

Engaging with Families of English Learners: From Theory to Policy to Practice (and Back)

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Promising practices...

The integration of theory, policy, and practice to effectively engage with families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds can be a challenge for states, districts, and schools. How do we move toward successful family engagement that weaves together theory, policy, and practice? In particular, how do we do this while prioritizing the needs of families of English learners (ELs)? In this article, we present how the state of Illinois has attempted to bring together research, legal requirements, and promising practices while maintaining the focus on the specific needs of families of ELs.

What does research tell us about family engagement?

The importance of involving families in students' schooling experiences has been well-examined, and there is agreement in the field regarding the positive outcomes for students and schools, including stronger school-home-community relationships and student academic outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; LeFevre & Shaw, 2011; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). In short, family engagement benefits school communities. Family engagement research also unveils important findings that point to best practices for effective family engagement approaches in schools and districts serving diverse families. However, it is the approaches schools employ in order to increase family engagement that are often problematic and can reproduce negative attitudes and/or beliefs toward culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families (Delgado-Gaitan, 2012).

Viewing diversity as deficiency has long been the lens used to view students and families from diverse backgrounds. Linguistic, cultural, familial, and home literacy differences among families have guided inadequate efforts that center on assimilation as the goal (Auerbach, 2009; De Gaetano, 2007; Valdés, 1996). "Parents can't..." and "Parents don't..." is the

common dialogue driving unbalanced family engagement efforts that place schools as knowledgeable experts and parents as receivers of this knowledge. This perspective fails to recognize families' knowledge and practices as valuable and important resources for students' schooling experiences (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992).



A team of parents and educators participating in the family engagement workshop offered by WIDA and ISBE in October 2014.

So, what then *is* family engagement? Who defines it? What does it look like? Families and educators must have a common understanding of what constitutes family engagement. For example, schools may perceive parents as uninterested in their child's education due to their lack of "visibility" at the school. However, these families may engage in powerful home dynamics in which parents teach and transmit life

lessons and values to their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001). Family engagement practices are just as diverse as the students and families in our schools. Thus, critical frameworks for family engagement that advance empowerment and cultural responsiveness are essential. We must find ways to bridge research to policy and practice.

How does policy align to family engagement research?

Given what the research tells us about family engagement, how does it contribute, if at all, to shaping policy? The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—strengthens family engagement efforts by increasing funding and including specific requirements. Parental involvement, as previously termed in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is now defined as "parent and family engagement," and it is allocated 1% of Title I grants. These parent and family engagement funds must be used by Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to implement at least one of the following activities: support schools and nonprofit organizations providing professional development for family engagement;

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support programs to reach parents and family members at home; disseminate best practices information on parent and family engagement; and collaborate with entities with a record of success in improving and increasing parent and family engagement. It is yet to be seen how states will implement these new requirements.

All these policies and regulations build upon the notion that the partnership between families, schools, and communities results in better student outcomes and healthy school systems (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, despite the potential impact that family engagement can have on student learning and healthy development, educators may not have sufficient resources to develop strong partnerships with families, especially families from diverse backgrounds. It is for this reason that districts and schools have asked states for more guidance on this topic and access to trainings on family engagement practices and resources.

In response to this need and the limited professional development opportunities, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) appointed a taskforce in 2008 to develop a common vision and framework for family engagement. The Family Engagement Framework (www.isbe.net/family-engagement) was developed by an ISBE cross-divisional team, in partnership with the American Institutes for Research and the Academic Development Institute. The framework is grounded on the eight essential elements of the continuous school improvement process and focused on research-based practices, legislative requirements, and effective resources. It is intended to support districts' efforts to develop successful family engagement systems embedded in school policies and practices. The framework goes beyond compliance and encourages a systemic and integrated approach to family engagement throughout all aspects of school.

In the case of ELs and their families, Illinois districts that have a transitional bilingual education program must establish a bilingual parent advisory committee (BPAC). The BPAC must act with autonomy, meet at least four times a year, and receive resources, including training for its members, from the district. The state also organizes an annual Bilingual Parent Summit in order to support parent leadership development and strengthen local family engagement practices. However, despite the policies and resources available to Illinois districts, ISBE felt that more could be done at the state level to foster effective family engagement practices—especially those targeting families of ELs.

Parent feedback from the Illinois family engagement workshop:

“Los temas del taller fueron de utilidad. Comprendí y entendí bastante que antes no sabía.”

“Fue bastante informativo especialmente cómo funciona el programa y cómo se puede ayudar.”

Educator feedback from the Illinois family engagement workshop:

“The ability to discuss with not only our own district staff and parents but others [was useful]. We don't ever have these opportunities.”

“This has been a very interesting, insightful time—I have had many ‘ah-ha’ moments.”

How can research and policy be transformed into effective practices?

Illinois has been a member of the WIDA Consortium since 2005. Roughly 9% of the state's K–12 students are identified as ELs, with a majority reporting Spanish as their home language. Although the state provides a variety of resources and professional development for educators of ELs, little had been done that specifically focused on families of ELs. To address this need, a team from WIDA and ISBE worked collaboratively on the development of resources for families of ELs.

When working with ELs and their families, school-based family engagement practices must also take into account language. ELs are learning both content *and* language at school. Thus, school-based family engagement practices targeting these students and their families must take into account students' language learning and development. For example, some districts will host family events where parents learn how to make sense of language proficiency scores and learn about the district's language learning program(s) or services.

With this in mind, the team from WIDA and ISBE collaborated to produce an online webinar series for families of ELs, pilot a face-to-face workshop, and deliver various conference presentations on EL family engagement. The three-part webinar series, *An Introduction to English Language Standards and Assessments for Parents*, developed by WIDA, provides families information on the purpose and use of the

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WIDA standards and assessments. To supplement the webinar series, a full-day workshop on EL family engagement was designed and piloted in 2014. The focus of the workshop was to promote collaboration between parents of ELs and educators in planning family engagement practices. Participants attended in teams of parents and educators. Lastly, to reach larger audiences, members of the collaborative team presented on EL family engagement at statewide educator conferences, as well as at the annual Illinois Bilingual Parent Summit. These presentations highlighted parent perspectives, issues of equity, and the need to include language learning in school-based family engagement practices.

The work with families of ELs resulted in various family-focused initiatives at WIDA. For example, the September 2015 WIDA Focus Bulletin, *Focus on Family Engagement*, was the first Focus Bulletin written for both families and educators and is available in English and Spanish. In addition, new resources for parents on the WIDA *ACCESS for ELLs* assessment were released to help parents understand the purpose of the assessment and how to interpret the scores. These parent resources, including the webinar series and Focus Bulletin, are available on www.wida.us.

Next steps: From research to policy to practice—and back

As more integrative frameworks for family engagement emerge, we need to increase the knowledge base regarding implementation. Moving family engagement from the periphery toward systemic inclusion that purposefully addresses issues of equity and language for families of ELs is a priority for scholarly investigation that will further guide this work. States still have many needs regarding family engagement. The first is to increase interstate collaboration, but there is also a need to allocate greater resources for family engagement, and finally, to enhance frameworks to include a more targeted and integrated vision of families of ELs and their unique needs.

In regards to practice, we wish to highlight four key points. First, to effectively engage with families, as educators we must critically reflect on our personal beliefs about families and the roles they play in their children's education. Second, there is a need for teacher education in the area of family engagement. Several Illinois educators shared that it was rare to have opportunities to learn about family engagement research, policy, and best practices. Third, we must

create spaces for parent voices to emerge. When working with families of ELs, linguistic barriers may hinder meaningful two-way communication. But such communication is critical for effective home-school relationships. Finally, family engagement practices for ELs and their families must incorporate language learning. Students' language learning is a key factor in their academic success. As the population of ELs continues to grow, it becomes imperative to critically reflect on how we approach family engagement. This includes looking at the research we draw from, the policies we implement, and the practices we have in place to engage with families of ELs.

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