

Landscape Survey and Opportunities to Support Family Engagement for Youth Academic Success

Executive Summary

Cheri Shapiro, Ph.D.
Kathleen M. Hayes, Ph.D.
Institute for Families in Society
University of South Carolina



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA

Institute for Families in Society
Division of Children, Youth and Families

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In order to build on the efforts of the Midlands Reading Consortium (MRC), a landscape survey of family engagement practices to support youth academic success at the level of school districts (4) and schools (12) was completed. Both qualitative and quantitative survey methods were used to establish a picture of current family engagement practices that can be used to guide future programmatic and investment strategies.

Key informants from school districts and schools in Richland and Lexington Counties in South Carolina that are involved with the MRC participated in qualitative in-person interviews. These qualitative interviews were supplemented by information obtained from an online quantitative survey sent to school administrators and a separate online quantitative survey sent to teachers.

Summary of Key Findings:

A number of strengths and challenges were identified by respondents with regard to supporting family engagement for student academic success. Key strengths include dedicated district-level and school staff who share a clear understanding of the importance of family engagement, policies and a wide range of reported practices that are consistent with this understanding, some level of infrastructure to support family engagement at the district and school level, significant efforts to reach non-English speaking populations, and positive collaboration and supports from a number of local community organizations.

Key challenges include a lack of a shared definition of family engagement across districts and schools, variable training or professional development activities for faculty and staff across districts and schools with regard to family engagement, fragmented tutoring and mentoring efforts, insufficient resources for programs outside of school hours that may assist schools in supporting family engagement and achieving academic targets for youth in poverty (i.e. after-school and summer programs), underutilization of evidence-based approaches for family strengthening, and variable use of data to drive decision-making around family engagement.

Recommendations:

Given the findings of the landscape survey, the following recommendations are made to guide future investment strategies to support family engagement efforts for youth academic success:

1. For schools that are lacking the resources to provide afterschool programming, efforts to support afterschool programs that provide academic support and instruction and that include routine parent contact are recommended. Efforts should ideally be made to partner with organizations that are equipped to provide high-quality afterschool programming with measurement of academic progress and methods to support regular two-way communication with families.

2. For schools that are lacking the resources to provide summer programs, efforts to support implementation of summer programs that provide academic support and instruction as well as family strengthening as key activities are recommended. Measurement of student academic functioning at several points over the course of the program is recommended. Summer programs that integrate evidence-based parenting approaches, delivered on either a group or individual family level, are recommended.

3. In order to address the reported gap between family needs and available resources in some schools, efforts to support additional staff should be examined, especially for schools who are close to but who do not meet the criteria for Title I eligibility. Ways to increase the number of parent educators, in particular, should be examined.

4. Coordination of mentor and tutor activities. A number of local groups, including faith-based organizations, colleges, and high schools, provide mentors or tutors for MRC schools. The MRC may benefit from formal affiliation with these organizations in an effort to coordinate the activities of these mentors and tutors. One opportunity is the current focus at the college and university level to support service learning. For example, one potential partner is the University of South Carolina Office of Student Engagement (<http://www.housing.sc.edu/studentengagement>), recently formed to oversee and support service learning initiatives. Connections between the MRC and specific university-level courses in education or related areas could provide a means for increasing the number of tutors that could be deployed to MRC schools. All mentors and tutors should receive training in standardized methods to support reading and their meetings with students should be clearly documented. Evaluation of mentor and tutor programs should ideally include measures of

academic functioning of students both before and after program involvement, as well as measures of the quality of the relationship between mentors and tutors, schools, and families, and the quality of family relationships to schools.

5. Support training for educators in family engagement practices. Examples include Incredible Years Training, which has teacher training that focuses on classroom behavioral management practices as well as engaging families, as well as brief approaches to strengthening families detailed below.

6. Support training for school-based and community stakeholders in brief, evidence-based parenting approaches that can be provided at schools or in the community to support parents along with universal access by parents within identified schools, districts, or communities to high quality information on parenting. As one example, the Triple P Positive Parenting Program System of Interventions includes both universal media and communication strategies for parenting support that can be delivered to all parents in a specified population; this media/communication strategy is known as the Stay Positive Communications Campaign. Costs for the campaign vary based on desired population reach and specific campaign elements chosen (e.g. website, posters, brochures, advertising, PSA's). Triple P also has brief interventions that range from single meeting large group seminars to Brief Primary Care Triple P, in which single meetings can be held with parents to provide evidence-based support and strategies for managing a wide range of common behavioral and developmental challenges in young children. A second example would be implementation of school-based parenting and family strengthening interventions in a group format. Incredible Years and Triple P both offer group-level interventions for families. Another intervention example is FAST, or Families and Schools Together. This evidence-based intervention operates as a multi-family group intervention lead by a collaborative team in school settings.

7. One very basic barrier to family engagement that was mentioned frequently was the difficulty of maintaining current, reliable phone contact information for parents. Support for ways to manage this significant but concrete challenge need to be explored. Possible partners to engage in managing this barrier include local businesses within the communication industry. The feasibility of short-term solutions, such as having cell phones available in schools to provide to parents on an as-needed or emergency basis, could be explored, among other possible solutions.