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Title I and Parent Involvement: Lessons from the Past, Recommendations for the Future

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DRAFT

Introduction

What role should families play in raising the achievement levels of children and in the efforts to reform our nation's schools?¹ This question has been a part of our federal, state, and local policy discourse for over thirty-five years, and has recently reached a new level of prominence. In his January 2011 State of the Union speech, President Barack Obama discussed the shared responsibility of the home, school, and community in enhancing our country's education system, stating, "...the question is whether all of us — as citizens and as parents—are willing to do what's necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities."

In his keynote address at the MOM Congress on Education and Learning in May of 2010, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan defined his vision for how parents can and should be engaged in their children's education:

My vision for family engagement is ambitious...I want to have too many parents demanding excellence in their schools. I want all parents to be real partners in education with their children's teachers, from cradle to career. In this partnership, students and parents should feel connected--and teachers should feel supported... We need parents to speak out and drive change in chronically-underperforming schools where children receive an inferior education. With parental support, those struggling schools need to be turned around now—not tomorrow, because children get only one chance at an education.

The President's and Secretary's remarks are aligned with a robust and comprehensive view of the role of families in their children's schooling. Instead of the involvement of parents being seen as a peripheral, compliance-driven aspect of whole school improvement, their vision calls for parents to be *full partners* with school staff and other members of the community in the work of creating and sustaining excellent schools. A symbol of this expanded view of the family's role is represented by the research-informed shift in terminology from "parental involvement" – representing supportive activities that occur primarily in the home between parent and child, to "family engagement," – broadening the role of families from at-home activities to full partnerships with school staff and other parents and community members in the overall improvement of schools. This broader definition requires that family engagement be:

- a *shared responsibility* among families, school staff, and community members where families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development, and school personnel and community members are committed to engaging and partnering with families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways;
- continuous across a child's life span, from cradle to career; and
- occurring in multiple settings where children learn: at home, at school, and in community settings (National Family and Community Engagement Working Group Policy, 2009)

Given this more comprehensive vision of family engagement, this paper will examine the role of federal policy, specifically, the parent involvement provisions of Title I, in moving this vision of from theory to practice. Currently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 addresses family engagement in a number of sections, most notably in Section 1118 of Title I. Through Section 1118, districts receiving more than \$500,000 in Title I funds must set aside at least one percent for family engagement activities and distribute at least 95% of those funds to Title I schools (PTA issue brief, 2009). In May of 2010,

DRAFT

Secretary Duncan announced the Education Department’s proposal to double this set-aside from one to two percent, and also proposed the creation of an optional Family Engagement and Responsibility fund for states to create with existing Title I funds. The fund would be used to launch state-run competitions to support innovative and effective local family engagement initiatives (ED.Gov release, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to review the history and evolution of the Title I parent involvement provisions and to use the lessons learned from this history to assess the current Title I language and the latest USDOE proposals for reauthorization. The paper will specifically examine the language regarding the use of the Title I set-aside funds for parent involvement, exploring whether the current and proposed funding parameters support the President’s and Secretary’s family engagement goals of shared responsibility and the cultivation of parent capacity to demand excellence in their schools.

The Genesis of Parent Involvement Language in ESEA – Title I

Sowing the seeds of parent activism and engagement – the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty Programs

Pushed by the Civil Rights movement and the tide of unrest in the country, the Federal government, particularly under the Johnson Administration, proceeded with the War on Poverty programs of the mid-sixties. These initiatives ushered in Federal support for the engagement of citizen participation in the planning and execution of these programs. From the Federal perspective, the support of citizen participation aimed to: 1) make the services delivered to the poor more responsive to needs; and 2) integrate the bottom segments of the urban population into community life, thus quieting unrest and promoting stability (Davies, Upton, Clasby, Baxter, Powers & Zerchkov, 1979).

For example, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA) required citizens served by the Act to have “maximum feasible participation” in the poverty program’s planning. The EOA was the centerpiece of the "War on Poverty," which in turn was a major thrust of the "Great Society" legislative agenda of the Lyndon Johnson administration. The EOA provided for job training, adult education, and loans to small businesses to attack the roots of unemployment and poverty. The EOA established thousands of Community Action Agencies (CAA’s) throughout the country. Many of these agencies, supported by federal dollars, opened neighborhood centers that provided technical assistance and training, spawning a generation of community leaders and activists, many of who were parents (wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/751/769950).

Head Start and Follow Through, education-related initiatives that were a part of the arsenal of anti-poverty programs, also operated on the concept that “the poor should participate in planning and carrying out of programs designed for their benefit (Davies, Upton, Clasby, Baxter, Powers & Zerchkov, 1979, p. 5). From its inception in 1965, Head Start emphasized parent participation and provided detailed language for how parents would be engaged in decision-making. Parent engagement in Head Start began with parent advisory councils. When Head Start was moved from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to the Office of Child Development in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) in 1970, these councils were upgraded to policy boards and given substantial authority, similar to the kind associated with a governing board. Wide variations were reported in the effectiveness of these policy boards, with some evidence that the public school push-back on the full engagement of parents was significant (Davies, et al., 1979; Mizell, 1980).

DRAFT

Another example of an education-related program was Follow Through, designed as a comprehensive attack on poverty where the local school would serve as a focal point for coordination of services to the poor community. Follow Through stressed both individual and collective forms of participation. Along with Head Start and other economic opportunity efforts, the vision of Follow Through was social change and collective empowerment. The goal of the program was to enable local institutions, parents and community residents to be responsible for and bring about the needed changes in their communities (Davies, et al., 1979).

When the Follow Through Program was shifted in 1969 from the Office of Economic Improvement to the Office of Education, the program focus shifted from one with an emphasis on social change to a concentration on evaluation and improvement of academic achievement. The Office of Education continued to support the program's original intent to involve parents, however, parental involvement became a means to improve the quality of the program's educational impact, not as a way of developing community leadership and collective strength. Even with this shift in focus, the parent involvement requirements for Follow Through suggested more citizen influence and engagement than any of the other Office of Education programs (Davies, et al., 1979).

An interesting episode occurred during the Office of Education's administration of the Follow Through program that raised questions about the Federal role in empowering parents to be engaged in education reform. In an attempt to affirm its recognition of the importance of parent engagement, the OOE contracted with Afram Associates, led by Harlem activist and supporter of community control, Preston Wilcox, to organize and advise a group of Follow Through Projects (Davies, et al., 1979). Afram's support and assistance to those programs was based on a strong ideological belief about parent engagement:

Families have a natural nonnegotiable right/responsibility to guard/protect the right of their children to be perceived as human/educable, as being members of a community and to be involved in shaping the content/policy of their children's educational programs. The failure of school systems to effectively provide educational justice to all children shifts the exercise of parental decision-making from a right/responsibility to an absolute necessity. (Davies, et al., 1979, p. 10)

Afram and OOE ran into difficulties when Afram staff rejected the evaluation of their projects based on standardized tests scores and other measures of student performance, and in 1976, OOE made the decision not to refund Afram. A 1977 Center for New Schools Report stated:

The position of the Federal funders was that Afram refused to follow proper procedures and that services being provided by Afram at that point were unclear. Afram's perspective was that it was not refunded because it refused to put the maintenance of relations with funders above its direct work with parents, because it pressed for more parent control of Follow Through, and because it encouraged local sites to take primary credit for their successes rather than fostering dependency and claiming major credit for Afram. (Davies, et al., 1979, p. 11)

The relationship between Afram and OOE raised questions about whether Federal education agencies' would fund initiatives that sought to transfer power to poor people, that emphasized preeminent roles for parents and community members, and that sought to utilize measurement and accountability tools that focused on parent and community empowerment outcomes rather than on more traditional academic achievement measures (Davies, et al. 1979).

DRAFT

Parent involvement and Title I

Unlike the other anti-poverty programs that contained specific language about citizen participation, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) created the Title I program without any mention of parent participation in the program (Pastrevich, 1991). However, by 1966, federal officials looking to implement Title I began urging local officials to involve parents, and by 1967, the United States Office of Education (USOE) required local school officials to create “appropriate activities and services” in which parents could be involved (Mizell, 1980). This language was expanded in 1967 in an USOE program guide where the goal of parent involvement was defined as building “the capabilities of parents to work with the school in a way that supports their children’s well being, growth, and development” (Mizell, 1980, p.2).

In 1968, the requirements for involving families grew in focus and intensity and were more explicitly stated in the USOE Title I regulations. These regulations required parents to be involved in the planning, operations, and evaluation of Title I projects. These new regulations also gave districts the option of establishing parent advisory councils (PACs) to meet these requirements. The momentum for even stronger language continued to build. In the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) of 1969, Congress gave the Commissioner of Education the power to strengthen parental involvement language, and 1972, the USOE acted on the discretionary powers granted by Congress and issued regulations that *required* each LEA to establish a district-wide parent advisory council (Mizell, 1980; NCPPIE Update, February 2007).

As the parent involvement language was being strengthened in Title I, activist organizations began to recognize the power of the law and became interested in the opportunity to encourage greater parent participation and voice in how Title I funds were being spent in schools and districts. For example, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) had been working in the southern states on issues of school desegregation (Mizell, 1980). In collaboration with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, AFSC formed the Southeastern Public Education program (SEPEP). SEPEP’s work included: 1) providing community groups and citizens with information, leadership development, organizing skills, and legal assistance; 2) working with federal agencies to ensure accountability to the communities they served; and 3) alerting the federal government of challenges to congressional mandates (Mizell, 1980).

As early as 1967, a SEPEP representative reported to Congress that:

The lack of community involvement in the creation of ESEA Title I programs often results in great misunderstandings, and even hostility, between the Negro community and school officials. Unfortunately, school officials seem to take little time to fully explain to the community how the ESEA funded programs work and the extent of their limitations...There needs to be some mechanism, hopefully created voluntarily by local school officials, but if necessary, created by law or required by the U.S. Office of Education, that will allow parents and community leaders to express their ideas and opinions, and to know their rights and responsibilities under ESEA funded programs. (Mizell, 1980, p. 4)

As the Title I requirements for parent involvement began to strengthen, particularly, the language requiring PACs at the district level, groups like SEPEP began to turn their attention to working on the election of parents to district PACs and building parents’ capacity to understand the law and assure that their school systems were in compliance with Title I parent involvement mandates (Mizell, 1980). In addition to SEPEP, organizations such as the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the National Committee for Citizens in Education began to provide workshops and

DRAFT

various training opportunities for parents in urban and rural areas around the country. As a result of the capacity building efforts on the part of these organizations the number of poor, African American, and Latino parents willing and able to participate as PAC leaders grew substantially.

The birth of the National Coalition of Title I parents

William H. Anderson from Wilmington, Delaware, a Title I PAC chairman and activist, had been working closely with staff from the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund on the training and organizing of other Title I parents. In 1972, Anderson learned that the National Advisory Council for the Education of Disadvantaged Children (NACEDC), a council appointed by President Johnson to oversee the administration of ESEA, was holding a meeting in Washington, D.C., for Title I state administrators. Anderson also learned that a portion of the meeting would focus on parent involvement. Seeing that this was an important opportunity for parents to meet members of the NACEDC and state Title I coordinators, Anderson organized and arranged for a group of fourteen parents to attend the meeting (Bailey, 1983).

In addition to presenting several resolutions and recommendations for strengthening the parent involvement provisions of Title I, the group pushed for NACEDC to sponsor a national conference for Title I parents. NACEDC agreed, and on January 4, 1973, fifty Title I parents from across the country met to discuss the challenges to parental involvement in Title I. The conference resulted in the formulation and passing of several dozen resolutions, with one calling for the establishment of the National Coalition of ESEA Title I Parents (Witherspoon, 1996).

The National Coalition functioned as a small group of activist Title I parents who focused on monitoring pending Title I legislation as well building the capacity of other parents to become more involved in the education of their children. The group regularly testified in hearings on parent involvement legislation, and was instrumental in pushing through in 1974, Public Law 93-380, stating that parent advisory councils were *required* for each district and school being served by Title I. The Coalition also testified on a number of occasions in favor of additional resources for parent training and leadership development.

In 1976, the Carnegie Corporation of New York awarded the National Coalition a two-year grant of \$200,000 to establish the National Parent Center (NPC) in Washington, D.C. The NPC became the premier training, information, and resource center for parents as well as schools and districts. Robert Witherspoon, who began as a trainer for the NPC and later became its director, stated that he and other Coalition members led hundreds of trainings around the country for parents on their rights and responsibilities under Title I. The trainings focused more on parents’ understanding of the legislation, the specifics of the law, and leadership training rather than on “parenting” classes and workshops. Witherspoon stated the classes were highly interactive, with parents often “quizzing each other” on the law.

Some workshops also taught parents about their eligibility for other federal initiatives such as Head Start and the free lunch programs. One parent, Susanne Jackson, in a talk at a National Coalition meeting in 2003, described the early parent capacity building efforts of the Coalition:

We studied budgets, federal, state and local regulations, elections, learning techniques and programs, methods of evaluation, impacts of early childhood education and computer learning and much more. We taught each other. We brought in experts from education, government and man other groups to help us learn. We used what we learned to train others in our regions and in our school districts. We believed “Knowledge is Power.” We were determined to

DRAFT

exercise our Power – to act on behalf of all the children. (*Reflections on the National Coalition of Title I Parents, Susanne Jackson, 1973-2003* – personal communication)

The 1978 parent involvement amendments

The most substantial victory for the National Coalition of ESEA Title I parents and other parent advocacy groups came with the passage of the Educational Amendments of 1978. Two full sections of the amended law were dedicated to ensuring that parents would be included in the governance of the program. The first section required districts give parents the opportunity to be engaged in the establishment of the programs and required that parents be kept informed of and permitted to make recommendations to the instructional goals of the program. The second section of the law addressed the establishment and role of the advisory councils, requiring that parents be involved in the “planning, implementation, and evaluation” of programs (Pastrevich, 1991). Councils could veto district plans for the use of federal funds, LEAs had to provide councils with relevant laws, guidelines, regulations and any other relevant documents, and training had to be provided for both local and district parent council members (Fege, 2006).

Even after the strengthening of the language in 1978, many schools and districts remained resistant to engaging parents. In one of the limited number of studies conducted on the impact of the Title I parent provisions, Gittell (1983) found that the impact of the PACs were disappointing. The study revealed that, overall, few Title I parents were aware of the existence of the PACs, schools dominated the advisory councils, and PAC members were seldom involved in the planning of the Title I projects. For example, in following up on complaints lodged by parents, the National Council discovered that deceased parents’ names appeared on PAC rosters or parents’ names were put on rosters without their knowledge. Elected PAC members also complained that it was difficult to get information from their districts and schools on how the Title I money was being spent or to receive the training and support that districts and schools were supposed to provide.

Despite the fact that the PACs struggled, many, especially those in large urban districts, gained strength, power, and control over the programming. This increase in the power and voice of poor parents of color resulted in significant pushback from district and state school officials, teacher’s unions, and superintendents (Gittell, 1983; Fege, 2006; NCPPIE Update, 2007).

The weakening of the parental involvement provisions

In 1981, under the Reagan Administration, almost all parental involvement provisions in Title I were eliminated when ESEA was repealed and replaced with the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act. (PTA Issue Brief, 2009). Title I became Chapter 1, and the parent involvement language was reduced to a single requirement that schools and districts hold an annual meeting of Title I parents to inform them about the program. In most cases, the repeal of the 1978 provisions led districts to abolish both district and school-based parent advisory councils. Some of the more active and powerful district councils, such as those in Detroit, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles, hung on, but many were eliminated.

According to Fege (2006), despite the repeal of the 1978 provisions, the five-year opening of the policy window that strongly supported parent involvement in the governance of Title I resulted in: 1) training that was developed by and for parents; 2) parents learning about and executing planning, evaluation, and programmatic authority; and 3) the cultivation of a new generation of poor parents who were educated on how to use the educational system and press for educational and institutional change.

DRAFT

These parents continued to travel to Washington to lobby for and support the reinsertion of parental involvement language into future reauthorizations.

From 1988 to 2001 – the reemergence of parent involvement language in Title I

Despite the repeal of the 1978 requirements, groups like the National Coalition of Title I ESEA Parents, the Center for Law and Education, the Children’s Defense Fund, and the National Committee for Citizens in Education continued to push for stronger parent involvement language in the law. With each reauthorization of ESEA came some attempt to strengthen the Title I parent involvement provisions. For example, The Hawkins-Stafford Amendments of 1988 provided language that required LEAs to write policies to ensure parent involvement in program planning, design and implementation, provide timely information about the program to parents, and provide information to parents in a language and form they could understand.

In 1994, President Clinton signed into law the “Improving America’s Schools Act.” This reauthorization of ESEA ushered in a more comprehensive model of parent involvement. The changes in language under Section 1118 required Title I schools to develop a written parent involvement policy and school-parent compacts, developed with and approved by parents, that would outline how students, parents, and school staff would work as a team to meet academic standards, and required multiple types of parent involvement. The 1994 law introduced the set-aside that required Title I schools to spend at least 1% of their Title I funds on parental involvement (PTA Issue Brief, 2009).

Parent involvement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The current version of ESEA, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, mentions parent involvement in several sections of the law, but most notably in Section 1118 (see text box). ESEA-NCLB, for the first time, included a definition of parent involvement, stated as, “the participation of parents in regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including ensuring that:

- Parents play an integral role in assisting their children’s learning;
- Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children’s education at school;
- Parents are full partners in their children’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child;
- The carrying out of other activities, such as those described in Section 1118

DRAFT

NCLB SECTION 1118 – Six Key Leverage Points for Parent Involvement

- (1) Every Title 1 school must have a written parent involvement policy, developed with and approved by parents. This policy should spell out how parents will be involved in a meaningful way and how they will be involved in the school. The policy must be updated periodically to reflect the changing concerns of parents.
- (2) Every Title 1 school must have a school-parent compact, developed and approved by parents, that describes how the school and parents will build a partnership to improve student achievement. This compact should explain how the school will meet the needs of its students so that they will achieve high standards.
- (3) Every school district must have a written Title 1 parent involvement policy that is developed with and approved by parents, and evaluated every year. This policy must spell out how the district will engage parents in developing its Title 1 plan and how it will help parents gain the knowledge and skills to be involved effectively in decisions about the program and in the schools.
- (4) The school district must distribute a report card specifying how every school and the district as a whole is performing. This applies to Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools, as well as to charter schools.
- (5) If a Title 1 school has not made adequate progress over the past two or more years, parents have two options. They can ask to transfer their children to a school that is making adequate progress, or they can request supplemental services and become involved in improving the school.
- (6) The state education agency must monitor the school districts' Title 1 programs to make sure they carry out the law. If the district is not involving parents, parents and community members should appeal to the state.

(From "No Child Left Behind: What's in it for Parents" by Anne Henderson, 2002)

DRAFT

Though the current law provides guidance on the implementation of Section 1118, research and federal monitoring has revealed that, once again, state education agencies, districts, and schools are struggling to fulfill the parent involvement requirements (PTA Issue Brief, 2009). For example, a recent report from the U.S. Department of Education concluded that the parent involvement requirements, including compacts, are one of the weakest areas of Title I compliance (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Emerging Themes from the History of the Title I Parent Provisions

This recounting of the history and evolution of the parent involvement provisions of Title I reveal five compelling themes that shape and undergird any future recommendations to the law:

A decrease in focus on and commitment to capacity building

Richard Elmore, in his “theory of reciprocity” states that for every unit of change you expect, you must provide an equal and corresponding unit of support (Elmore, 2002). Throughout the history of the parental involvement provisions, parents and school staff have been asked to engage in ways for which neither side is prepared. The anti-poverty programs of the 1960’s provided technical assistance and capacity building to poor communities and communities of color, resulting in the cultivation of a cadre of parents who were ready and able to participate in district and school councils. Over the past few decades, however, the overall federal emphasis on capacity building has dissipated (Weiss & Stephen, 2010) and especially for Title I, there has been a steady decrease in the focus on the capacity building side of parental involvement. For example, NCLB-Section 1118 places a heavy emphasis on the role of parents in the development of parent involvement policies at the district and school level and the development of school-parent compacts, but lacks an equal and corresponding emphasis on the type of capacity building required for parents to fulfill these roles.

Similarly, state, district and school level staff receive little to no training on the skills and competencies required to partner with families. Weiss and Stephen (2010) report that “there has been and continues to be little leadership from any source demanding or providing pre- or in- service training of teachers in this area” (p. 454). They also state that survey data indicates that teachers feel working with parents is their greatest challenge and the area in which they have received the least training and support. Teachers are also unprepared to work with families in supporting these roles. The Met Life Survey of the American Teacher in 2005 found that new teachers identified working with families as their greatest challenge and the area where they feel least well prepared (MetLife, 2004-2005).

The limited of capacity of both parents and state, district and school level personnel to partner with each other and share the responsibility of improving student performance factors heavily into the relatively poor execution and oversight of the Title I parent provisions.

The promotion of “random acts” versus systemic family engagement

An unintended outcome of the provisions has been the creation of conditions resulting in “random acts” (Gill Kressley, 2008) of parent involvement versus systemic family engagement initiatives. Family engagement that is systemic is purposely designed as a core component of whole school improvement; in other words, all initiatives are linked to student learning and school improvement (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007).

DRAFT

For example, the current law does not require schools to link their school-parent compacts to achieving the goals of their school improvement plans, thus missing an opportunity to stimulate teacher-parent collaboration on a powerful mutual interest: achieving student progress in a given school year. In a review of school compacts, the Connecticut Department of Education in 2008 found that many were gathering dust and had not been revised in years. Few compacts described home-school initiatives that could have a direct impact on learning. Most of the compacts parroted the general language in the law about parents' responsibility to support children's learning, such as monitoring attendance, homework completion, and TV-watching. (Henderson & Carson, in press; USDOE, 1996).

A focus on a compliance versus improvement mindset

Throughout the history of the Title I parent engagement language, there has been an emphasis on a *compliance mindset* versus an *improvement mindset*. The compliance mindset views the role of the Title I parent as "compliance officer" or "watchdog" of the school system - where parents are placed in the position of making sure the law is followed and schools are in compliance. Although this role may be a necessary component of parent involvement, it is not sufficient. The heavy emphasis on this compliance orientation exacerbates an "us versus them" dynamic between parents and school staff, rather than a dynamic of shared responsibility. This mindset also pulls parents away from the work of whole school improvement, making parental involvement appear to be more of a nuisance and an "appendage" than an integral part of the school improvement process (Fege, 2006).

In contrast, an "improvement mindset" would see parents as vital contributors to the work of improving schools. As their children's first teachers, parents often bring valuable "funds of knowledge" to the school that inform teaching and learning strategies (Moll, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Parents are also key informants about community strengths and challenges, information that is vital for any comprehensive school improvement process. In order for improvement strategies to be fully implemented and sustained, the families affected by these changes must be directly engaged as partners in the process.

A shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual

A noticeable shift over the years in the Title I parent involvement language has been from an emphasis on ensuring the delivery of equitable and effective programming *across* Title I districts and schools to an emphasis on a parent's ability to oversee the program's impact on their own child or children. In the early parent involvement language, an emphasis was placed on oversight of how the Title I dollars were being spent in districts and schools and the level and type of programming. Those parent involvement provisions enabled parents to question how the money was being used. This authority led to the reporting out by parent to organizations such as the NAACP Legal Defense fund about the improper use of Title I funds in the south, which led to the groundbreaking report by Phyllis McClure about the supplanting of Title I dollars (McClure, 1969). Thus, parents did influence programming decisions made by districts and school staff that impacted not only their children, but also multiple children across the districts and schools.

In contrast, Section 1118 places more emphasis on the parent's role as a chooser of services and schools for their own child rather than on the overall improvement of the school. Fege (2006) states that while there had been some strengthening in the parental involvement in NCLB from previous versions of the law, the emphasis "has been on choice rather than political organizing and mobilization...and while choice may improve the education of some children, it drains the responsibility that parents and communities have in working together to improve their public schools" (p. 578).

DRAFT

This focus on the individual rather than on the collective may also have an impact on incentivizing families to be engaged in initiatives. Social capital research states that a key incentive in any mobilization effort is the participation of other members of the community who one knows and trusts. In a research study by Mapp (2001) on how and why low income, Title I eligible parents were involved in their children’s educations, parents indicated that the school’s emphasis on relationship building with school staff and other parents was key. The process of “joining”—welcoming, honoring and connecting families to each other, staff members, and to their children’s learning—served as powerful incentives for family engagement. Thus, individualized approaches for involving families fail to recognize research informed strategies for connecting with Title I parents.

Little to no commitment to monitoring and evaluation

Sadly, few lessons about best or promising practice family engagement strategies and initiatives can be derived from the Title I program. With the exception of a few studies, such as the one conducted by Reynolds and Clements (2005) on the impact of the Chicago-based Child-Parent Center program, few in-depth evaluations have been conducted recently on the range of family engagement initiatives that have emerged from Title I. In addition to the lack of investment in research on the parent involvement aspect of the program, there has been relatively little effort made to monitor states and districts for accountability and compliance (Weiss & Stephen, 2010, Fege, 2006).

Recommendations

Using the themes from the history of the Title I parental involvement provisions as a foundation, this paper offers five recommendations for consideration for the reauthorization of ESEA. Several of the recommendations are aligned with those in the Family Engagement in Education Act, HR 5211, a proposal put forth to Congress in the fall of 2010 by the National Family and Community Engagement Working group, a nation-wide team of family and community engagement researchers, advocacy groups, practitioners, and policy makers (see Appendix). The five recommendations provided here are designed to compliment, not repeat, those offered in HR 5211.

Increase the minimum set-aside figure from 1 percent to 2 percent and revise the statutory language in Section 1118 to direct set-aside funding and the Family Engagement and Opportunity Fund towards the design and implementation of initiatives that build the capacity of families and school staff to partner to improve student achievement and school quality

The language in the law must incentivize states, districts and schools to develop innovative capacity building initiatives for parents and school staff to enable them to carry out the various family engagement provisions outlined in Title I. The language should *require* states and districts to partner with community-based organizations with expertise in leadership development and capacity building initiatives. Partnering with community-based organizations with this expertise will reconnect and integrate more collective capacity building outcomes into the intent and goals of the law.

In order for parents to be active and effective participants in the school reform process, these capacity building efforts must enable them to be collaborative agents of change in support of student achievement and school improvement (National Family and Community Engagement Working Group, 2010). The set-aside funds must be directed to support the enhanced capacity of families to engage in all five of the following roles at home, school, and in the community:

- As supporters of learning
- As effective decision-makers
- As leaders
- As advocates
- As partners in shared accountability

Teachers, paraprofessionals, and district, state and school leaders are in great need of pre-service and in-service “intensive and continuing” (Weiss & Stephen, 2010. p 454) professional development opportunities to help them create and sustain, with families as their partners, systemic and comprehensive initiatives.

Reconsider the allocation formula for the distribution of the family engagement set-aside funds to the districts and schools

Even with an increase of funding to a 2% set-aside, the requirement for districts to direct 95% of the funding to individual schools prevents the implementation of systemic, integrated and sustainable systemic district-wide initiatives. In many cases, the direct allotment to schools is too small to support a systemic approach to family engagement. The funding language should be flexible enough so that district family and community engagement planning teams, consisting of parents, school staff, and community members, can design initiatives that are linked to learning and improvement, rather than continue to run random, stand-alone projects that have little to no connection to school improvement and teaching and learning.

Change the statutory language to require that schools involve Title I parents in governance and decision-making

Schools receiving Title I funds should be required to have Title I parent representation on their governing bodies. Most schools have a school site council or local school council, and Title I parents should occupy at least 50% of the seats reserved for parents. If the capacity building efforts are enacted, then a number of parents who can effectively serve on these governing bodies will be available. Having Title I parents as members of school and district governance groups that are responsible for strategic decision-making connects them to, rather than separates them from, the work of improving schools.

Revise the statutory language regarding parent involvement policies and compacts to align the goals and strategies to the whole school improvement goals of the district and schools

The research on family engagement indicates that when strategies to engage families are linked to student learning, these strategies have a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be effective, family engagement strategies must be focused on improving achievement and be designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The statutory language about the creation of school-parent compacts should require that compacts be linked to achieving the goals of the whole school improvement plan.

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For example, the Connecticut Department of Education has recently undertaken a major initiative to help Title I schools transform their school-family compacts from boilerplate documents to action plans laying out how parents, school staff and students will collaborate over the coming year to achieve key goals for student achievement. At a minimum, the language should require that compacts focus directly on student learning (not behavior or dress, which can be covered in the school handbook), be linked to the student achievement goals in the school improvement plan, and be developed collaboratively by parents and school staff each year. (Henderson and Carson, 2011, in press). This recommendation ties in with one of the ARRA priorities to provide information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children’s schools, and to educators to help them improve children’s learning.

Provide support to monitor and research innovative family engagement strategies and initiatives

The Title I funding for family engagement, if directed to support the creation of innovative family engagement initiatives that support whole school improvement, could be used as a research and development opportunity to add to what we know about best practice in this area. Instead of monitoring and evaluation being seen as only a tool of compliance, federal support can incentivize states and districts to engage in monitoring and improvement research to inform and strengthen the field of family engagement.

Conclusion

In their groundbreaking longitudinal investigation of the internal and external conditions that impact elementary school improvement, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) five essential supports for school improvement. Strong leadership, instructional guidance, professional capacity, a student-centered learning climate, and *strong parent and community ties* were identified as organizational features of schools that interact with what happens inside classrooms and are essential to improving schools and student achievement. Schools with strong family engagement were four times more likely to improve student reading over time, and were ten times more likely to improve student learning gains in mathematics (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010).

This research underscores the need to elevate the role of families from backstage to front and center in the school reform policy, research and practice discourse. The building of these essential partnerships between families and schools will require a new level of commitment to the development, execution, oversight and evaluation of current and future federal policy in the area of family engagement.

Appendix

HIGHLIGHTS OF HR 5211 – The Family Engagement in Education Act

Purpose:

(1) Incentivize districts and schools to use best practices for family engagement (FE):

- Provide research-based national standards for family school partnerships and providing guidance for the use of the set-aside
- Incentivize school districts to meaningfully engage families by increasing the set-aside from 1% to 2% and providing additional training and technical assistance on FE best practices
- Engage parents leaders in developing and assessing the implementation of FE policies and practices

(2) Build local and state capacity for effective family engagement in education by establishing a mandatory 1% set-aside for a “Family Engagement and Responsibility Fund.” The fund would resource:

- Local Family Engagement Centers that would provide innovative programming and services, such as leadership development and family literacy
- State Family Coordinating Councils comprised of parents, educators, early learning and high education institutions and business and community organizations to coordinate systemic FE initiatives that support children from cradle to career.
- State Capacity for developing, assessing and evaluating FE Initiatives

(3) Restructure Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) to provide high quality services and reach more families:

- Shift scope from providing information and limited services to providing capacity-building, training, and technical assistance to SEAs and LEAs
- Establish a minimum grant award of \$500,000 to assure baseline FE and rename PIRCs “Statewide Family Engagement Centers” to better reflect their role.

(4) Improve professional development in FE in Education

(5) Extend FE in Education to neglected and delinquent youth

(6) Build national-level capacity for FE:

- Require the Secretary to convene a body of FE researchers and expert practitioners to develop metrics to assess the impact of FE policies and practices
- Require the Government Accountability Office to conduct studies on the use of funds for FE, the barriers to implementing provisions, and the innovative policies and practices supported by Section 1118 of Title 1.

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Endnotes

¹ The terms “family(ies)” and parent (s) will be used in this article to mean any adult caretaker of children. This can include biological parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, other relatives or fictive kin.