

Testimony of Anne T. Henderson, Senior Fellow
Community Involvement Program, Annenberg Institute for School Reform

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS

NCLB Reauthorization:

Effective Strategies for Engaging Parents and Communities in Schools

Wednesday, March 28, 2007

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this important hearing on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. I am here today to discuss the all-important relationship between families and schools, especially low-income families and the schools their children attend, because this relationship has a powerful impact on students' academic achievement and life prospects. For over 25 years, I have been tracking two things:

- the research on how and why engaging families can have a positive impact on student learning, and
- effective policies and practices of schools, school districts and community organizations that are working to build and sustain strong family-school partnerships.

First, I will discuss the big stories coming out of the research over the past 30 years. Then I will explore the implications of this research for the legislation before this committee.

Big Stories from the Research

1. If the first big story can be summed up in a sentence, it is: **When families are involved at home and at school, children do better in school, and the schools get better. The effects are greatest for low-income students.**

In my most recent review of the research, which was written with Karen L. Mapp of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in 2002, we found that students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs

- Be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to post-secondary education ¹

2. The second big story is families are doing more at home than we realize or give them credit for. For years, studies have been finding that families of all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups, are talking to their children about school, trying to keep them focused on learning and homework, encouraging them to work hard and get a good education, and helping them plan for higher education. Low-income and culturally diverse families DO value education and they DO want their children to succeed.

Families with more income and education, however, tend to be more engaged at school, better able to work collaboratively with educators, and therefore to be better informed about how to help their children at home. Supporting all families in their efforts to be more involved at school and more knowledgeable about what children are learning in class is an important strategy for addressing the achievement gap. We must build on this interest and effort, instead of blaming families for not doing more.

Another important reason for giving families information and resources to guide their children's out-of-school time is that students spend 70 percent of their waking hours outside school. How they spend that time, and with whom, is critical to their success in school. Reginald Clark's studies have found that students who spend at least 20 hours a week out of school in "high-yield learning activities" with responsible, caring adults tend to have higher grades and test scores.²

3. Third, parent advocacy and support has a protective effect on children. The more families can speak out for children and support their progress, the better their children do, and the longer they stay, in school. It takes a fairly complex skill set to do this job. To be effective advocates, parents must:

1. Know how the system works
2. Work with school staff to plan for their children's future
3. Guide children through the system, steering them to higher-level classes and programs

4. Know where to get help when their children need it
5. Speak out for their children, and for other students and families, when problems arise.

Opportunities to learn these skills, from workshops to full-blown parent leadership training programs such as the Parent Leadership Exchange in Massachusetts, the Parent Leadership Training Program in Connecticut, the Parent Education Network in Wyoming, and the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky, give low-income and less well-educated families a real advantage.

4. The fourth big story is that investing in parent education when children are young will pay off throughout their whole career in school. The Child-Parent Center (CPC) program in Chicago is an excellent example. This is a center-based, early intervention program that provides comprehensive education and family support services to low-income children and parents from preschool to third grade.

Direct parent involvement in the CPC program is designed to enhance parent-child interactions, parent and child connection to school, social support among parents, and children's school readiness and social adjustment. The program requires that parents take part at least one-half day per week. A parent resource room, staffed by trained parent resource teachers, offers a variety of activities, including parent-to-parent and parent-child interactions. It also offers materials, training, GED classes, membership on a school advisory council, and participation in school activities such as field trips.

The chart on the next page, from an important study by Arthur Reynolds and Melissa Clements (2005), summarizes the benefits for children whose parents took part in the CPC program from one to six years. In short, CPC students were better prepared for school and more likely to finish high school, and less likely to be maltreated, repeat a grade, need special education services, or be arrested.

Each year that families participated in the program increased the odds that their children would graduate from high school by 16 percent. Over 80% of the students whose parents were involved for the whole six years graduated from high school, compared to 38 percent of students whose parents were not involved at all.³ The CPC program is funded in part with Title I funds.

Proportion of CPC Preschool and Comparison Children Achieving School and Social Competence (Participation 1-6 years)

Child Outcomes	Age	Program Group	Comparison Group	Percentage Change
At/Above national norm on school readiness	5	46.7%	25.1%	+ 86 %
Completed HS	18-22	65.7	54.5	+ 21 %
Child maltreatment	4-17	5.0	10.3	- 51 %
Repeated a grade	6-15	23.0	38.4	- 40 %
Special education	6-18	14.4	24.6	- 41 %
Juvenile arrest	10-18	16.9	25.1	- 33 %

5. The more that programs and activities for families are linked to what their children are learning and doing in class, the greater impact they will have on student achievement.

Think about all the things schools put on for families: fun fairs, back to school nights, PTA meetings, family fun nights, science fairs, and so on. In general, when these programs and activities focus on helping parents understand what students are learning, what the standards say students should know for their age and grade level, and how they are being taught, they have significantly more impact on student achievement.

Workshops, learning kits, family math and reading events, and other learning activities also are a good investment. Learning what their children are doing in class, practicing learning activities with their children, then borrowing materials such as math and science kits to use at home, all contribute to student learning.

The most powerful link to learning, however, is close, regular communications between teachers and families. A study of 81 high-poverty Title I schools by Westat and Policy Studies Associates (2001), for example, found that three practices of teacher outreach to families lead to a 40-50 percent faster gain in both reading and math among third to fifth grade students:

- Meeting with families face to face
- Sending materials on ways to help their children at home

- Telephoning both routinely and when their child was having problems.⁴

If schools could do only this – and how hard would it be to do these three things? – they would be using parent involvement as an intentional strategy for improving achievement and their students would be making substantial gains. Provided, of course, that the classroom teaching was effective.

6. Community organizing efforts to build parent and community leadership are improving schools Efforts by community organizations to engage parents in improving low-performing schools are growing across the country. Parent leadership training and community organizing expand families' knowledge of how the system works and how to make it work for their children. Unlike traditional, school-based parent involvement, parent leadership and community organizing programs build partnerships to support schools and hold them accountable for results.

Recent studies by the Community Involvement Program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, which is based in Providence, RI, have found that community organizing contributed to these changes in schools:

- upgraded school facilities
- improved school leadership and staffing
- higher quality learning programs for students
- new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum
- greater parent and community involvement in school activities and programs
- new funding for family services and after-school programs.⁵

Schools in low-income areas should be working with community organizations, rather than seeing them as “outsiders” who want to “interfere with” the school. Schools also should work closely with providers of after-school programs, to make sure their tutoring and homework help are aligned with what students are learning in class and focused on skills that need to be strengthened.

7. The final big story is about building and sustaining effective partnerships with families. When families are welcomed and treated with respect, honored for their contributions, and connected to teachers, other parents and what’s happening in the

classroom, they become motivated to be involved over the long-term, in ways that can improve their children’s success in school.

I often hear complaints that low-income families “don’t care about their kids,” or “don’t value education.” This could not be farther from the truth. Kathy Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler have done a series of studies on parent motivation and found that three key factors influence the choices parents make about being involved in their children’s education:

1. How parents develop their job description as a parent. (Researchers call this “role construction.”) What parents think they’re *supposed* to do to help their children, and what teachers, family and friends say about what’s important and *acceptable*, deeply affect what parents decide to do.

2. How confident parents feel about their ability to help their children. (Researchers call this “efficacy.”) Parents are more likely to become involved if they feel that:

- they have the skills and knowledge needed to help their children
- their children can learn what they have to share and teach
- they can find other sources of skill or knowledge if needed
- what they do will make a positive difference in their children’s learning.

3. Whether parents feel invited – both by their children and the school. This “sense of invitation” is strongly influenced by signals that parents receive from their children and school staff. These signals that let parents know what their children and teachers want and expect. Their children’s age, and how well they’re doing in school, also have an impact. (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997)⁶ In her current research, Hoover-Dempsey notes that of the three factors, invitation is very often the most important.

In other words, we know that parents are more motivated to support their children’s learning when they receive clear invitations and support from teachers and other school staff to be engaged, are confident about their ability to help their children, and are clear about what they should do to support their child’s learning. Obviously, school staff can have a big impact on these considerations, especially on making parents feel invited and welcome.

At Wyman Elementary School in St. Louis a couple of years ago, I was attending a breakfast for parents. Standing just outside the door was an African American parent, hesitating to come in.

I went over and greeted her, introducing myself. She said she was “Tyrone’s mom” and had never been inside the school before. “Why did you come this time?” I asked.

“Because Tyrone’s teacher called and invited me,” she said.

When I asked if she had ever gotten other invitations to come to the school, she said, “Yes, I got flyers and other stuff. But I didn’t think they meant ME. I didn’t think they wanted ME to come.” I’ll never forget her.

Implications for Title I and Section 1118 of No Child Left Behind

"It Takes A Parent," a recent report by the Appleaseed organization, is based on research involving 18 school districts in six states. The report finds that:

- data reports are often confusing and overwhelming, and parents wait months for performance results, often into the next school year;
- teachers and administrators often lack training in how to engage parents; and
- parent involvement has fallen to the bottom of the list of NCLB requirements, though it is integral to the success of the law and of students and schools.

The report concludes, and I agree, that current parent involvement provisions of the law are solid and ambitious, but require more faithful implementation and greater enforcement.⁷

1. First, make sure the requirements for compacts and policies are taken seriously and enforced. School staff must use the compact as a tool for collaborating with families to improve achievement. Instead, districts and schools tend to see it as a burden and do the bare minimum to satisfy the law. The general guidance on the US Department of Education website is being copied and inserted into compacts all over the country. This is a missed opportunity.

When compacts were first proposed in 1994, one idea was to have a personal learning plan for every Title I student. Because this was seen as burdensome, the 1994 law instead required a general compact, which can be discussed individually and made more detailed at parent-teacher conferences.

I recommend that schools be required to take the following steps in implementing compacts:

1. Look at the school’s test data with parents. What are the areas of low achievement? Break down the data to find any gaps between different groups of students.
2. Set priorities for improvement and establish a goal for each group. For example, if

- reading scores are low across the board, then make improving reading skills a priority.
3. Ask parents, students, and school staff what *they* should do to meet the goals. Then ask each group to list what it wants the *others* to do.
 4. Focus the compact on concerns that have come up in the discussions. For each area (e.g. homework, communication, rules of behavior), list what each group can do.
 5. Draw up a first draft, then ask for comments. Revise it based on reactions from parents, teachers and students.
 6. Review and customize the compact for each child at parent-teacher conferences.

The following chart, from my new book *Beyond the Bake Sale*, contrasts the typical compact (on the right) with one that has more specific links to learning.⁸

<p>Compact Linked to Learning: This compact pledges our school community to increase student reading and math skills so all students will be proficient by the end of third grade.</p>	<p>Old Style Compact: “This compact will promote effective working relationships to improve student achievement.”</p>
<p>Parent’s Pledge: I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor my child’s progress and let the teacher know right away if I notice any problems • Use reading and math materials the school sends home each week to help my child • Read to my child 20 minutes a day and keep a list of new words. • Limit TV to one hour a day and talk to my child about our favorite program. • Help my child see how to use reading and math to pursue interests and goals 	<p>Parent’s Pledge: I will</p> <p>Send my child to school every day</p> <p>Keep in contact with school once a month</p> <p>Support the school dress and discipline codes</p> <p>Limit TV watching time</p> <p>Be an active participant in my child’s learning process</p>
<p>Student’s Pledge: I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for help from my teacher and family if I am having trouble doing my work • Read on my own and with my family every day • Work on my math and reading skills at home, using the materials my teacher sends home • Write down assignments, do my homework every day, and turn it in when it’s due • Talk to my family about my favorite TV program. 	<p>Student’s Pledge: I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete my classwork • Come to school prepared to learn • Respect adults, myself and other students • Obey school rules • Complete my homework
<p>Teacher’s Pledge: I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a relationship with every family in my class • Keep families informed of their children’s progress and needs in each subject • Make sure every student gets the help he/she needs as soon as it’s needed • Send home learning materials in math and reading. 	<p>Teacher’s Pledge: I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have high expectations for all students • Develop a classroom climate that is comfortable for all students • Develop proficient learners • Enforce rules fairly and consistently • Provide the books and necessary supplies for

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain my approach to teaching, expectations, and grading to students and their families • Work on my reading and math strategies so that I can reach all children. • Make sure students understand assignments and what they'll learn from them. 	education
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2. Schools also should be required to develop, with parent participation and approval, school parent involvement policies and programs that actually commit schools to do what the compact says and to make the school family-friendly. For example, the policy should allow parents to observe in the classroom so they can see how reading and math are being taught; give teachers time in their schedule to meet one-to-one with families; and use Title I funds to purchase learning materials that can be sent home.

The policy should provide that all activities, events and programs for families be designed so that in some way they help families:

- Get a clear idea of what their children are learning and doing in class
- Promote high standards for student work
- Gain skills to help their children at home
- Understand what good teaching looks like
- Discuss how to improve student progress.

The policy also should lay out clear expectations for staff about making the school welcoming and family-friendly. For example, setting standards for customer service in the front office, posting signs that clearly explain where things are in the school, setting aside parking spaces for parents, and establishing regular hours for parents to meet with teachers and the principal.

3. Make it clear that Title I funds can be used to hire family-school coordinators and that this is a sound investment. Not only can coordinators save teachers a lot of time, they also act as cultural brokers, bridging differences of class, language and culture between staff and families.

For this position to be effective, there must be training both for the coordinator and for school staff about the role of the coordinator. A good job description should consist of four key tasks:

Number One: Help the school to develop a family-friendly school climate. This should be done in cooperation with the principal, teachers, parent organization, and other staff.

For example:

- Conduct an annual “welcoming school walk-through” with parents and teachers to make sure the school welcomes families and treats them with respect.
- Work with school staff to use the walk-through results to make improvements (e.g. signs, directions, greeting at front office, displays of student work, regular visiting hours.)
- Create a comfortable family resource room where families can meet, get to know each other, and discuss their interests and concerns. Stock the family room with books, games, learning materials that families can borrow.
- Develop a school family involvement policy with input and approval from parents and teachers.

Number Two: Develop programs and activities designed to engage families in improving student achievement. Plan these in collaboration with an action team of families, teachers, parent organizations, business-community partners, and the principal. For example:

- Design two family involvement programs/activities each quarter to help families participate more effectively in improving their children’s learning (e.g. family reading activities, math and science trainings, and career and college planning events).
- Help families understand standards and assessments, student test scores, rubrics, and the school report card.
- Facilitate and organize other parent meetings and workshops, as parents request.
- Collaborate with school staff, community members, partners and families to develop programs and activities geared to reach families who are under-represented because of social, economic, racial and/or language barriers.

Number Three: Help teachers/staff and families develop strong partnerships and enhance communication between families and school staff. For example:

- Create ways for teachers and parents to meet face-to-face. Examples: class meetings, breakfast with principal, getting-to-know-you activities at PTA/PTO meetings.
- Develop monthly contact logs for teachers with families’ telephone numbers, so that teachers can be in touch with families at least once a month.

- Communicate regularly with the principal about parents' and families' concerns and ideas for improvement..
- Work with teachers and other staff to develop learning kits that families can take home to use with their children.
- Be a liaison between families and teachers when problems arise, more information needs to be shared, or cultural differences are a barrier.
- Arrange for translation and interpretation services for meetings, parent-teacher conferences, telephone calls, and notes home.
- Partner with community groups to organize tours of the community for school staff to get to know families and neighborhoods better.

Number Four: Develop and implement effective family involvement strategies and activities to empower students and their families. For example:

- Invite parents to participate in school committees and in the school's parent organization. Work with those groups to help them be welcoming and supportive of new members.
- Recruit parents to be a part of school/district decision-making committees and meetings. Be sure they have information and background materials to be informed members.
- Document parent/community activities through visual portfolios that include sign-in sheets, flyers, pictures, etc.
- Invite families to participate in professional development training along with staff.
- Ask parents to evaluate parent meetings and parent/family workshops.
- Survey families/school community and school personnel to assess the effectiveness of your school's partnership program.

4. Create a district action team of administrators, teachers and parents. The parents must be leaders who are active in the schools, represent the diversity of students, and know the community. This action team should be responsible for developing and implementing a parent involvement plan as well as engaging families and community members in developing a district policy for parent involvement that applies to all schools, not just to schools receiving Title I funds. This team should design effective approaches to engage families, through the school parent association, focus groups and study circles, to obtain their advice about improving student achievement and to build their social and political connections.

5. Encourage districts to develop district-wide programs that support family involvement, such as family resource centers, professional development for families and school staff, and parent leadership training. Double the one percent minimum of their Title I funds that districts are required to spend for parent involvement programs, and make clear that it's a minimum.

6. Create separate funding for district investment in early childhood programs that promote parent involvement and school readiness, modeled on the Child-Parent Centers in Chicago.

7. Require every state education agency to designate a high-level official to head an office for family and community engagement that will enforce the parent involvement requirements in the law. This office must have full responsibility to set standards and indicators for proficient school and district practices of family involvement, to make sure that districts fully engage families in improving schools and student achievement, and to offer information, technical assistance, and other resources to school districts, schools, and parent and community organizations, as well as other SEA staff .

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate this opportunity to share my views. I encourage the committee to make sure that proven strategies for effectively engaging families are an integral part of every state, district and school improvement plan to improve the achievement of our most vulnerable children. Yes, we must continue to uphold the high standards for accountability set by No Child Left Behind, but we must also understand that we will not reach the goal we have set for our children unless parents are full partners in the effort to make it happen.

Thank you.

¹ Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).

² Reginald Clark, “Ten Hypotheses about what predicts student achievement for African American student and all other students: what the research shows,” in Walter L. Allen et al. (eds), *African American Education: Race, Community, Inequality and Achievement – A Tribute to Edgar G. Epps* (Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science, 2002).

³ Arthur Reynolds and Melissa Clements, “Parental Involvement and Children’s School Success,” in Eva Patrikakou et al. (eds), *School-Family Partnerships: Promoting the Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth of Children* (NY: Teachers College Press, 2005).

⁴ Westat and Policy Studies Associates, *The Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance in Title I Schools, Volume I*. (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 2001) www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lescp_highlights.html

⁵ Kavitha Mediratta, *Constituents of Change: Community Organizations and Public Education Reform* (NY: Institute for Education and Social Policy, 2004).

⁶ Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler, “Why do parents become involved in their children’s education?” *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1)1997, 3-42.

⁷ *It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act*, (Washington, DC: Appleseed, 2006). www.appleseednetwork.org

⁸ Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (NY: The New Press, 2007) 104-105.