Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education:

Research, Practice, and Policy

MASSACHUSETTS
Department of Early Education and Care

BRAIN BUILDING IN PROGRESS

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Creating Architects of *Change*

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION & INTRODUCTION

In December 2011, Massachusetts was selected as one of nine states awarded a U.S. Department of Education *Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge* (RTT-ELC) grant. The grant is designed to enhance states' efforts to improve access to quality early childhood education (particularly for low income and minority children), strengthen program quality standards, support the professional development of the workforce, and implement comprehensive data systems to measure progress and assess outcomes.

As part of the RTT-ELC grant, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) has funded several initiatives to support the professional growth of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce and the quality of early childhood education settings for all children in the Commonwealth. In an effort to strengthen the capacity of Massachusetts's culturally and linguistically diverse early childhood educators working with children ages 0-5, EEC initiated the Higher Education for English Language Learners RTT-ELC grant project. The goal is to identify and support viable pathways for all ECE educators to improve their knowledge and competency through access to postsecondary degrees in early childhood education.

As a key partner in these efforts, The CAYL Institute engaged in cross-sector research, including comprehensive literature reviews and statewide engagement of key stakeholders. This research explored both the challenges and opportunities facing culturally and linguistically diverse educators, and the program models and practices to improve access and persistence in postsecondary education.[1] Subsequent research focused on career pathway models as a potential strategy to align and coordinate broader recommendations for systemic change across early education, higher education and workforce development, and on the specific needs and challenges facing family child care providers.[2]

This project has resulted in several practical outcomes for the early childhood education field in Massachusetts, including: 1.) strengthening our knowledge base of strategies to support postsecondary access and persistence among nontraditional students through a comprehensive literature review; 2.) engagement with Massachusetts ECE educators, English Language Learners (ELLs), and policymakers to build awareness and shared understanding of the

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[1] CAYL Institute. (2015). *Postsecondary pathways for ECE educators: Supporting adult English Language Learners' access and success in higher education*. Boston, MA: The CAYL Institute.

[2] CAYL Institute. (2015). *Model career pathway framework: Creating a viable education roadmap for adult and English language learner educators in early education settings*. Boston, MA: The CAYL Institute; and CAYL Institute. (2015). *Family and home-based child care: Challenges and opportunities for educator development and postsecondary pathways*. Boston, MA: The CAYL Institute.

challenges and opportunities presented by these issues; and 3.) the development and vetting of a career lattice for the field that incorporates recommendations for systemic reforms that are necessary across education, workforce development, and human services to create a viable career pathway for all ECE educators in the Commonwealth.

Building on this work, the following report explores the research literature on another key improvement strategy in the RTT-ELC grant program—*family engagement* (Harvard Family Research Project, 2012). Parents' role in their children's social, behavioral, and cognitive development has been well documented in the literature. Research suggests that family engagement in their children's education is highly predictive of academic outcomes and a particularly effective strategy to address academic gaps for low income and culturally and linguistically diverse children (Office of Head Start, 2011; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Efforts to better engage families and foster greater cross-agency collaboration to support families are central to state and federal educational policies to improve outcomes across the early education through K-12 continuum (Belway, Duran, & Spielberg, 2014; Driskell, 2014; National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement, 2010).

The idea that parents are their children's first and most important teachers is a widely accepted cultural value. Parents of young children possess a wealth of experiences and innate behaviors that shape their parenting, but are also developing new skills and competencies necessary to support their children's development and learning. Research suggests that the preschool years present an opportunity to facilitate parents' sustained engagement in their children's education. These years represent parents' first experiences as key stakeholders and advocates for their children, and their experiences with ECE programs are formative in how they conceptualize the roles they can play in partnerships with educational entities (Jeffries, 2012). Early education programs have long been considered "dual-generational" in that they present an opportunity to foster ongoing development and learning for both children and their parents (Lombardi, Mosle, Patel, Schumacher, & Stedron, 2014). According to the Head Start performance standards:

> Head start agencies must provide opportunities for parents to enhance their parenting skills, knowledge, and understanding of the educational and developmental needs and activities of their children and to share concerns about their children with program staff. (Chang, Park, & Kim, 2009, p. 159)

Family engagement has been a mandated element of the federal Head Start program since its inception fifty years ago (Snow, n.d.). Under Head Start's legislative mandate, programs are

required to include parents in all programmatic efforts and policy decisions to the "maximum feasible participation" (Lombardi et al., 2014). Family engagement that fosters collaborative partnerships to support children's development and learning are cornerstones of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's program quality and accreditation standards. More recently, state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) include family participation activities—outreach and communication, program governance, and collaborative learning—as key metrics of program quality ratings (Belway et al., 2014; Bruner, Ray, Wright & Copeman, 2009; Diskell, 2014; McCormick Center for Early Education Leadership, 2014).

Despite the widespread recognition of family engagement in state and federal policies, educational entities, including early education programs, have generally not done a good job. Often described as "random acts of family involvement," most efforts have been distinct, uncoordinated and ineffective in addressing student needs (National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement, 2010, p.3). Policies are often based on the assumption that educators and families already have the capacity to engage in effective collaboration. The reality is that educators receive little training in family engagement and often lack the relational skills and cultural competencies required to deal effectively with families, particularly from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Cultural, racial and socio-economic differences, moreover, can result in educators and education systems embracing a deficit viewpoint of parents that sees them as incapable of contributing to their children's learning. Families also face significant barriers to effectively engage with formal education settings. These include the lack of social capital, limited understanding of educational systems, life responsibilities, linguistic barriers, and cultural beliefs and values that may challenge formally-accepted educational practices (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; McGrath, 2007; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011).

Part of the problem is the lack of data on the practices and conditions that foster family engagement, and the complex behaviors and interactions that may have a positive impact on outcomes for children and families. Effective family engagement is often derailed by miscommunication, misunderstandings, biases, and missed opportunities that create real barriers between parents and programs (Daniel, 2009; McGrath, 2007). Some observers have attributed these disconnects, in part, to the expansion of formal childcare and the increasing expectations among parents and policymakers that have led to demands for program standards and accountability rather than shared responsibility for children's learning and development (Douglass, 2011; Snow, n.d.). A 2012 study from the National Institute of Early Education Research found that between 1993 and 2007 parents of 3 and 4 year olds demonstrated a greater awareness of the essential competencies and cognitive skills needed for school success;

yet specific family activities to contribute to those developmental assets have not change (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012).

Cross-disciplinary research is beginning to elevate the need for new models of engagement grounded in familial and cultural competence, and new methods to assess efforts that take into consideration parental perspectives and needs. These efforts are redefining traditional notions of engagement as parental participation in program-based activities to parents engaging as active agents in their children's development and learning. Given the diversity of caregivers in children's lives today, moreover, stakeholders are moving from a focus on parents to a focus on families, including grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and others who play an important role in early development of young children (Fehrer, 2014; Goode & Jones, 2006; Hilado, Kallemeyn, & Phillips, 2013). The Office of Head Start (2012) takes the broadest view of "family" as including:

> All the people that may play both a parenting role in a child's life and a partnering role with Head Start/Early Head Start staff. This includes fathers, mothers, grandparents, kith and kin caregivers, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) parents, guardians, expectant parents, teen parents, and families with diverse structures that include multiple relationships with significant others. (p. 1)

Drawing on the rich literature of family engagement in education, human services, and health care, multidimensional models embrace practices that foster strong collaborative relationships grounded in bi-directional communication, mutual trust, understanding, shared responsibility, responsiveness to family needs, and a strength-based stance that values the cultural and linguistic assets all families bring to programs (Forry, Moodie, Rothenberg, & Simkin, 2011a; Forry, Moodie, Simkin, & Rothenberg, 2011b).

Such conceptions of sustained, goal-oriented relationships that build the capacity of both programs and families to support the social, emotional and cognitive development of young children have been influenced by full-service community school models and complimentary learning models that embrace learning and support across multiple contexts—family, school, community—that impact children. These family engagement approaches embrace supports that are systemic, integrated across disciplines and contexts, and comprehensive to respond to the individual needs of families and their children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Hill, 2012; MDRC, 2013; National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement, 2010; Office of Head Start, 2012; Weiss et al., 2006).

This report draws on the broad literature on family engagement in education and human services, with particular focus on early childhood education and the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. The review includes a brief analysis of the conceptual and theoretical literature on family engagement and on the empirical research on the outcomes for children, families, and programs, and the engagement practices and behaviors that have some evidence of effectiveness. Finally, the review explores the current landscape of family engagement research and practice in early education in the context of current trends in state and federal education policy.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN, FAMILIES & PROGRAMS

Fifty years of research has shown that family engagement is one of the most predictive factors of academic and social success for children across the educational spectrum—from early childhood to college (Belway et al., 2014; Jeynes, 2005). For ECE programs, involved families and strong, collaborative relationships are considered essential for the creation of developmentally appropriate practices (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Snow, n.d.). High levels of family engagement support children's learning across multiple domains, facilitate an exchange of information about children's development between program and home, and create opportunities for family participation in programmatic decision making and leadership (Hilado et al., 2013; Morrison, Storey, & Zhang, 2011). Despite these potential benefits, there is no universal understanding of what constitutes effective family engagement or research-based blueprints to guide the practices of ECE programs (Douglass, 2011; Jeffries, 2012; Morrison et al., 2011).

Some definitions of family engagement stress the importance of partnerships between parents and caregivers and child-serving agencies to support young children. Stark (2010), for instance, argues that "family engagement is a partnerships between parents, grandparents and other caregivers and pre-K programs that reflects a shared responsibility to foster young children's development and learning" (p. 2). Others researchers "conceptualize parent engagement as behaviors that connect with and support children or others in their environment in ways that are interactive, purposeful, and directed toward meaningful learning and affective outcomes" (Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011, p. 361). More recent definitions of family engagement embrace a stronger purpose-driven approach that incorporates the needs and assets of both families and programs. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2014), family engagement:

> Refers to ongoing, goal-directed relationships between staff and families that are mutual, culturally responsive, and support what is best for children and families both individually and collectively. Staff and families share responsibility for the learning and development of children, the progress toward outcomes for children and families, and parent involvement in the program. (p. 3)

The re-packaging of family engagement as a core intervention in education reform is being driven in part by persistent gaps in achievement as children enter and progress through school and the need to better support the growing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse

children and families. Research has consistently shown that the first five years of a child's life are critical for developing the skills, competencies and habits of mind necessary to support their transition to school and ongoing success as learners (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). Research has also demonstrated that as much as one-third of the gaps in academic achievement between minority and white children can be attributed to differences in early parenting practices (Hogan, 2011). More broadly, the settings in which children develop, their interactions and relationships with adults and peers, and their experiences with both play and intentional learning influence their ability to learn and grow throughout life (National Research Council, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

We also know that disparities in children's experiences—shaped by poverty, low parental education, linguistic and cultural isolation, and physical and mental health issues—present significant challenges to young children's development. Gaps in cognitive, social and emotional development that emerge during a child's first five years not only affect their readiness to enter school, but also tend to progress and widen over time as they move through K-12 education (Brooks-Gunn, Rouse, & McLanahan, 2007; Haskins & Rouse, 2005). It is widely understood that early learning and development that supports school readiness starts at home and is shaped by the relationships between children, families, communities and educational settings. As Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk (2010) have noted:

> Early education and intervention programs can promote children's readiness skills, including social-emotional competencies, via relational contexts that permeate across home and school systems. These include the teacher-child relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the parent-professional relationship. (p. 128)

The family engagement literature – overview and limitations
The literature on parental involvement and educational and developmental outcomes for young children has focused primarily on three domains: 1.) parents' participation at school (conferences, classroom volunteering, school activities); 2.) parents' engagement in educational activities at home (supervision and monitoring of homework, tutoring activities, and daily conversations about school; and 3.) parental attitudes, beliefs and expectations regarding their children and education. Research has found positive outcomes related to all these domains of engagement, but home-based engagement—which often requires a specific set of parental attitudes and skills—has the strongest relationship to children's learning (Bryk, Sebring, & Allensworth, 2009; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Looking across the literature on family-school connections, the Southwestern Educational Development Laboratory identified six common themes (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008):

1. *Sense of welcome*: creating a warm and welcoming environment that fosters positive family-school relationships across contexts, cultures, and language; builds capacity for reciprocal learning and addressing educator and family perceptions.
2. *Misconceptions among stakeholders*: identifying and elevating educator and family misconceptions about the motivations, practices, and beliefs of each other than can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust.
3. *Use and issues related to resources*: directing resources and programmatic interventions in a targeted way to engage families in practices that support child development and learning. Resources are generally school- or community-based, but emerging research is focusing more attention on the resources brought by families.
4. *Home context and student performance*: understanding how the home context—culture, language, parenting behaviors, crisis/trauma—effect development, learning and family functioning.
5. *Program structures*: building the organizational structures that encourage and support family involvement, including policy, leadership, procedures, processes, and resources.
6. *Roles of those involved in school-family connections*: addressing how individuals' beliefs, self-efficacy, funds of knowledge and previous experience influence their roles.

Researchers are clear that the literature on family engagement has significant methodological limitations. Most studies use small sample sizes and inadequate measures of engagement that focus on single items, such as surveys, to try to understand causality across complex sets of behaviors. Many of these studies are based on teacher and/or parent perceptions of their own involvement and do not distinguish between types and intensity of engagement (Jeffries, 2012). Family engagement initiatives, moreover, are generally implemented as components of other improvement efforts making it difficult to understand and study specific practices that may have some empirical evidence of success (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Sheridan, Kim, Coutts, Sjuts, Holmes, Ransom, & Garbacz, 2012).

Rigorous empirical studies have found that only one type of parental involvement produced repeated evidence of positive outcomes for children's academic development—parents helping their children learn at home (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Jeynes, 2005; Kim & Riley, 2014). School-based involvement, including volunteering, attendance at program events, or participation on governance councils, has not been found to promote positive outcomes for children. Given the

small sample sizes for most of these studies, however, researchers have not been able to calculate the effect sizes for any given intervention or activity on a specific outcome for children or parents (Sheridan et al., 2012). Further, there is some evidence that the strength of effects were somewhat moderated when parents had low educational attainment (less than a high school diploma), when children have identified learning disabilities, and when their primary language was not English (Sheridan et al., 2011).

The research on the impact of family engagement during the preschool years is particularly limited (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; Jeynes, 2005). A recent synthesis of the research on family engagement found that out of 27,000 studies reviewed, less than 10% focused on the preschool years, while more than 70% focused on the elementary years. Moreover, given the requirements for family engagement within the Head Start program, nearly all of the studies that do exist related to preschool years focus on interventions implemented in Head Start programs that operate under federal guidelines (Sheridan et al., 2012).

This review did not find any specific empirical studies of the role of family engagement in unaffiliated center-based or family child care (FCC) settings. Home-based FCC programs, in particular, would seem to present an important context for studying family engagement strategies in early education. Studies have shown that parents often choose FCC settings based on a variety of family-centered practices, including flexible schedules, greater levels of trust, shared language and culture, common child-rearing beliefs and individualized attention provided to both children and families (Layzer & Goodson, 2007; Porter, Paulsell, DelGrosso, Avellar, Hass, & Vuong, 2010).

Unlike most center-based programs that maintain a transactional exchange of services, FCC providers maintain a social exchange of services with parents and are generally viewed as more responsive to family needs and values. As Bumgarner (2013) and others have found, FCC providers are often more interested in quality improvement initiatives that focus on strengthening families rather than addressing formal quality standards or rating systems. Relational and cultural competencies are core drivers of emerging multidimensional models of family engagement, yet we know very little about how these elements of FCC programs foster engagement among parents and families who choose home-based care.

Finally, meta-analyses of the literature have identified two primary types of interventions to foster family engagement and parental involvement: 1.) relational interventions that strengthen family-school partnerships; and 2.) structural interventions that promote parental involvement

activities. Of these types of approaches, structural interventions, such as promoting an educational curriculum at home or school-to-home communication, comprise 80% of the literature. This is significant given current efforts to create strong, collaborative partnerships grounded in relational dynamics. Our understanding of initiatives to support families through nurturing parent-child relationships or bi-directional communication and information sharing to support children's development and learning is limited. Finally, across the literature the academic, behavioral, or social-emotional outcomes of children are the primary variable studied, with only 15% of studies focused explicitly on parental or program outcomes. Studies focused specifically on culturally and linguistically diverse families, moreover, are a small percentage of this subset of research (Sheridan et al., 2012).

Potential outcomes for children

Research has consistently found that children who come from supportive home environments characterized by positive parental behaviors have greater literacy development and communication skills, stronger peer and adult relationships, fewer behavioral problems, greater motivation and persistence in learning activities, and enhance health and well-being (Forry et al., 2011b). Among the parental behaviors most predictive of positive outcomes are warmth and sensitivity, support for children's emerging autonomy, and active participation in learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011).

Parents who engage in literacy activities when their children are young support their children's ability to recognize letters and connect individual letters and letter pairs to sounds. Daily parent-child reading among very young low-income children has been found to build cognitive skills, vocabulary development and literacy (Raikes, Luze, Brooks-Gunn, Raikes, Pan, Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2006). Children's cognitive development is improved when parents actively engage in supportive play and create developmentally-appropriate cognitive and literacy-oriented environments at home. These benefits, moreover, accrue as preschoolers transition to school (Belway et al., 2014).

Recent analysis of data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that the positive association between student outcomes and family engagement crosses culture, country of residence, and socio-economic status (Best & Dunlap, 2012; Jeffries, 2012). Research also suggests that the frequency of parental engagement with children and the quality of interactions on literacy and vocabulary-building activities are shaped by parents' attitudes and beliefs about reading, their education level, and socio-economic status (Chiu & Ko, 2008).

Longitudinal studies suggest that intentional engagement among low-income families may offset some of the risks associated with growing up in low-income families (Barnard, 2004; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). Latino and African American children from low income families are more likely to succeed academically and complete high school when their families are actively engaged in their education, provide encouragement, and emphasize the value of education as a pathway to long-term economic success (Belway et al., 2014; Hogan, 2011). Family participation in educational activities among families living in poverty has also been linked to cognitive and emotional resilience, two developmental assets associated with school readiness and long-term academic success (Morrison et al., 2011).

Despite the dearth of research on the impact of family engagement on culturally and linguistically diverse children, there is some evidence that parental engagement in the home environment correlates to higher literacy and vocabulary skills and greater social and emotional resilience among young Latino dual language learners (DLLs) (Arias, Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Cannon, Jacknowitz, & Karoly, 2012; Halgunseth, Jia, & Barbarin, 2013; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011). National longitudinal studies have found that fostering bilingualism and heritage language use at home has important protective factors that support cognitive development, language development, and academic skills related to school readiness. Based on this research, Halgunseth et al. (2013) have argued:

> A focus on strengthening DLL family engagement in ECE programs may play an important role in reducing the achievement gap. Strengthening DLL family engagement in preschool may be especially important, since the early years of development set the foundation for future learning, and since families who are engaged early on with schools are more likely to maintain engagement across future educational settings. (p. 121)

Potential outcomes for parents & families

Research on parental perceptions and attitudes regarding their children's learning have found that parents generally place a high priority on their children's academic success but have a limited understanding of how best to support their child's learning needs (Fehrer, 2014). When parents lack confidence in their ability to support their children's learning, they are less likely to engage in educational activities at home. A number of factors have been found that influence parental motivation to become more involved in their children's education, including: 1.) previous educational experiences and the belief that they have a role to play; 2.) efforts of formal educational settings to engage parents, such as creating a welcoming environment, educator characteristics, and the relevance of these efforts to family needs; and 3.) family

context, such as socio-economic status, culture, language, and their ability to manage the logistics of engagement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005).

Parents who are actively engaged in their children's education and report strong collaborative partnerships with their children's caregivers and teachers and have stronger conceptions of their self-efficacy in supporting their children and feel more empowered as advocates for their children's learning. When parents feel welcomed and supported by their children's educational programs, they are more likely to be involved in both formal participatory opportunities, such as governance councils and parent-teacher conferences, and informal participatory opportunities, such as classroom volunteering and parent networking groups (Ferguson et al., 2008; Halgunseth et al., 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Significantly, parent's experiences with early education settings may influence their involvement and capacity to partner with schools when their children transition to kindergarten (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Krieder, 2002).

Engaged families perceive that they have a better understanding of their child's learning styles and a greater awareness of community resources that can both support their families' education, health, and economic outcomes (Morrison et al., 2011). Consequently, involvement in family engagement activities has been linked to improved parental mental health, well-being, and improved parent-child relationships (Forry et al., 2011b). ECE programs, moreover, have been found to be an effective mechanism to help immigrant families manage their transition to the U.S. through connections to social networks and community services. As Vesely & Ginsberg (2011), have observed:

> The most successful types of ECE not only support children in their learning but also focus on teaching parents so they can reinforce their children's learning in their homes. Numerous research studies indicate child-focused, center-based care that also includes a parent component yields the most promising developmental outcomes such that the later benefits to children, families, and society far outweigh the initial financial costs needed to establish these high-quality ECE programs. (p. 19)

Despite these positive outcomes, there is no empirical evidence that parent or family involvement in school-based activities, whether formal participation in governance or informal participation in classroom activities, have any positive impact on improving educational activities at home (Snow, n.d.). However, such engagement is important for strengthening

relationships and building trust between programs and families to create the relational conditions that are essential for ongoing and more substantive engagement in their children's learning (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

Potential outcomes for ECE educators & programs
Qualitative research on educators' perceptions of family engagement has found that they often feel more rewarded in their roles when they have strong, trusting and mutually respectful relationships with families (Morrison et al., 2011; Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2006). As a result, they often experience greater job satisfaction, more confidence and commitment, and a greater sense of self-efficacy as educators (Forry et al., 2011b). Efforts to engage families have been linked to both process benefits and direct benefits for programs and staffs. Among the process benefits that can improve overall program quality include improved communication and improved decision making. Direct benefits for programs and staffs include a better understanding of their families' lives that reduced bias and strengthen their relationships with children and parents, improved outcomes for children, and greater satisfaction among program clients with the services offered (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Hogan, 2011).

A focus on family engagement can help programs engage in ongoing quality improvement efforts and to recognize the importance of recruiting, retaining, and developing staff that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the families they serve (Halgunseth et al., 2013; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011). When educators' beliefs and decision making is informed by positive attitudes toward families they are more likely to engage in activities that build on the strengths and assets families bring to programs, including their cultural and linguistic diversity (Bruner et al., 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Such activities are central to responsive practices and family-sensitive caregiving that has been linked to positive outcomes for both families and children (Forry et al., 2011a). Further, programs that create strong family engagement components increase their capacity to engage in cross-system partnerships that are cooperative, coordinated, and collaborative to enhance children's success across social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains (Sheridan et al., 2011).

EDUCATION > INVOLVEMENT > ENGAGEMENT: CHANGING ROLE OF FAMILIES IN EARLY EDUCATION

Parent involvement in U.S. education goes back to the earliest objectives of public education as a pathway to influence family behaviors through parental education. Influenced by progressive theories of social change, education advocates began to see public education as a way to assimilate immigrant and low-income families into middle-class society. In 1930, a White House Conference on Child Health and Protection proposed parent education as a mechanism to teach parents the norms of society and the proper ways to raise children (Price-Mitchell, 2009). These ideas were reinforced with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of the federal Head Start program in 1965. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, many parent education programs were seen as culturally biased, unduly burdensome, implying blame or behavioral deficit, and interfering with the primary role of parents (Mahoney, Kaiser, Girolametto, MacDonald, Robinson, Stafford, & Spiker, 1999).

Research began to focus greater emphasis on the connections between home and school, and the cultural values of parents as assets rather than deficits (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Price-Mitchell, 2009). New models of family engagement elevated the role of parental involvement in programmatic activities. These models have been described as unidirectional in that they focus primarily on the behaviors of parents at home or at school. Parents were encouraged to adopt a variety of roles, including teacher, decision maker, volunteer, and paraprofessional. There was an expectation that parents would participate in school-based activities, engage in educational activities at home, monitor children during out-of-school time, communicate with educators about what children are learning, and attend school events. The parent-as-participant approach embraced a typology of parental involvement developed by Epstein (2001) that includes six items:

1. *Parenting* – home environments that support achievement
2. *Communicating* – two way information sharing
3. *Volunteering* – helping with planned activities
4. *Learning at home* – parents assisting the learning process at home
5. *Decision making* – parent involvement in school decisions
6. *Collaborating with community* – use of local services and community resources to support children's learning and development

While research began to show that these types of activities have some benefit in terms of outcomes for children, they were often based on parents conforming to the processes and

practices of educational settings. These practices were increasingly seen as insensitive to the challenges facing many families, including poverty, language proficiency, and education level that created barriers to their engagement. Little effort was made to embrace and build upon the strengths of culturally and linguistically diverse families who often feel isolated from the educational settings that their children attend. As a result, lack of participation often reinforces a deficit view toward these families from educators and administrators that can create miscommunication, misunderstandings, and misconceptions about educational and social expectations (Halgunseth et al., 2013). Further, these practices embraced a narrow biological view of "parents" and often failed to recognize the larger continuum of caregivers who influence children's development across multiple contexts—home, community, and school (Halgunseth et al., 2009). As Price-Mitchell (2009) observed:

> The [parent-as-participant] model acknowledges many influences on children's learning, but is primarily unidirectional, exploring the explicit ways in which families help children learn and develop. But the model does not consider the multidimensional or tacit aspects of learning between parents, educators, students, and communities. (p. 12-13)

New multidimensional models of parental involvement began to emerge over the past 15 years that expand upon parental behaviors to include patterns and content of communication, expectations for academic achievement, parental styles that foster trust within the parent-child relationship and the extent to which parents are cognitively and intellectually involved in their child's education. Multidimensional models also stress the role of educational programs to foster culturally and linguistically appropriate practices that facilitate parental engagement (Jeffries, 2012; Jeynes, 2005). This new paradigm stresses engagement over involvement, relational practices that embrace families from a strength-based perspective, and partnership-driven programs that create modes of learning that are co-created and based on trust, shared values, ongoing bidirectional communication, mutual respect, and mutual understanding of needs (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) conceptualize the differences between parent involvement and family engagement in terms of traditional vs. non-traditional approaches. The following table outlines their distinctions:

Table 1: Traditional vs. non-traditional approaches to parental involvement

Traditional	Non-Traditional
Assists families with parenting and childrearing skills, and with creating home conditions to support learning.	Develops reciprocal understanding of schools and families.
Communicates with families about school programs and student progress with two-way communications.	Situates cultural strengths of family and community within the school curriculum.
Includes recruiting efforts to involve families as volunteers and audiences.	Provides parental education that includes family literacy and understanding school community.
Involves families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities.	Promotes parental advocacy that informs and teaches parents how to advocate for their children.
Includes families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through councils and organizations.	Instills parental empowerment through parent-initiated efforts at the school and community level.
Collaborates and coordinates with the work and community-based agencies, colleges and other groups to strengthen school programs.	Implements culturally and linguistically appropriate practices in all aspects of communication.

Source: Table 4 in Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008, p. 13).

In short, multidimensional models of family engagement emphasize "the importance of parent's active power-sharing role as citizens of the education community rather than people who participate only when invited" (Price-Mitchell, 2009, p. 13); they embrace a broad conception of family to include the diversity of caregivers and family members that support children's development and learning; they operate across multiple contexts where children and families live and learn (Hill, 2012; Office of Head Start, 2012); and they are grounded in the capacity of both families and programs to develop their familial and cultural competence to work together toward shared goals of positive outcomes for children and families (Hilado et al., 2013).

Theoretical frameworks & multidimensional approaches to family engagement
Multidimensional approaches to family engagement in early education are built upon cross-disciplinary research that draw upon multiple theoretical frameworks, including ecological theory; social exchange theory; social, cultural, and human capital; and organizational and

relational theories (Forry et al., 2011a & 2011b). Grounded in the work of Bronfenbrenner (1974) and others, ecological theories of child development and learning emphasize the importance of multiple interactive contexts and systems that are both proximal (families, educational settings, communities) and distal (culture and society). These contexts and systems affect children's development and positive outcomes are maximized when there are harmonious interactions between them (Halgunseth et al., 2013). Applying such theories to family engagement in early education focuses on the motivations for parents and programs to work together to support children, and often elevate the social, cultural and linguistic barriers that can exist between programs and families (Halgunseth et al., 2009; Jeffries, 2012; MDRC, 2013; Weiss et al., 2006).

Social exchange theories conceptualize relationship-building as dependent upon an exchange of tangible and intangible resources. Each party in the relationship explicitly and implicitly weigh the costs and benefits of the relationship to affect some desired outcome. Reciprocal social exchange is based on mutual trust and respect, shared responsibility, shared exchange of information, and relational kindness and warmth. In the context of family engagement, ECE programs may provide resources that are perceived as beneficial to families, including a welcoming environment, respectful two-way communication, linkages to community resources, home visits or parent education classes. Providing such resources strengthens relationships, builds partnerships, helps families develop new skills, expands families' social networks, and reduces barriers to involvement (Halgunseth et al., 2009 & 2013).

Within this framework, families provide resources to programs that are essential in supporting children's development and learning. These include: communicating knowledge with educators and caregivers about their children's health, well-being, and learning styles; reinforcing learning that occurs in the program within the home environment; adopting high educational expectations for their children, and participating in both informal and formal program activities. When programs are receptive to the resources that families bring to programs, they are less likely to hold biases toward families and more likely to engage with families from a strength-based perspective (Daniel, 2009; Halgunseth et al., 2009; McGrath, 2007; Morrison et al., 2011). Applied to family engagement in early education, the framework assumes that effective relationship building is dependent upon the social, cultural and human capital that families possess and efforts to strengthen those capacities in both families and programs (Halgunseth et al., 2013):

- *Social capital*: social networks that connect individuals and groups and support how individuals understand and engage with social systems, such as ECE programs. For

many families, the lack of social capital creates disconnection between families and early education networks.

- *Cultural capital*: the cultural knowledge, customs and beliefs that individuals develop through life experience. When ECE programs approach families through an asset-based perspective they are better able to tap those "funds of knowledge" to strengthen program quality.
- *Human capital*: The personal attributes, education, and competencies that support individuals in life. High levels of human capital strengthens families' ability to engage as effective advocates and support their children's development through behaviors that foster social, emotional, and cognitive learning.

When ECE programs intentionally build supportive, mutually-respectful relationships, engage in regular two-way communication, and approach families with a strength-based perspective, they are better able to utilize the existing social, cultural, and human capital that exists within their families while at the same time continually strengthening the capacity of families. Such practices are particularly important for facilitating engagement among immigrants and culturally and linguistically diverse families (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Cannon et al., 2012; Halgunseth et al., 2013; Jor'dan, Wolf, & Douglass, 2012). Many researchers and practitioners argue that ECE programs are particularly effective settings for family capacity building due to their emphasis on supportive relationships, daily opportunities for observation and learning with families, and the fact that families engage with ECE programs as empowered consumers rather than clients or service recipients (Jor'dan et al., 2012).

Drawing on organizational and ecological theories, Douglass (2011) has focused attention on the importance the organizational context for high quality family engagement in early education settings.

Douglass's research has shown that when organizations operate as relational bureaucracies—characterized by leadership that models and supports caring and responsive staff relationships and the use of structures, policies, and processes that promote responsive professionalism—they are more effective engaging families than more conventional bureaucratic contexts. Conventional bureaucracy, conversely, embraces norms of professionalism that stress boundaries, expert knowledge, impartiality and standardized services grounded in scientific, evidence-based practices rather than personal knowledge or relationships (Douglass, 2012).
Table 2: Dimensions of relational and conventional bureaucracies across organizational systems

Components of Organizational Systems	Key Dimensions of Relational Bureaucracy	Key Dimensions of Conventional Bureaucracy
1. People	Staff members reflect the cultures/languages of families served	Staff members may not reflect the cultures/languages of families served.
2. Structures: power	Democratic and participatory structures.	Hierarchical staff structures
3. Structures: relationships	Systems exist to support use of relational competencies for caring, flexible, and responsive approaches to individual needs.	Rigid rules, boundaries, and policies exist to guide uniform approach.
4. Processes: power	Opportunities to share knowledge, expertise and power.	Hierarchy of expertise, knowledge, and power.
5. Processes: relationships	Staff relationships are caring, reciprocal, and respectful. Relational competencies are recognized, valued, and developed.	Staff relationships are formal, hierarchical, and impersonal. Adherence to rules and protocol is recognized and valued.

Source: Douglass, 2011, n.p. Table 1: Theorized patterns of relational and conventional bureaucratic organizations.

The literature on the impact of organizational contexts on the processes and practices of family engagement in ECE program is limited. Douglass (2012) and others (McCormick Center for Early Education Leadership, 2014) have elevated the importance of leadership that has the competencies to model caring relationships and shared power to their staff, and create the structures, processes and practices that sustain and reward relational competencies. Such leaders take on the role of "boundary spanners" capable of facilitating collaboration and learning across contexts and cultures and ensuring that approaches are continually adapting to the environment (Price-Mitchell, 2009). As Jor'dan et al. (2012) have shown, when these skills are present across a program's staff, they are more effective in building protective factors in families—particularly culturally and linguistically diverse families. Such a stance, however, requires building the capacity of educators who work with families everyday:

> The difference is staff's desire to shift and deepen their practice and to change
> practices that may be subtle barriers to closer staff-family connections. The shift

from being child centered to family centered is difficult. It requires professional development, new practices, reinforcement, tools, and new ways of interacting with families and colleagues. (Jor'dan, 2012, p. 23)

Engagement and culturally and linguistically diverse families

Strength-based and family-centered approaches to family engagement inherent in multidimensional models have a particularly relevancy to current efforts to improve outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse families and children (Daniel, 2009; Halgunseth et al., 2009). Miscommunication and bias are often compounded when there are cultural, racial, ethnic and linguistic differences between program staff and families. It is no surprise, then, that current trends in policy and compliance are focused on efforts to strengthen programmatic and organizational cultural competency. Standards and quality indicators for multicultural curricula, recruitment and retention of diverse staff, relevant professional development, and family engagement practices that recognize and value diversity, foster communication and trust, and are guided by philosophy of shared power and responsibility are increasingly the norm (Best & Dunlap, 2012; Bruner et al., 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Stark, 2010).

Research has identified unique obstacles to engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families, but also inherent strengths that these families bring to programs that can support positive outcomes for children. Immigrants and other DLL families are more likely to have multiple risk factors due to language proficiency, poverty, and low parental education levels that negatively affect their engagement with ECE programs. Many of these families hold cultural beliefs that are different from educators regarding language development, discipline, and the perceived value of play versus academic activities (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Best & Dunlap, 2012; Vesley & Ginsberg, 2011). Traditional forms of participation practiced by dual language families, moreover, including storytelling and teaching about culture and ethnic heritage are often not recognized as formal strategies by educators. Due to cultural norms, they are often less likely to question the perceived authority of educators making it more difficult to create mutually-respectful and goal-oriented partnerships (Halgunseth et al., 2013).

Despite these challenges, culturally and linguistically diverse children are often more likely to come from two parent households with strong work ethics and strong connections to a local community. Research has also found that immigrant parents are highly invested in their children's education and have strong feelings about the types of educational experiences they want for their children. Evaluations of early literacy interventions consistently reveal that parents are most interested in practical strategies that teach them how to better engage their

children in learning at home rather than theoretical discussions of why engagement is important (Cannon et al., 2012; Edie & McNelis, 2008; Fehrer, 2014; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2013).

Successful programs serving immigrant and dual language learning families have explicit commitment to connecting families to community services and resources and helping them advocate for their needs. These programs empower parents and families, engage in shared decision making with families, and help families strengthen their capacity to support educational activities in the home (Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011). They are intentional in addressing barriers directly through multilingual services and home visits to improve communication, integrating their families' cultural values into the classroom, and ensuring that opportunities to engage and involve families are sensitive to their individual needs (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

To remain effective, these programs must constantly assess their capacity to engage in culturally competent practices. The National Center on Cultural Competence defines organizational cultural competency as the encompassing an organization's values, principles, behaviors, and policies that allow them to work effectively across multiple cultures. Culturally competent organizations have the capacity to "1.) value diversity, 2.) conduct self-assessments, 3.) manage the dynamics of difference, 4.) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and 5.) adapt to the diversity and cultural contexts of communities they serve" (Goode & Jones, 2006, p. 3). Within this framework, building the capacity for organizational cultural competence is viewed as a developmental process that shifts practices over time through intentional and goal-directed effort. Like any continuous improvement effort, this process requires a management structure, shared vision, an audit of current competence, the development and implementation of an action plan, and ongoing efforts to evaluate outcomes (Goode & Jones, 2006).

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT MODELS AND STRATEGIES

Multidimensional models of family engagement incorporate a variety of strategies, including home visitation programs, parenting classes, and cross-disciplinary partnerships. While they may differ in their focus, programmatic components, and intensity, effective approaches tend to share an emphasis on interventions that are systemic, integrated, and comprehensive (National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement, 2010; Office of Head Start, 2012). Current family engagement approaches also embrace the three core elements that are evident in multi-disciplinary models (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014):

1. *Collaboration* – Engagement is grounded in partnerships where each party has an equal voice and shared responsibility. These partnerships are thought of as goal-directed relationships.
2. *Communication* – Families are recognized as "funds of knowledge" with valuable information, insights and ideas that must be part of the process. Tapping this knowledge requires ongoing, two-way communication.
3. *Sustained engagement* – Engagement with families must be regular and sustained over time.

Dual generation approach
Dual or two-generation approaches to family engagement are not new and as mentioned earlier have been a central component of the Head Start program since its inception in the mid-1960s. The idea—codified in Head Start Performance Standards—is that ECE programs must create the conditions and the opportunities for parents and families to build their skills and competencies to better understand and support their children's development and engage with educators. There are no prescriptive models for programs to follow and even Head Start programs have flexibility and autonomy to develop programs that are most suited to their needs (Chang et al., 2009). Dual generation interventions have an explicit goal to meet the diverse needs of vulnerable families and ensure their educational success and economic self-sufficiency.

Dual generational approaches draw on the experiences of full-service school models to provide a range of education, health, social service and employment services to address a broad spectrum of needs across the cultural and ecological contexts that affect family outcomes (Lombardi et al., 2014; Vesley & Ginsberg, 2011). They take a developmental approach to both children and families and recognize that efforts are mutually-reinforcing and that outcomes accrue over time. The Aspen Institute has recently initiated a dual-generation framework known as ASCEND that incorporates three components to address family needs: 1.) high quality

education for children and post-secondary education and skills training for parents; 2.) economic support and family asset-building as they work toward long term financial stability; and 3.) social capital and networks that build on the existing strength and resilience of families (Lombardi et al., 2014).

Within these models, ECE programs are seen as potential gateways to build relationships and establish partnerships with families. However, there is recognition that most programs do not have the capacity to provide adequate levels of support or the intentional linkages with community-based services that are needed. There is also an understanding that these models require much greater coordination between local and state agencies to ensure systemic alignment and efficient resource allocations. According to the Aspen Institute, "adaptive infrastructure and cohesive systems may be two of the most important factors to ensuring successful implementation and strong outcomes for both children and families" (Lombardi et al., 2014). The Strengthening Families Initiative is one example of a two-generation approach that has created strong connections with ECE programs.

Developed through a partnership between the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy in 2001, the Strengthening Families initiative is a child abuse and neglect prevention program implemented in ECE programs to build protective factors in both parents and children. The initiative is designed to build on the existing positive relationships between ECE program educators and families through parenting classes, coaching, home visits, targeted child supports, and peer network building. Working collaboratively with parents to address needs, set goals, make decisions and identify community resources, ECE educators support parental resilience for more effective parenting. In 2012, 35 states had implemented the Strengthening Families initiative and currently 19 states have integrated the model into statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) standards (Edie & McNelis, 2008; Jor'dan et al., 2012; Lombardi et al., 2014).

Dual capacity-building models
Dual capacity-building frameworks recognize that sustained, collaborative partnerships between families and ECE programs are dependent upon both parties having the skills and competencies to be effective partners. Such approaches are designed to address a central disconnect across many family engagement efforts that focus too much effort on parental behaviors rather than on the behaviors and beliefs of educators or the organizational structures and policies of ECE programs (Douglass, 2011; Fehrer, 2014; Hilado et al., 2013). While programs can do little to address families' language proficiency, economic status or education levels, they can implement programmatic practices to address social and cultural barriers,

including hiring bilingual staff, translating information into other languages, helping families recognize their strengths and assets (Halgunseth et al., 2013).

Current frameworks to support capacity-building across both program staff and families tend to focus on what some researchers refer to as the "4-Cs": 1.) Capabilities (skills and knowledge); 2.) Connections (social networks); 3.) Cognition (beliefs and values); and 4.) Confidence (self-efficacy). Key outcomes for ECE educators include being able to honor and recognize families' funds of knowledge, connect family engagement to student learning, and create welcoming and inviting environment for all families. Outcomes for families include being able to monitor and support their children's learning and development, encourage their children through high expectations, advocate for their children, and to be more effective collaborators and decision makers with program staff (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Research suggests that across family engagement strategies, interventions that focus on dual capacity-building receive the highest community support (Fehrer, 2014). When interventions incorporate intentional approaches to address provider attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors they are more likely to foster family sensitive caregiving. Building the capacity of programs and educators to more effectively engage families requires an emphasis on cultural responsiveness and self-refection on their own beliefs and values. Research is clear that the ability of programs to effectively engage families is highly depended upon how they perceive their families strengths and assets and how broadly they view parental involvement (Forry et al., 2011a & 2011b; Hilado et al., 2013).

Parent and community engagement framework

Head Start's Parent and Community Engagement Framework is an outcome-driven roadmap to improve how programs develop goal-directed relationships and authentic partnerships with families to support children's development and learning. The framework is one of three different frameworks adopted by the Office of Head Start to support school readiness among children and their families.[3] The framework was developed as part of a partnership between the National Center of Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, families, ECE practitioners and subject-matter experts. It provides a two-generation approach to support development and learning of both children and families through an aligned focus on strategic planning, program design and management, assessment and continuous improvement, staff education and development and parent involved governance (Office of Head Start, 2011 & 2012.

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[3] The other frameworks include *Head Start's Revised Framework for Programs Serving Infants and Toddlers and their Families*; and the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework*.

The framework calls for systemic and comprehensive approaches to family engagement in which specific activities to engage families are integrated across multiple programmatic contexts, including program impact areas, outcomes goals, and assessment systems. Positive and goal-oriented relationships are the bedrock of the framework's family engagement activities and central to organizational priorities regarding leadership, program management, continuous improvement, and staff development. The framework also recognizes that family engagement efforts transcend different service areas and activities to effectively integrate with comprehensive health and human services available to children and families (Office of Head Start, 2011). The framework includes seven specific family engagement outcomes that have been linked to positive outcomes for children (National Center of Parent, Family and Community Engagement, n.d.; Office of Head Start, 2011 & 2012). These outcome goals and the strategies associated with them incorporate both dual-generation and dual capacity-building approaches to improving family engagement:

1. *Family well-being*: Families are healthy, safe, and working toward economic self-sufficiency.
2. *Positive parent-child relationships*: Parent-child relationships are warm and nurturing and supportive of children's development and learning.
3. *Families as lifelong educators*: Families engage in learning activities across home, school and community contexts at all times.
4. *Families as learners*: Lifelong learning that supports broader goals in parenting, careers and life is inherent in how families operate.
5. *Family engagement in transitions*: Parents and families are particularly cognizant of the need to support and advocate for their children as they transition to new educational levels and settings.
6. *Family connections to peers and community*: Both formal and informal social networks support learning, well-being and community integration.
7. *Families as advocates and leaders*: Families are engaged in leadership development, program development, planning and decision-making, and advocacy efforts that support children's development and learning.

Strategies associated with effective family engagement

Strategies to engage families that involve an intentional and individualized approach are perceived by educators and parents to be more feasible and effective. Direct engagement through collaborative problem solving, joint planning, collaborative implementation of supports, and ongoing monitoring of success are more effective than simply providing school-based activities that families can participate in (Sjuts, Clarke, Sheridan, Rispoli, & Ransom, 2012). Significantly, facilitating engagement in learning at home, which requires a distinct set of parental and educator attitudes and skills, has the strongest relationship to children's learning outcomes. In contrast, family engagement initiatives that focus on home-school involvement, such as attending conferences, discussing children with teachers, or serving on program governance boards, is not predictive of later child outcomes (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Jeffries, 2012; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010; Snow, n.d.).

Research findings suggest that programs with strong relationship-based organizational structures characterized by strong leadership and supportive work environments support effective educator practices and relationships with children and families (Douglass, 2011). Effective strategies to support strong family engagement share similar characteristics, including a focus on relationship-building that foster trust and collaboration, recognition of the needs and context of family differences to build understanding and respect, and involvement among all stakeholders in a shared partnerships with mutual responsibilities and goals. Effective interventions also focus on the needs of everyone involved, have clear outcomes, and support the value of an inclusive educational culture where everyone has a role to play (Ferguson et al., 2008).

Despite the ubiquitous calls in early education for relational practices and stronger partnerships between families and programs, Sheridan et al. (2012), have shown that the research on family engagement is skewed heavily toward studies of structural interventions designed to affect parental behaviors. The following engagement strategies have some evidence of effectiveness in influencing parental beliefs and behaviors in ways that positively affect children's development and learning:

- *Parenting classes and workshops*: These interventions generally have two elements: 1.) recruitment of parents to participate; and 2.) direct guidance in daily parenting practices based on new knowledge and skills. Classes commonly focus on topics including early learning and development, behavior guidance, health and nutrition, violence prevention, early literacy, and transition to kindergarten (Chang et al., 2009; Gross, Fogg, Webster-Stratton, Garvey, Julion, & Grady, 2003). The research on these types of

interventions is limited because they do not adequately isolate specific intervention elements that have some effect. Also, the research is also influenced by selection bias since parents who decide to take part in classes are often more motivated to be engaged in their child's learning (Chang et al., 2009).

Parents regularly report a strong interest in supporting their children's learning at home, but often mentions not knowing how as a primary barrier. Studies of parental perceptions of their own self-efficacy in supporting their children consistently find that they want more resources to help them understand their child's learning style, improve their behavior, support their literacy and help with homework. Parents, moreover, report the highest degree of interest in activities they can do with their children (Fehrer, 2014). Parent workshops and classes have been linked to improvements in verbal and relational interactions with children that have a positive impact on children's social and cognitive development (Chang et al., 2009).

Interventions that include homework assignments for parents and caregivers—reading to their children using specific pedagogical methods, such as reading sections to children and then actively engaging in dialogue about the story—have been found to be effective. Studies of these types of interventions have found that parental homework can change the content of communication between educators and parents, focusing more on their children's strengths and needs. Engaging ECE educators and parents in joint projects, moreover, has been found to foster higher levels of trust and stronger relationships. Such interventions have also been linked to greater increases in children's vocabulary and understanding of print (Chiu & Ko, 2008; Kim & Riley, 2014).

The existing research on parenting classes have found relationships between participation and positive outcomes on parental behaviors and child outcomes, but most studies acknowledge that there are multiple factors that affect parent behavior, including parent education, English language proficiency, socio-economic status, and child gender. Multivariate analyses of these variables have found that that they have significant effects on outcomes for children (Chang et al., 2009). Researchers argue that classes are most effective when they focus on practical ideas to improve behaviors, support positive child-parent interactions, and teach parents:

1. The importance of positive interactions;
2. Engagement in play;
3. Appropriate activities for literacy and cognitive development; and

4.   How to arrange the home environment to promote development and learning.

- *Home visitation*: Home visitation models provide some form of in-home observational consultation to families designed to positively influence parenting practices and improve overall family health, well-being, and school readiness. Programs vary in their approach, but they generally share three assumptions: 1.) parents and families are critical to children's early development; 2.) early interventions are the most effective; and 3.) it is more effective to bring resources to families rather than have them seek out services (Edie & McNelis, 2008). Research supports home visits as a potentially powerful strategy to more fully engage parents and families in their children's learning when combined with high quality ECE programming. Studies of home visitation interventions associate positive outcomes with both the frequency and duration of home visits and visits that focus specifically on child-centered activities (Halgunseth et al., 2013).

  - *Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)*: Program initiated across 141 early education settings to promote parent involvement through information sharing, targeted resources, and parent training (Best & Dunlap, 2012; Edie & McNelis, 2008). The program is delivered through a mix of home visits and group meetings designed to address barriers to parental engagement, including lack of education, poverty, or social isolation. The program utilizes trained coordinators and community-based home visitors who engage families through role playing and joint educational activities with children in their homes. Evaluations of the program have identified positive outcomes for children (social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive), parents (self-efficacy, knowledge and competence, advocacy, engagement), and communities (social networks, decreased isolation, educational opportunities, activism) (Barnett, Diallo Roost, & McEachran, 2012; Brown & Johnson, 2014).

- *Targeted & individualized engagement*: Targeted engagement initiatives designed to address a specific need, such as early literacy interventions, have been found to be particularly effective in fostering stronger partnerships between families and educators to support children's development and learning (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2010 & 2011). These approaches adopt a variety of strategies, including coaching, teaching teams, workshops and parent classes and home visits. They are designed to increase communication and information sharing, increase support through instruction, behavior modeling, and practice to families, facilitate collaborative problem solving and

decision making, and provide opportunity for targeted interventions that address specific family needs.

Consultations between educators and caregivers are two-way and incorporate a circular process—*meetings>planning>implementation>checking>reconnecting*—to ensure sustained engagement, reflection, and adaptability (Sjuts et al., 2012).

- o *Getting Ready Intervention*: Developed in 2004 by the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools, the Getting Ready Intervention is an ecological, relationship-based approach to school readiness targeting low income families with young children aged 0-5 who are enrolled in ECE programs. Building off the existing research, the intervention is designed to promote parent engagement, warm and sensitive caregiving, support for child autonomy, and active participation in learning. It is also designed to strengthen parental responsiveness, confidence, and competence. Grounded in a strength-based consultative model, the intervention includes 60 minute home visits conducted 5 times a year and ongoing family-educator communication. Teachers engage in a 2-day training to learn program strategies to focus parents' attention on children's strengths, share and discuss observations, discuss and agree upon developmental expectations and goals, provide developmental information, and engage in collaborative brainstorming to solve problems (Sheridan et al., 2010; Sjuts et al., 2012).

  A randomized trial of 217 children in 21 Head Start programs found significant difference between those exposed to the intervention and a control group. Interventions led to improvements in children's language use, reading skills, and writing skills. Children in the treatment group also experienced declines in distractibility, improvements in behavior, enthusiasm, and affection toward parents. Significantly, Spanish-speaking DLL children experienced greater gains than native English speaking children and the effect sizes increased during the second year of the intervention (Clarke, Sheridan, Kim, Kupzyk, Knoche, Ransom, & Sjuts, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2010 & 2012).

- *Cross-disciplinary partnerships/whole community strategies*: Cross-disciplinary and cross-system partnership approaches are designed to build relationships and connect families, educational programs, and community-based resources in a cooperative, coordinated, and collaborative way to enhance children's success across social, emotional, health,

behavioral and academic domains (Sheridan et al., 2011). The Harvard Family Research Project's complementary learning framework embraces this approach to learning across families, ECE programs, schools, out-of-school time programs, higher education, health and social services and community-based organizations. Such efforts are dependent upon linkages across networks and greater alignment of service delivery and resource allocations (Weiss et al., 2006).

Research suggests that efforts to engage families through cross-disciplinary alignment and systemic coordination have both process benefits and direct outcome benefits. Process benefits include improved communication, improved involvement, improved decision making, and improved relationships. Direct outcome benefits include changed behaviors, improved parenting skills, improved program understanding of client strengths and needs, greater satisfaction with services, and improved child outcomes (Best & Dunlap, 2012; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Such coordination has the potential to address existing gaps. As Fehrer (2014) observed, "There is little collaboration between child- and family-serving organizations in the same community, resulting in missed opportunities for sustained, systemic support to families" (p. 1.). These efforts tend to be resource intensive, but they are increasingly popular due to the success of the Harlem Children's Zone and the U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhood program (Best & Dunlap, 2012).

- *Technology*: New mobile and digital technologies are being promoted as potential mechanisms to address barriers to family engagement in ECE programs. ECE providers often report difficulty keeping up with family communication using traditional means, including signs, bulletin boards, or notes sent home with children. Families also report greater constraints on their time and low income and single-parent families in particular often struggle with inflexible work schedules. In its position statement regarding technology use in ECE, NAEYC supports technology use as a potential strategy for strengthening home-program connections (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2012). Used effectively, digital and mobile technologies can enhance two-way communication and create more opportunity for asynchronous communication that provides parents an opportunity to engage at a time and place that is convenient to them. Any technology use should be geared to the specific needs of families and programs should work to understand what kinds of technologies families use at home. Many low income families, for instance, lack internet connectivity but have the capability to text (Daugherty, Dossani, Johnson, & Wright, 2014).

o *Message from Me* – developed by the CREATE Lab at Carnegie Mellon University, the system provides children in ECE programs tools to create digital voice, video and text messages for their parents about what they are doing and learning while in the program. Parents can access the message via the internet. Program developed to help facilitate educational activities in the home that reinforce learning that is occurring in programs (Daugherty et al., 2014).

Despite its limitations, research suggests that ECE educators do have a role to play in educating and engaging parent and families in ways that better equip them to support their children's learning and development. These interventions may be more effective when implemented in a cross-disciplinary way to connect families with other health and human services to address needs and improve outcomes for families. As Kim and Riley (2014) have argued:

With out-of-home care of preschoolers having become the norm in industrialized societies, we might begin to conceptualize the early care and education program as the most widespread institution providing childrearing education to parents . . . parent education programs delivered through existing relationships and settings in the parent's life, characterized by trust and daily interactions, are more likely to be effective than interventions based on a new relationship or new setting. (p. 93)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Research suggests that family engagement in their children's education is highly predictive of academic outcomes and a particularly effective strategy to address academic gaps for low income and culturally and linguistically diverse children (Bryk et al., 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, parent involvement has been a component of national education policy to address issues of social justice, equity, and quality. With funding streams spread across federal departments, approaches have been highly variable with little effort to create systemic, integrated and sustained engagement. Over the past 50 years family engagement policies have embraced practices such as school-based involvement, collective organizing, parent education, joint decision making, and parental choice (Moles & Fege, 2011; National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement 2010).

States vary in their definitions of family engagement and how it is utilized as school improvement strategy. States approach engagement through a variety of methods, including: involving families in development of education policies; improving communication with families; establishing formal compacts between families and educational settings; establishing advisory councils and other boards with families; the dissemination of resources and best practices related to family engagement strategies; and targeted programs for culturally and linguistically diverse families. State policies, moreover, vary widely in terms of their comprehensiveness, level of specificity, incentive structures, and accountability mechanisms. Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia have specific family engagement policies. Of these, only five states (including Massachusetts) have specific councils or boards at the state or district level to shape the development of family engagement policies (Belway et al., 2014).

According to 2008-2009 data collected by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), only 20 states included family engagement requirements in their state-funded pre-K programs. Twelve states allowed for local determination regarding family engagement activities in state-funded pre-K programs and 7 states (including Massachusetts) had no family engagement requirements in state-funded pre-K programs (Stark, 2010). By 2014, 27 states (including Massachusetts) and the District of Columbia had statutes to support family engagement in ECE programs. Of these, only 5 had specific statutory requirements to support capacity-building among families to support their children's early development and learning. Across states, there is a lack of clear, research-based mechanism to support family engagement interventions, evaluations and assessments of child and family outcomes (Belway et al., 2014). As Hogan (2011) has argued:

Current policies and practices at the federal, state, district and school levels do not provide sufficient support to teachers and parents, nor do they hold schools accountable for comprehensively and consistently engaging a diverse range of families. (p. 7)

Advocates and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels are calling for more comprehensive and systemic approaches to family engagement. In 2015, the National Conference of State Legislatures elevated four key family engagement policy options for states, including: 1.) expanding two-generation engagement strategies; 2.) programmatic capacity-building and comprehensive service delivery; 3.) technology supported engagement, and; 4.) home visitation strategies (Weyer, 2015). Current bills in Congress, including the *Family Engagement in Education Act* and the *Parent Education and Family Engagement in Early Education Act* are designed to gain dedicated funding for capacity-building and technical assistance efforts. Specific grants would fund professional development efforts for ECE educators, parent education programs, and other evidence-based approaches to improving family engagement in early education. They would also require evaluations to assess the efficacy of various strategies to improve outcomes for both children and families.[4]

These efforts are trying to create greater coherency and alignment across educational and community systems, establish new standards and accountability frameworks, and ensure adequate resources to support the work. The federal RTT-ELC grant identified family engagement as a core improvement strategy for ECE programs (Harvard Family Research Project, 2012). Massachusetts has used its RTT-ELC grant to foster greater systemic alignment and improve supports for families through 4 key strategies:

1. Expanding, supporting, and sustaining Coordinated Family and Community Engagement programs that work directly with families;
2. Leveraging Head Start resources to train providers in family engagement across the Commonwealth;
3. Promoting statewide public awareness for early education, including communicating in multiple languages;

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[4] The *Family Engagement in Education Act* (S. 622/H.R. 1194) was introduced to the U.S. Senate on March 2, 2015; The *Parent Education and Family Engagement in Early Childhood Care and Education Act* (S. 1674) was introduced to the U.S. Senate on November 7, 2013. Both of these bills are currently in committee, but it is unclear if either will move forward unless Congress votes to reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

4. Building a network across the state to develop and deliver training to family engagement providers using a train-the-trainers model (Driskell, 2014).

According to Driskell (2014), Massachusetts stands out as a leader in family engagement nationwide, in part due to its emphasis on capacity building and cross-agency collaboration. Drawing on partnerships across a broad spectrum of stakeholders engaged in family and children services, the Department of Early Education and Care is coordinating efforts to create a shared language and understanding of child development across sectors, including education, health care, and family services. Coordinated Family and Community Engagement grant recipients are providing direct support to the ECE field through needs identification, access to training and professional development, best-practice dissemination, and linkages and partnerships across local resources (Driskell, 2014; Massachusetts Executive Office of Education website). It is unclear, however, how these efforts are addressing the needs of thousands of center-based ECE programs and home-based family child care programs and the educators who work in these settings.[5]

Increasingly, states are utilizing their QRIS as a compliance tool to ensure programs are adhering to quality standards and provided a roadmap to higher quality and continuous improvement (Bruner et al., 2009). Most states have integrated family engagement quality indicators into their QRIS and their administrator and educator qualification standards. Indicators include knowing and understanding program families, sharing information between staff and families, and program evaluation, accountability, and continuous improvement (McCormick Center for Early Education Leadership, 2014). While these are good steps, they do not provide program staff clear direction on the practices that have some evidence of effectiveness or provide the funding necessary to support capacity-building required for multidimensional models of family engagement.

Massachusetts's QRIS rates a program's family engagement practices in three ways: 1.) reviews of policy and practice documents; 2.) assessments of the strength of specific family engagement professional development, and; 3.) the implementation of measurement tools to assess the satisfaction of families and other stakeholders (Driskell, 2014). Given the current efforts to better engage culturally and linguistically diverse families and children, however, it is significant that a 2009 analysis of QRIS systems across multiple states found that none awarded quality rating points for bilingual speaking teachers, formal educational requirements related to

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[5] Based on 2015 numbers published by the Administration for Children & Families, Office of Child Care (2015), there are 2,844 center-based ECE programs and 6,832 FCC home-based ECE programs.

multicultural education, bilingual education, or the developmental contexts of diverse children, or multicultural curricula (Bruner et al., 2009). States are currently addressing these gaps.

How programs measure their efforts to engage families and use that data to improve their practices is challenging given the current climate of accountability. Happy families and children at pick-up time or a full house for an evening pot luck dinner, while important, do not necessarily translate to improved outcomes for children and families. Programs must address a variety of conceptual issues to define objective indicators of quality that are behaviorally-anchored, shaped by the frequency, intensity, and quality of interactions, sensitive to diverse families, and applicable across diverse ECE settings (Forry et al., 2011a; Hanover Research, 2014). While there are few guidelines for programs, the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (n.d.) suggests "the 4 R approach" as a potential framework:

1. *Responsible* – data should be used responsibly, accurately, timely, efficiently, and effectively
2. *Respectful* – data collection must be sensitive to families' beliefs, values, culture, and needs, and prioritize family input
3. *Relevant* – data must be collected using measures that are valid, culturally sensitive, and relevant to answering specific questions
4. *Relationship-based* – families and community partners should be involved in developing the various measures and metrics, and data should be analyzed and interpreted collaboratively

Implications for research, practice, & policy

Based on the findings from the research and literature reviewed for this report, the following implications for research, practice, and policy are provided:

Research
- Additional research is needed that focuses more attention on interventions designed to support relationship-building between families and educational settings and incorporates a comprehensive set of interventions that create continuities between home and program settings, such as shared decision-making, joint assessment of children's development, and collaborative problem-solving. Research must be conducted with a broader pool of participants, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse families, an expanded set of child and family outcomes, and a rigorous adherence to methodological standards (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2008; Sheridan et al., 2012).

- ECE practitioners need more data on the relationship between strategies and outcomes rather than theoretical treaties on the importance of family engagement. Research suggests that facilitating parent involvement in program governance has little impact on child outcomes, yet such strategies are inherent in Head Start, NAEYC, and most state QRIS standards. To maximize the impact of practices, more research is needed that creates clear linkages between activities and specific outcomes desired by programs, families, and policymakers. Further, most studies of family engagement interventions take place in highly regulated, comprehensive early intervention and pre-k programs (Early Head Start and Head Start) or in public school settings. Consequently, we have little guidance or empirical evidence on effective engagement strategies and outcomes that have some relevance to independent center and home-based family child care.

- The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) should fund an evaluation of current coordinated family engagement policies to better understand how the efforts of the Coordinated Family and Community Engagement program addresses the needs of ECE programs across the Commonwealth. To what extent is the access to training and professional development, best-practice dissemination, and linkages and partnerships across community resources building the capacity of ECE educators to better support families and children and ensure positive outcomes for all families in Massachusetts?

Practice
- Research is clear that program leadership—including administrator education and training and their efforts to create specific structures and procedures that promote caring and responsive professionalism—is essential for the creating the conditions and organizational contexts necessary to engage families in a way that supports family and child outcomes. States should ensure that administrator qualification requirements and professional certification include training and continued education on the organizational structures and practices that support engagement.

- Home-based involvement in children's learning is the strongest predictor of outcomes, including cognitive development, motivation, attention, task persistence, receptive vocabulary skills and low conduct problems. Helping families' build their ability to support learning and development at home is dependent on ECE educators developing strong, collaborative relationships with families grounded in trust, mutual respect, and sustained communication. Consequently, EEC should support efforts to build the

capacity of programs to provide in house workshops with families to teach techniques for joint learning activities that have some evidence on effectiveness.

- Given the inability of most ECE program, including independent center-based and family child care to offer parenting classes and home visitation programs, efforts must be made to expand these services across communities and engage ECE programs as partners to share information and recruit families. Home visitation programs should focus on practical ideas to improve parental behaviors and parent-child interactions, and teach parents and other caregivers hands-on activities to support their children's development and learning.

- The movement towards accountability and professionalism in early education, while an important step in its evolution as a field, presents a number of dilemmas for the field in relation to family engagement. Professionalism is grounded in scientific and evidence-based practices that embrace norms of impartiality, standardized services, expert knowledge and professional boundaries. Some observers have argued that these trends are moving ECE programs from an individualized and flexible approach to one that is more prescribed (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). As Douglass (2011) has argued, "Despite the many benefits of professionalizing the ECE field, the current trend toward formalization and standardization may increase bureaucratic characteristics of early childhood programs, leading to unintended negative consequences for family-centered relational practices" (n.p.)

  To be effective policies and practices must allow for individual, familial, and community values and belief that are contextualized to the specific needs of a particular early educational setting, whether they are Head Start, school based, center-based or home-based. Consequently, family engagement initiatives must be evaluated within the context of individual programs to ensure that efforts and outcome goals are targeted to the needs of specific families. Moreover, efforts should be made to develop professional development and technical assistance opportunities that build on the relational capacities that already exist in the field. With additional guidance, practitioners can improve how they apply their relational skills toward practices that are effective in engaging families in more intentionally in their children's learning and development.

- Provide more explicit guidance and technical assistance on strength-based approaches that require both programs and families to build their capacity to partner to address shared goals. ECE educators need specific training on how to work with parents directly

to assess and analyze their children's development and learning. Practices are most effective when they are individualized to the needs of each family and flexible to incorporate their beliefs and values.

Policy

- Compliance and quality improvement systems, such as QRIS, must incorporate multidimensional indicators of quality (research based) engagement that examine both the efforts of the family engagement interventions and the effects (outcomes) of those efforts (Hanover Research, 2014). Indicators must include measures of the family engagement that are supported in the literature, including:

    o Programs support, welcome and have an expectation of family involvement in all decision making that affects their children's learning and development.
    o Relationships between programs and families are grounded in sustained, bidirectional communication that is culturally and linguistically appropriate to the families served.
    o The skills, knowledge, and cultural values of families are integrated into the learning experience.
    o Programs directly help families in creating supportive home learning environments.
    o Continuous and comprehensive systems for intentional family engagement are integrated across all programmatic activities, procedures, and organizational structures.

- Federal legislation to facilitate family engagement must focus on providing clear guidance and incentives for programs to build their capacity for family-centered, strength-based programming and invest in research-based and innovative pilot practices locally. Resources must be allocated to address the key levers of effective family engagement:

    o Leadership
    o Capacity building
    o Training and professional development
    o Innovation
    o Learning and accountability

- Data policies must move beyond compliance with state or federal reporting to focus more on providing families and educators actionable data to develop shared goals, monitor progress, and implement individualized interventions that support the learning, development and well-being of children and families. Data systems should provide long-term pathways to support family engagement across the "cradle-to-career" continuum that address mutual goals rather than discreet checklists of activities.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to better engage families through multidimensional approaches and foster greater cross-agency collaboration to support families are central to state and federal educational policies to improve outcomes across the early education through K-12 continuum (Belway et al., 2014; Driskell, 2014). These efforts are grounded in research that supports the contention that when parents and families are actively engaged in their children's learning and development and have strong, collaborative partnerships with educators built on mutual trust, respect and shared responsibilities, children are more likely to thrive. Early education plays an important role, not only in the development and learning of young children, but in the habits and behaviors of families that can have a long term effect on their educational outcomes and overall well-being. The experiences families have and the choices they make for their young children are formative in how they perceive their ongoing role in their children's growth and learning as they move through early education, into K-12 settings, and through college and careers.

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