the SAT-9 closed-ended reading test, 3rd to 5th grade



¹ Teachers emphasizing basic instruction spend more time with worksheets, reading aloud, and other types of relatively routine skill practice.

² Outreach to low achievers' parents measured in third grade was associated with both the predicted third-grade score and the score gain from third to fifth grade. For that variable, the figure reflects a significant difference in the predicted third-grade score (603.5) rather than the average third-grade score (608.6).