

# Parent Engagement from Preschool through Grade 3

## *A Guide for Policymakers*

Sheila Smith | Taylor Robbins | Shannon Stagman | Disha Mathur

September 2013



The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. Using research to inform policy and practice, NCCP seeks to advance family-oriented solutions and the strategic use of public resources at the state and national levels to ensure positive outcomes for the next generation. Founded in 1989 as a division of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, NCCP is a nonpartisan, public interest research organization.

## PARENT ENGAGEMENT FROM PRESCHOOL THROUGH GRADE 3 A Guide for Policymakers

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# Parent Engagement from Preschool through Grade 3

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### What's inside?

- Highlights of research on preschool through grade 3 parent engagement
- Promising models
- Opportunities for states to strengthen parent engagement
- Recommendations for policymakers

## Introduction

Parent engagement in children's education is increasingly viewed as an essential support to children's learning in early care and education programs and throughout the school years. While there are many definitions of "parent engagement," the term is used here to describe parents' efforts to promote their children's healthy development and learning through activities that can be encouraged by educators in child care, preschool and school settings. (We also use the term "parent involvement" in the same way.) This report makes the case that effective parent engagement during the span from preschool through the early grades is a key contributor to children's positive academic outcomes. During this period, young children acquire foundational competencies – including language, literacy, early math, and social-emotional skills – that strongly affect their capacity for grade-level learning.<sup>1</sup> When young children fall behind in developing these skills, they often face an uphill path for the rest of their school years. For example, children who have weak language skills upon school entry are more likely to struggle while learning to read, and weak reading skills in third grade greatly hamper

children's learning across the curriculum in later grades.<sup>2</sup> While high-quality teaching in preschool and the early grades is essential, parents can also play a vital role in helping children acquire foundational competencies that fuel school success.

The following sections of this report present research, program, and policy information that can inform state initiatives to strengthen parent engagement during preschool through grade 3.

- ◆ Key findings from research: Studies relating parenting behavior to child's learning and achievement; studies that evaluate interventions; and research on factors affecting parent involvement
- ◆ Promising models designed for culturally diverse, low-income families
- ◆ Exemplary state parent engagement initiatives
- ◆ Opportunities for states to advance parent engagement policies and practices
- ◆ Summary of research
- ◆ Recommendations

# Key Findings from Research on Preschool through Grade 3 Parent Engagement

## *Relationships between parenting during the preschool years and children's learning*

Our knowledge about what types of parent involvement are likely to promote children's learning comes in part from studies that show relationships between children's learning and certain types of parent behaviors and parent-child activities that vary across families. These studies focus on one or more types of parent engagement that can be broadly classified as: *home-based parent involvement*, such as playing games with children that offer learning enrichment; *community activities*, such as taking children to the library; and *school-based parent involvement*, such as volunteering in a child care or early grades classroom or attending a parent-teacher conference.

One of the most frequently examined home-based parent engagement activities in the preschool years is parent-child reading. Many studies have shown that the frequency of parents reading to preschool-age children is related to children's language and literacy development, including growth in vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, letter knowledge, and awareness of sounds in words.<sup>3</sup> Since these skills are key predictors of children's success in learning to read, parent-child reading can play an important role in promoting children's school success.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the frequency of parent-child reading, parents' style of reading makes a difference; children benefit most when parents show warmth, use open-ended questions and explanations, and link the book to the child's experience.<sup>5</sup>

Several features of parent conversation with children during everyday routines and activities have also been linked to children's development. The amount of conversation young children experience from the toddler through preschool years predicts their language development.<sup>6</sup> Parents' conversational style, particularly the use of open-ended questions and elaborations on what the child says during conversation, is related to preschoolers' language and literacy skills.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the amount of parent talk about numbers, beginning when children are toddlers, predicts preschoolers' number knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Parents' engagement in a variety of other home and community activities has also been linked to young children's learning. Growth in children's language and literacy skills is related to broad measures of community-based parent involvement that include visits to the library or bookstore and measures of home-based parent involvement that include playing alphabet games, telling stories, and helping children with art activities.<sup>9</sup> In one study, a broad measure of home-based parent involvement that included reading to children, asking about preschool, and providing space for educational activities, predicted Head Start children's learning behaviors (attention, persistence, and motivation), vocabulary skills, and positive behavior.<sup>10</sup>

The frequency of parent-child activities that provide experience with math predicts children's math knowledge and skills.<sup>11</sup> Examples of these activities are board games, mazes, and connect the dots. Evidence about the value of parent-child play with board games is reinforced by experimental studies in which children's experience playing board games with researchers led to large gains in math skills.<sup>12</sup> Children's acquisition of more advanced math knowledge is related to parent-child activities that go beyond counting, such as comparing amounts of items and adding or subtracting objects.<sup>13</sup>

Research shows that parent warmth and responsiveness to children's interests and needs are key dimensions of parent involvement that promote children's learning. Parent praise, encouragement, and responsiveness observed in parent-child book reading have been linked to children's engagement in reading and their efforts to independently read a book.<sup>14</sup> Other researchers have found that parent nurturance towards preschoolers across a variety of activities makes a unique contribution to children's growth in reading skills in the early grades, over and above the learning stimulation found in the home.<sup>15</sup> One way that parent nurturance may promote learning is by helping children acquire self-regulation skills that enable children to manage their emotions and behavior. In one study, children whose mothers

showed greater warmth in the preschool years were found to have stronger self-regulation skills at ages eight and nine.<sup>16</sup> Numerous studies show that self-regulation skills help children learn in school.<sup>17</sup>

### *Relationships between parenting during the early grades and children's learning*

Results of research on variation in parent involvement in kindergarten through third grade show some similarity to patterns found in studies focused on the preschool years. During the early grades there is evidence that broad measures of parent-child literacy activities that include the frequency of parent-child reading as well as visits to the library and number of books in the home, are related to children's literacy and oral language skills.<sup>18</sup> Parents' nurturing behavior in parent-child reading during kindergarten and parents' use of talk relating a book to topics beyond the immediate story were related in one study to children's more frequent independent reading of challenging books in second grade; in turn, children who engaged in higher-level reading had stronger reading achievement in third grade.<sup>19</sup> A supportive home learning environment where parents help children practice what they learn at school, talk about the importance of school, and provide educational materials and learning opportunities has been linked to both academic and social competencies among kindergarten children.<sup>20</sup>



There is also evidence that children of parents who increase their home-based and out-of-home activities between prekindergarten and first grade show stronger math skills in first grade.<sup>21</sup> Home-based parent involvement linked to math achievement includes teaching children about numbers, playing with blocks and puzzles, and counting. Examples of out-of-home activities are visits to the library, park, and sports events.

During the early elementary grades, parents' involvement in activities at school has also been found to predict literacy and math skills as well as teachers' report of children's academic progress.<sup>22</sup> Broad measures of school-based parent involvement that predict children's school achievement include participation in parent-teacher conferences, classroom visits, and school social events.

Parental warmth and responsiveness is also important for children's learning in the early grades. As noted earlier, warmth during parent-child reading in kindergarten is associated with children's later engagement with challenging books, a finding similar to one linking parent warmth to preschoolers' efforts to read independently.<sup>23</sup> There is also evidence that parents' warmth helps early elementary children manage positive emotions, and for boys, leads to more peer acceptance, while parents' responsiveness to distress is associated with children's empathy and positive social behavior.<sup>24</sup> These child outcomes are likely to promote children's positive relationships with teachers and peers, which, in turn, are associated with higher school achievement.<sup>25</sup> Also, parents' lack of warmth and responsiveness is associated with children's behavior problems, which increase children's risk of academic difficulties.<sup>26</sup>

### *What types of parent involvement show the strongest relationship to child outcomes?*

While research has identified relationships between children's learning and parent involvement based in the home, community, and preschool or school setting, there are inconsistencies across studies. For example, two studies found associations between home-based but not school-based parent involvement and positive child outcomes,<sup>27</sup> while another finds a link between school-based involvement and children's achievement but no relationships to home-based activities.<sup>28</sup> The use of different and typically broad measures of parent involvement across studies may contribute to inconsistent findings. Some researchers point to the unique value of home-based parent involvement that provides direct learning experiences in key domains, such as language, reading, and math, and suggest that the most beneficial school-based activities are ones that help parents learn about ways to promote children's learning in these areas.<sup>29</sup> In the intervention studies discussed next, and also in "Promising Models," parents typically receive training to increase both the frequency and quality of home learning experiences.

One strength of correlational studies of parent involvement is that they investigate links between positive child outcomes and different types of parent involvement that naturally occur in some families. The occurrence of certain types of parent involvement linked to benefits for children suggests potentially achievable goals for interventions that target families where parent involvement is weak. A limitation of these studies is that they produce evidence of associations between parent involvement and child outcomes, but cannot confirm cause and effect relationships.<sup>30</sup> Findings from intervention studies discussed in this report provide stronger evidence of causal relationships, and can help reinforce evidence from correlational studies. Together, the two bodies of research provide a clearer picture of how different types of parent involvement contribute to children's learning and development.

### *Research on parent engagement interventions*

Studies of preschool parent-child reading interventions show positive effects on children's oral language skills, especially when parents are trained to encourage their child's conversation about the book during reading. In a review of shared book-reading interventions, researchers found that parents could be trained to use effective book-reading strategies, such as open-ended questions, relating the book to the child's experiences, and expanding on the child's comments.<sup>31</sup> Parents were trained through brief in-person or video training sessions. Another review that focused on book-reading interventions in which parents were instructed to read the same book several times over a few days found that similar features of book reading played a role in children's improved vocabulary and comprehension skills.<sup>32</sup>

One analysis of parent-child reading interventions shows weaker effects for children age four and five compared with children age two and three, and for children from low-income families.<sup>33</sup> A recent study of a bilingual family literacy intervention also shows weaker effects for low-income children.<sup>34</sup> These findings suggest that low-income parents may need more extensive training to effectively use interactive reading methods that are tailored to their children's language skills.<sup>35</sup> The potential benefits of more intensive training for parents of low-income children is suggested by the gains in language skills made by low-income children who participated in read-aloud interventions conducted by trained child care providers and teachers.<sup>36</sup>

A few studies have looked at interventions that encourage parents to engage in extended, language-rich conversations with their young children. In these interventions, parents are trained to talk with children about past experiences and provide children with explanations, narratives about events, and questions that encourage children's use of language. A recent review of these studies found that these interventions promote the language skills of preschoolers and kindergarteners, even among children whose mothers have limited education.<sup>37</sup> In one study that trained parents of preschoolers in Head Start to use these methods, children showed stronger story

comprehension skills than children of parents trained in interactive reading; benefits were found for white, black, and Hispanic children as well as for children whose families used a language other than English at home. The researchers conclude that training parents to engage in rich conversation with children may be an effective alternative to interactive book reading, especially for parents who are more accustomed to storytelling and conversation with their young children.<sup>38</sup>

Parent-child literacy interventions for children in kindergarten through third grade include studies that investigate the effects of training parents to read to children, listen to children read, and tutor children in specific skills. A recent review of these studies found that parent reading to children did not lead to gains in children's reading skills.<sup>39</sup> However, interventions in which parents were trained to tutor children in literacy skills or to listen and provide feedback when children read to them did promote early reading skills. The researchers note that parent-child reading in the early grades should still be considered a valuable activity in light of its potential to indirectly support reading achievement by building oral language skills, a predictor for reading comprehension, and encouraging children's interest in reading.

Research on parent engagement has also examined parents' involvement in elementary school children's homework. A recent analysis of this research, which includes intervention studies, suggests that elementary school children's achievement in math and reading is related to parent homework assistance when this help consists of setting guidelines about homework, such as when and where it should be completed, and providing instruction. The authors suggest that children in elementary school, who are new to the demands of homework, may benefit from learning work habits and self-management through this type of parent involvement.<sup>40</sup>

## *Factors influencing parent engagement*

While research suggests that disadvantaged children benefit the most from efforts to increase parent involvement in their education, overall levels of home-based and school-based parent involvement are lower among parents with less education and lower incomes.<sup>41</sup> Parent involvement tends to decrease during the transition to kindergarten, and over the early grades period.<sup>42</sup> However, a substantial number of families show increases in parent involvement during this period.<sup>43</sup> One trigger to increased parent involvement appears to be learning difficulties experienced by a child. In a study of Mexican-American families, most parents of kindergarten children with weak skills responded with increased involvement in the school (e.g., participation in parent-child conferences, volunteering in the classroom).<sup>44</sup> However, parents whose children had bilingual teachers between kindergarten and third grade showed greater increases than those whose children had teachers who were not fluent in Spanish, suggesting the benefits of reducing language barriers experienced by parents.<sup>45</sup>

Research is beginning to identify other school-related factors that may affect parent involvement. Practices supporting children and parents during the transition from preschool to kindergarten promote both increased learning in kindergarten and higher levels of parent involvement.<sup>46</sup> In one study, children in preschool through first grade whose teachers engaged in more outreach to parents, through invitations to workshops and classroom volunteering, showed greater learning gains, suggesting that outreach may have encouraged greater parent involvement in children's learning.<sup>47</sup> However, there is also evidence that the typical types of outreach used by teachers are less helpful to minority children, most likely due to language barriers and less comfort in interacting with teachers whose backgrounds may be different from parents.<sup>48</sup> Higher-quality teacher-parent relationships are also linked to higher levels of parent involvement in the early grades.<sup>49</sup> This finding suggests the importance of helping teachers engage in positive, supportive interactions with parents. Several promising models, discussed next, demonstrate strategies for engaging families that need extra support.

## Promising Models that Target Culturally Diverse, Low-income Families

Several parent-involvement interventions have been designed to serve diverse groups of low-income children from preschool through grade three. Most of these interventions have employed special strategies to engage parents. The results from evaluations of these interventions and features of their implementation suggest lessons for the design of effective parent involvement programs.

### *The Companion Curriculum*

One such study found positive results for an intervention that served African-American parents and their children in Head Start programs.<sup>50</sup> The intervention, **The Companion Curriculum** (TCC), provided monthly teacher-led workshops in which parents observed a teacher demonstration of early learning activities and then practiced the activities with their children. Activities included play and conversation to promote children's social-competence; story-telling and reading to promote language skills; and math experiences such as counting, sorting, and adding. Parents were encouraged to bring other children and family members to the workshops, and participants received dinner and transportation assistance. Even with these supports and parent ratings showing high satisfaction with the workshops, only 40 percent of parents attended two or more meetings. The project did, however, distribute curriculum resources to parents who did not attend the workshops in order to encourage home-based parent-child activities in all families. Parents in the intervention group reported increases in their reading to children while parents in the comparison group reported declines in parent-child reading over the year. Children of parents in the intervention group were found to have stronger vocabulary knowledge and social-emotional skills compared to non-intervention children.<sup>51</sup>

### *Family Mathematics Curriculum*

In another study, the **Family Mathematics Curriculum** was implemented first with a group of African-American Head Start families and again with a group of primarily Latino Head Start families, including about 40 percent who spoke Spanish at home.<sup>52</sup> Intervention parents were invited to attend eight Saturday classes with their child over a four-month period. The parent-child pairs sat at tables and were given materials for a math activity. After teachers demonstrated teaching the child the activity, the parents tried out the activity with their child as teachers provided guidance. For example, the teachers helped parents learn to support their child's completion of tasks at a lower level before moving to more advanced activities. In both groups, teachers had the same ethnic/racial background as parents. At the end of class, parents were encouraged to take out math materials kits from the lending library to use at home; parents borrowed an average of 11 math kits and reported regular use of them between classes.

Attendance at the classes was high, with absences averaging fewer than 1.5 sessions. The researchers cite several features of the intervention that may have contributed to high attendance and engagement in math activities at home. A teacher liaison was assigned to contact participating parents before each class to identify barriers to their attendance. The program addressed barriers by providing child care at the class, arranging carpools to help with transportation, and encouraging mothers to send another family member to the class if she could not attend. The provision of math kits also encouraged home-based parent-child activities; parents reported that many of these activities were initiated by children who enjoyed them and asked to play "math games." Among both African-American and Latino families, children in the intervention group made greater gains across all targeted mathematics skills, including counting, number reasoning, and geometric knowledge. Little growth in these areas was seen among children who were not part of the intervention.



### *Getting Ready Intervention*

The **Getting Ready Intervention** was tested with Head Start parents and children, including about 20 percent who were not English speakers.<sup>53</sup> This model aimed to help parents increase their warm, sensitive engagement with children; become aware of their child's strengths; identify natural learning opportunities in the home; understand early development; and gain skills in using positive, responsive strategies for supporting children's learning. Teachers conducted five home visits annually over two years and used supportive discussion, child observation, and modeling to promote parents' engagement with children. Teachers were also trained to use these strategies in interactions with parents at school. Parents in a control group also received home visits, but were not trained in these strategies. Results of the evaluation showed that after two years, children in the intervention group were rated by teachers as showing stronger attachment to adults and more assertiveness and self-direction. Intervention children were also rated as showing less anxiety and withdrawal compared to children in the non-intervention group. A second study of the **Getting Ready Intervention** also found that intervention children had stronger language skills compared to non-participating children.<sup>54</sup>



### *Abriendo Puertos/Opening Doors*

**Abriendo Puertos/Opening Doors** is a program designed for Latino parents of children birth to age 5 and delivered in 10 sessions by trained community educators in school and community settings.<sup>55</sup> The curriculum, which is available in English and Spanish, covers a range of topics that includes not only strategies parents can use to promote their children's language, social-emotional, and literacy skills, but also parents' wellness, and parent problem-solving and advocacy skills that can help them obtain important supports for their children and family. Since its development in 2007, **Abriendo Puertos/Opening Doors** has been implemented in 31 states. Sessions provide a welcoming environment with opportunities for parents to relate information about effective parenting to their own lives and enjoy discussion with other parents and the facilitator.

A survey study of 623 participants reported large gains in parent knowledge and practices across areas addressed by the model.<sup>56</sup> For example, parents showed significant gains in their understanding of ways they could promote their children's ability to express and regulate their feelings and support their language and literacy skills. The results also showed a marked increase in the percentage of parents who reported taking their children to the library once a week, parents' knowledge about their rights regarding involvement in their child's education, and parents' confidence about their ability to support their child's positive behavior and learning. A rigorous evaluation that includes child outcome measures is currently in progress and will provide more information about this promising model in 2014.

## *Incredible Years Parent Program*

The **Incredible Years Parent Program** (IYPP), designed to promote children's social-emotional competencies and reduce challenging behaviors that interfere with learning, is one of the few parent programs that has been evaluated as a prevention model in elementary school settings.<sup>57</sup> The IYPP has been tested with kindergarten and first-grade students in elementary school classrooms using the Incredible Years Dinosaur Classroom intervention, also designed to promote children's social-emotional skills. In this demonstration, parents of children identified as being at mild to moderate risk for behavior problems attended parent sessions focused on parenting skills to help manage children's challenging behavior and foster their social-emotional, communication, and problem-solving skills. The program also provided guidance to parents on strategies for promoting children's language and reading skills and collaborating with teachers to support children's success in school.

During the interactive sessions, trained facilitators led discussion and role-plays. Parents also watched videos showing culturally diverse parents engaging in activities that promote children's social and academic competence. Home assignments encouraged practice of new activities and parenting strategies. Twenty-six percent of the families did not speak English as their first language and interpreters helped these families fully participate in the training sessions. Over the two-year period from kindergarten through first grade, 12 to 14 weekly sessions were held in the schools. Transportation, meals, and child care were provided to help encourage parent attendance.



Over the two years, 24 percent of intervention group parents attended no sessions and 43 percent attended more than half the sessions. Compared to non-intervention and classroom intervention-only families, parents in the combined (parenting plus classroom) intervention were more emotionally supportive of their children; these parents also reported that children had fewer behavior problems and were better able to manage their emotions and behavior. Teachers also reported that parents in the combined intervention group, compared to the other groups, were more involved in their children's education. While the study did not directly test the benefits of this program in the absence of a simultaneous classroom intervention, the positive effects found for the combined intervention that included parent sessions suggest the value of the parenting program as a preventive intervention for the early grades.

## Exemplary State Initiatives

Many states are beginning to develop strong parent engagement policies that target early care and education settings and the early grades. The following examples suggest a range of promising strategies that can benefit large numbers of children and their families.

### ***Kansas Parent Information Resource Center and Prekindergarten Program***

Within the state's Department of Education (DOE), Kansas' Parent Information Resource Center (KPIRC) works in a variety of ways to promote parent engagement in Kansas schools and early care and education programs.<sup>58</sup> Formerly funded by the U.S. Department of Education, KPIRC continues to operate with funding from the Kansas DOE. In addition to an annual parent engagement conference for parents and professionals, KPIRC provides technical assistance to schools on effective parent engagement and resources to higher education programs to help them prepare future teachers to use effective parent engagement methods. Currently, KPIRC is providing training to educators and leadership teams in the state's lowest-performing schools. KPIRC helps these schools develop family engagement action plans based on state performance indicators which include professional development for teachers and regular communication with parents about what they can do at home to support their children's learning.

KPIRC also develops resources to help parents understand their role in promoting young children's learning and development. This work includes KPIRC's participation in a workgroup that developed the Social Emotional Character Development (SECD) Standards for Kansas, which have been endorsed by the Kansas DOE. KPIRC provided training on the SECD standards to educators, emphasizing the importance of engaging families in promoting children's social-emotional learning, and produced a booklet for parents, *Social-emotional and Character Development: What Families Need to Know*. Other KPIRC resources include booklets for families of young children in both Spanish and English on cognitive development

and literacy. The booklets, made available on the KPIRC website, are used as resources for parents in preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

Another KPIRC activity is aiding in the redesign of the Kansas DOE's accreditation system for school districts, which includes performance criteria related to family engagement. Under this system, school districts will be required to establish goals for implementing family engagement activities that promote students' learning, train educators on research-based family engagement strategies that help parents promote their children's learning at home, develop methods for monitoring parent-involvement policies of each school, and prepare an annual evaluation report on family engagement activities. The DOE has begun piloting the new accreditation standards, which will replace the current system in 2015-16.

Another way Kansas supports parent engagement is through its prekindergarten program. All Kansas prekindergarten programs must document practices they will use to engage parents in their children's learning. Programs must include a family service worker and make the Parents as Teachers home visitor program for children age three to five available for families served by the prekindergarten program. In addition, programs must administer a survey of home practices to families that includes questions about parent-child activities (e.g., conversation, shared reading, going to the library) and the parent-child relationship.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Iowa's Every Child Reads 3-5***

Parent engagement is a critical component of Iowa's *Every Child Reads 3-5*, an initiative of the Iowa DOE that promotes young children's reading readiness.<sup>60</sup> This initiative is part of the state-wide *Every Child Reads*, which provides school and community-based supports for children birth to grade twelve and their families. In addition to a professional development curriculum to enhance the practices of early care and education providers, the initiative developed a set of seven training modules that early care and education



programs can use in sessions with parents to increase their involvement in activities that promote reading readiness.

The set of parent training modules in *Every Child Reads: Three to Five Years* provides six 90 minute to two hour sessions that can be delivered to parents by early childhood teachers and other early education professionals. Focusing on everyday family routines, the modules teach parents evidence-based strategies for supporting children’s language skills through conversation, storytelling, and book reading. For example, parents learn that they can teach children new words each day by offering child-friendly definitions or demonstrating the meaning of words. Module titles include “Talking with your child,” “Asking questions,” “Responding to words your child is saying: Teaching new words,” and “Retelling Personal Stories.” The modules are highly interactive, engaging parents

in role-play and practice using the strategies. Each module is fully scripted, a feature that allows individuals with limited experience in parent education to deliver high-quality content with engaging activities.

The parent involvement modules, available on the Iowa DOE website, are currently used by teachers and trainers in Head Start programs, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and Area Education Agencies. In addition, the Iowa DOE hopes to incorporate use of the modules in its new *Collaboration for Iowa’s Kids* initiative, which will use *Response to Intervention* (RIT) practices, beginning in preschool, to ensure that all children are reading by third grade. In RIT, children showing delays in their pre-reading and reading skills will be provided with additional supports, which may include guidance to parents about engaging in home-based learning activities with their children.

## *Nevada's Office of Parent Involvement and Family Engagement*

The Office of Parent Involvement and Family Engagement (OPIFE) in Nevada's Department of Education offers a wide range of supports and resources to promote parents' involvement in their children's education.<sup>61</sup> Created in 2011 through state legislation (AB 224), the OPIFE and the Department's Advisory Council on Parental Involvement are working to create a database of parent engagement resources for schools that reflect current research on effective parent involvement.<sup>62</sup> The OPIFE will also oversee expanded training for teachers to help them implement high quality parent involvement strategies. Currently, the OPIFE provides toolkits and tip sheets to parents of children in kindergarten and the early grades that promote parents' active support of their children's learning at home and at school. These resources are offered through the state's website and promoted in school districts by administrators and parent-teacher associations. The OPIFE also holds a statewide parent involvement summit every other year that is open to parents, teachers, school administrators, elected officials and community members. The last summit, *Connecting the Dots: Family Engagement and Student Achievement*, was held in May 2012 and featured workshops on preparing for the preschool to kindergarten transition and parent involvement to improve children's learning.

The same legislation that created OPIFE, also mandates that the state's Commission on Professional Standards in Education set requirements in teacher training programs for coursework on family engagement. The OPIEF has worked with the state's higher education system and regional professional development programs to develop this coursework. The state's regional professional development programs will also expand in-service teacher training on parent engagement in accordance with AB 224.

One of these programs, the Northwestern Regional Professional Development Program (RPDP), operates Nevada's Parent University, which offers free classes to parents, promoted through schools. Classes address

such topics as building preschoolers' language skills and promoting children's reading comprehension and early math skills through home-based learning activities. Parent classes attracted 2,100 parents in 2012.

## *Colorado's Parent Engagement Legislation*

Through the passage of key legislation in recent years, Colorado has developed strong state leadership in support of parent engagement. In 2009, legislation established the State Advisory Council for Parent Involvement in Education (SACPIE).<sup>63</sup> This council reviews best practices and recommends strategies to educators and policymakers for incorporating parent involvement in public education. SACPIE's members include parents; school and district accountability committees; non-profit organizations that assist underserved families; statewide organizations serving parents, teachers, and school counselors; and representatives from the Colorado Department of Education. The role of the SACPIE was recently expanded with passage of "Increasing Parent Engagement In Public Schools," in May 2013.<sup>64</sup> This law calls for the council to work with the State Department of Education to develop new training for school accountability committees and school personnel on strategies for increasing parent engagement and using best practices. The law also requires the council to develop indicators of effective parent engagement for schools that will be used to monitor progress towards increased levels of engagement. The council will prepare an annual report on parent engagement data collected from school districts in Colorado.

In related legislation passed in 2012, the *Colorado READ Act*, each school must work closely with parents of children in kindergarten through third grade to provide needed supports for children's reading proficiency by the end of third grade.<sup>65</sup> For children identified as having delays in reading achievement, a plan of supports and interventions is developed with school personnel and parents. As part of each plan, parents will be encouraged to provide home-based supports for the child's learning that can supplement school interventions.

# Opportunities for States to Advance Preschool through Grade 3 Parent Engagement Policies and Practices

A range of policies and programs, described next, provide states with opportunities to strengthen the quality of parent engagement focused on children's learning from preschool through grade three. Although opportunities to enhance parent engagement are not conveniently packaged in a single state or federal initiative, significant opportunities exist, and can be harnessed to advance the goals for children's school success sought by states' Early Childhood Advisory Councils, Race to the Top projects, and other state-level early care and education policy efforts.<sup>66</sup>

## *Quality Rating Improvement Systems*

Currently, 38 states have statewide Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRISs) that have established standards for assigning quality ratings to early care and education programs.<sup>67</sup> Although many states' QRIS have standards concerning parent involvement, few states' QRIS include standards that describe explicit requirements for programs to help parents learn about ways they can promote their children's learning.<sup>69</sup> An exception is Rhode Island's BrightStars, which requires center-based programs to give parents guidance about home-based learning activities for children, beginning at the next-to-lowest quality level. Similarly, Colorado's Qualistar awards points to programs that provide parents with information about promoting their children's learning and development, and requires the use of a family questionnaire that asks parents about children's activities and behavior at home.

QRIS standards have the potential to influence both the practices programs establish to engage parents and the professional development teachers and directors receive to meet QRIS parent engagement standards. Moreover, while many QRIS include Head Start and prekindergarten programs, a primary target is states' child care programs, which often lack strong parent engagement practices. For these reasons, QRIS standards offer an important opportunity to define and encourage active efforts on the part of early care and education programs to help parents support their

children's learning in key areas such as language and social-emotional development.

## *State Head Start Collaboration Offices*

State Head Start Collaboration offices are well positioned to develop agreements and policies that strengthen family engagement in Head Start and other early care and education programs, and during the transition to kindergarten.<sup>68</sup> Head Start performance standards concerning family engagement can be used as a model for other early care and education programs and for school districts. These standards include requirements that programs support parents' ability to promote their child's learning and development through home visits, family literacy initiatives, and other activities; address family needs through referrals and community partnerships; and promote parent involvement during the transition to school.<sup>69</sup> The Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework describes outcomes for families, related to these standards, that can promote parents' capacity to support their child's learning.<sup>70</sup> These include family financial security, parent health and educational advancement, and connections to a supportive network of peers and mentors. Head Start Collaboration offices, charged with collaborative policy planning to strengthen supports for low-income young children and families through state and local partnerships, can promote this more expansive approach to family engagement.

## *Early Childhood State Advisory Councils*

Several states have used their Early Childhood State Advisory Councils, authorized by the Improving Head Start Readiness Act of 2007, and funded between 2010 and 2013 by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), to address parent engagement. A recent report on activities of the councils highlights states that have begun work on a parent education credential (New York), assessed the use of evidence-based parent engagement practices in the state (Maine); developed and disseminated parent education materials

to parents of preschool and kindergarten children (Pennsylvania and Nebraska), and identified effective parent engagement strategies (Kentucky).<sup>71</sup> Although ARRA funding for the councils is ending, future state, federal or private support could help them build on their accomplishments. Given the membership of the councils, which includes representatives from the child care, Head Start, and education sectors, these entities provide unique opportunities for enhancing and aligning parent engagement across the preschool to early grades period.

### ***State-funded Prekindergarten Programs***

State-funded prekindergarten programs, now operating in 41 states, vary in their requirements concerning parent engagement. In its 2010 policy brief, the Pew Center on the States reported that only about half of state-funded prekindergarten programs require parent engagement activities.<sup>72</sup> In examples from states that prioritize parent engagement in their prekindergarten programs, the report cites: 1) requirements that programs offer a range of parent engagement opportunities, including parent education that is regularly documented in reports to the state (Kentucky); 2) a state's provision of financial incentives for parent outreach and activities, such as parenting classes, lending libraries, and prekindergarten-to-school

transition plans (Wisconsin); and 3) the inclusion of competencies related to parent engagement in preschool teacher certification requirements (Kentucky and North Carolina).

### ***Title I Parent Involvement provisions***

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, school districts with a high percentage of low-income students receive Title I funds to improve education for economically disadvantaged children.<sup>73</sup> School districts receiving more than \$500,000 in Title I Funds must spend a minimum of one percent of funds for parent involvement activities and comply with several parent engagement provisions. These include requirements that schools offer assistance to parents to help them understand state learning standards and assessment practices, and provide materials and training to increase parent involvement focused on improving children's achievement. Districts must also provide training to teachers, principals, and other staff on parent outreach and engagement strategies. Another provision calls for states to align these parent involvement activities with those of other programs, including Head Start and family literacy programs. Funds may be used to provide child care and transportation that enable parents to participate in parent training or other parent involvement activities.



Recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education encourages the use of Title I funds for preschool parent engagement activities. The activities cited in this guidance include linkages with community supports and family literacy services; training and supports that enable parents to reinforce children's cognitive and social-emotional skills during the summer to help prevent the loss of these skills; and transition to kindergarten supports for families in Head Start and child care settings.<sup>74</sup>

# Summary and Recommendations

## Summary of key research findings

### In the preschool period

- ◆ The frequency of parent-child reading and conversation are related to children's early literacy and language skills; benefits are greatest when parents use a warm style of interaction and use explanations and questions that encourage children to participate in conversation.
- ◆ Measures that reflect parents' engagement in several home- and community-based activities, such as playing alphabet games, telling stories, doing art projects, and visiting the library, are linked to preschoolers' language, literacy, social, and learning skills.
- ◆ Parent-child activities providing experience with math, such as board games, counting, and comparing amounts of items, are related to preschoolers' math skills; activities that go beyond counting, such as adding items, may help children acquire more advanced math skills.
- ◆ Parents' nurturing, responsive behavior across a variety of activities contributes to children's engagement in learning and school achievement.

### In the early grades

- ◆ Home-based activities and a supportive home learning environment, including parent-child reading, talk about the importance of school, and the provision of learning materials, are related to children's literacy, oral language, and social skills.
- ◆ An increase in parents' home- and community-based activities with children, such as play with numbers and puzzles as well as visits to the library, park, and sports events, is related to children's math achievement.
- ◆ Parents' school-based involvement, including participation in parent-teacher conferences and school events, is linked to children's school performance.
- ◆ Parents' warmth and responsiveness predict children's motivation to read challenging books, social skills, and peer acceptance (for boys), as well as a lower incidence of behavior problems.

## Evidence from studies of interventions

- ◆ Preschool parent-child reading interventions lead to parents' increased use of effective reading strategies, such as asking open-ended questions and expanding on children's comments, as well as benefits for children's oral language skills. Benefits may be weaker for older preschoolers' (age four and five), low-income children, and children of parents whose first language is not English, suggesting the need for more intensive parent training in these groups.
- ◆ Interventions during the preschool and kindergarten years that train culturally diverse parents to have rich conversations with children have been found to support children's language skills, even when parents have limited education or speak a language other than English at home.
- ◆ In the early grades, interventions that train parents to listen to children read and provide feedback, and to tutor children in literacy skills have been found to promote children's reading ability.
- ◆ Parent training on homework assistance that emphasizes setting guidelines about when and where to complete homework, and offering instruction, has been shown to promote reading and math achievement in elementary school.
- ◆ Several interventions designed for culturally diverse low-income families have shown promising results:
  - **The Companion Curriculum** led to increases in parent-child reading, and preschoolers' oral language and social skills in low-income African-American families.
  - **The Family Mathematics Curriculum** promoted low-income African-American and Latino Head Start families' use of math activities at home and stronger math skills among participating preschoolers. This program achieved unusually high parent attendance by assigning a teacher to contact parents before each session to inquire about any barriers to participation, and working to address these barriers.
  - **The Getting Ready Intervention**, which used home visits to support Head Start parents'



involvement in children's learning at home and warm, responsive parenting, led to higher quality parent-child relationships and stronger language skills in intervention children.

- **Abriendo Puertos/Opening Doors**, designed to meet the needs of Latino families, helped parents increase their knowledge about how to support preschoolers' language, literacy, and social-emotional skills.
- **The Incredible Years Parent Program**, led to increased parent involvement in children's education, more positive parenting, and stronger social-emotional skills among intervention preschoolers and kindergarten children in a diverse group of low-income families.

### What we know about factors affecting parent engagement

- ◆ Although there is considerable variation within different groups of families, parents with less education, lower incomes, and difficulties communicating with teachers due to language barriers tend to show lower levels of parent engagement in children's education.
- ◆ The transition from preschool to the early grades is a time when levels of parent involvement tend to drop for many families, although a substantial number of parents increase their involvement during this period; strong outreach from teachers to parents during this period can promote higher levels of parent engagement.
- ◆ Parents' awareness that children are struggling in school is one trigger for increased involvement.
- ◆ Parents who experience positive relationships with their child's teachers, and parents who can communicate with teachers in the families' first language are likely to show more school-based parent involvement.

### Recommendations

#### Use multiple, aligned state-level strategies to promote parent engagement in preschool through grade 3

- ◆ State policymakers should consider a range of opportunities for promoting parent engagement in preschool through grade three. Key opportunities include:
  - designing **QRIS and State Prekindergarten Program standards** that explicitly require early care and education programs to help parents become better equipped to promote their children's learning in key domains and social-emotional growth;
  - promoting the use of Head Start family engagement practices and policies in the state's child care and prekindergarten programs through activities of the **Head Start Collaboration Office**;
  - helping school districts develop strategies for effectively using **Title 1 funds** to promote parent engagement through training of preschool and early grades teachers and school staff and by offering supports, such as transportation and child care, to help parents participate in parent engagement activities;
  - creating a permanent **State Office of Parent Engagement** that develops and identifies research-based parent engagement resources, such as professional development and parent education models; supports the use of these resources in child care, Head Start, and prekindergarten programs and in school districts; provides guidance on professional development and training (both pre-service and in-service) for early care and education professionals; and helps establish policies, such as standards and incentives, for the use of effective parent engagement practices by early care and education programs and schools.
- ◆ State policymakers should use their **Early Childhood Advisory Council** or other cross-sector state policy entity, to align parent engagement strategies across programs and ages. Examples of alignment are:
  - setting uniformly strong standards for parent engagement across different early childhood programs, such as prekindergarten and child care;
  - providing guidance and resources to promote increased parent engagement outreach and support during the transition from preschool to kindergarten; and

- supporting the use of several consistent practices, such as parent education focused on building a strong parent-child relationship and lending libraries with send-home guidance about read-aloud strategies, across this transition to help parents experience continuity in parent engagement.

### Promote the most effective types of parent engagement in preschool through grade 3

- ◆ States should promote parent engagement that helps parents provide *effective supports for children's learning at home and in the community*. These supports include:
  - Interactive parent-child reading and language-rich conversation (especially for preschool and kindergarten children)
  - Opportunities for children to read to parents and receive feedback (early grades)
  - Math experiences such as play with board games and puzzles (preschool and kindergarten)
  - Guidance about homework routines (early grades)
  - Visits to libraries, sports events, parks, and other community settings that provide learning experiences (preschoolers and early grades)
  - Warm, responsive parenting (preschool and early grades)
- ◆ States should promote parent engagement in program- and school-based activities that help parents learn about how to promote their child's school success. Examples of activities are:
  - Parent-child conferences that provide individualized guidance to parents about activities they can do at home with their child to promote learning in key areas such as language and social-emotional development, reading and math

- Program- and school-based parent sessions or home visits that provide modeling of effective-home-based activities and a chance for parents to practice activities

### Promote the use of effective strategies for engaging families

- ◆ States should use incentives, standards, and guidance to encourage early care and education programs and schools to implement varied strategies to engage families, especially parents who face significant barriers. Examples include:
  - providing interpreters and parent involvement materials in parents' home language to reduce language barriers;
  - providing different forms of outreach and delivery of materials to parents who cannot attend program- and school-based sessions focused on effective ways parents can promote children's learning at home (e.g., phone-calls and home visits, sending home books or learning materials with notes about how to use them with children);
  - providing frequent opportunities for parents to experience positive, supportive interactions with teachers and other staff; and
  - establishing partnerships with community resources that can help meet important family needs, such as parent mental health or family financial security.
- ◆ States that require programs and schools to report on parent engagement activities should require information about participation by families who experience greater barriers, such as low-income and non-English speaking parents, along with information about efforts to reduce these barriers.

## Conclusion

Effective parent engagement, combined with excellent learning supports in early care and education programs and school, offer young children the best chance of achieving their full potential. Children in families experiencing challenges associated with poverty or minority status can greatly benefit from policies that help parents support their children's

social-emotional growth and learning in key domains. Given the evidence that parent involvement holds significant benefits for children, efforts to promote effective parent engagement should be viewed as an indispensable part of state policies that promote children's school readiness and academic success.

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