



FAMILY INVOLVEMENT & SUPPORT: Essential Components for Effective Early Childhood Care and Education Programs

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As Massachusetts charts a new course for early childhood care and education, family involvement and support must be established as vital components of a high quality system. Research has demonstrated consistently and unequivocally that the most effective early education programs work closely not only with children, but also with their families. Indeed, both instructional and intensive family supports were imbedded components of the landmark studies most commonly cited to support increased investment in quality preschool.¹

While focusing on academic experience in early childhood programs is important, it is not sufficient to achieve the results for children intended by the Massachusetts legislature. A parent (broadly defined as family) has the potential to have more influence on a child's educational foundation and motivation than any other person or experience in their life.² If we are to achieve results comparable to the landmark studies, then our preschool programs must have components that are reasonably similar to those studies.

Regretfully, family support is a neglected feature of the newly expanding early learning programs in Massachusetts. To consider how Massachusetts might strengthen the current early care and education system, we reviewed the literature, interviewed 60 key stakeholders across the state, and built upon our professional experiences and expertise. Based on this work, we recommend three areas of focus that can help us build a more effective practice: Program Administration; Early Childhood Educator Training; and Family Awareness and Participation.

Program Administration Must Include the Voices of Families

Successful family partnership begins with program administration.

- Programs must have a **VISION** for parent involvement within their policies.
- Administrators must **TAKE ACTION**. For example, having parents on advisory committees is good way to exchange ideas, identify concerns and meet family needs.
- Families must be **PARTNERS**. Hone personal relationships with families and treat them as collaborators in the education process.
- **EXPECTATIONS** must be **CLEAR AND MEASURABLE**. Involve parents, early educators, students, businesses and other key stakeholders in policy development.
- The system must ensure **ADEQUATE FISCAL SUPPORT** for activities that will strengthen parent participation and for opportunities that will help staff to develop skills in partnering with parents. Landmark studies in early education included significant support for parent activities such as home visits, family resource rooms and advisory committees.

Two examples illustrate the successful implementation of the above strategies:

- In Washington State, the Federal Way school board explicitly recognizes parents as the "primary" authority and decision-makers. The district's strategic plan and written policies establish the expectation that all school personnel develop, implement, and maintain effective family involvement programs.³
- For the past 40 years, the federal Head Start Performance Standards establish both parent education and leadership opportunities. Parent education includes child development, parenting skills, nutrition, and budget management. Parent Policy Councils have decision-making responsibilities for personnel, budget, field trip policies, classroom curriculum, grant requests, and overall program policy and operations.

All of these efforts redefine the relationship with parents not as outsiders, but as partners in their child's education—not as a problem, but as part of the solution.

RECOMENDATION #1: All early care and education programs must include families in the development and evaluation of overall policies and practices of the program through a written manual that outlines family involvement opportunities and expectations, including, but not limited to a parent advisory board that meets at least three times per year.

Early Educators' Training Must Focus on Families

Professional staff should connect families with the educational setting and establish the tone that welcomes the child's family as part of daily classroom life. This effort should also provide both the child and the family with the skills to continue to thrive in an educational setting. Our interviews and experience point to a lack of knowledge and skills that early educators need in order to facilitate family involvement. Nevertheless, early educators expressed a strong desire for training to support their efforts to accomplish this goal. Such training would:

- **TEACH EARLY EDUCATORS TO SHARE POWER**, to create a greater sense of involvement by families. This will not be easy, but it is a change that will be welcome by both parents and staff.
- **OFFER STRATEGIES IN WORKING WITH FAMILIES**. Family centered practice has yet to hold a central role in either the pre-service or in-service teacher education curricula. Associate, bachelor and graduate degree programs should all include a family centered competency. Current staff should be able to attain this competency through the continuing education (CEU) process.
- **EMPHASIZE A WELCOMING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT**. Some examples are easy to implement such as, routinely scheduled meetings and regular communication that is respectful of both parties' time constraints and cultures. Others may be more difficult, including parent-staff education classes and parental participation on governing boards.

RECOMENDATION #2: New and existing teaching and program staff must possess or develop the skills and knowledge to work effectively with families. This will require making Family Centered Practice a core competency for all early education staff. Qualifications must include a minimum of 8-12 college level credits (or equivalent training hours) in the subject areas of Family Dynamics, Communication or Family Centered Practice. Existing program staff must participate annually in ongoing credit hours in the subject area.

Programs Must Build Family Involvement

Families differ greatly in their willingness, ability, and availability for involvement in their child's educational activities. Families most often participate within their home, e.g. reading and helping homework, or attending school activities and meetings. Research has found that the majority of families engage in a limited range of activity including less active and informal forms of involvement, mostly conducted at home.⁴

To strengthen family involvement in Massachusetts early care and education programs, the programs must:

- **ACKNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS** about what "family involvement" means. Some expect the program to be the principal educator of their children whilst families play a relatively minor supporting role. Other families see themselves as an important part of the educational team.
- **STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION**. Facilitate a reciprocal home-program communication by regularly sharing information about activities and issues affecting the children.

Use multiple means of communication including: daily messages, a calendar of events, phone calls, and home visits.

- **ENCOURAGE PROGRESS**. Help families build on what they currently do and encourage them to increase the frequency and level of their involvement.
- **TEACH AND SHARE CHILD DEVELOPMENT**. A family's perception of their own competency in parental skills and child development knowledge greatly influences their extent of involvement. Programs should offer training for parents around topics in child development.
- **CELEBRATE FAMILY DIVERSITY**. Interactions with families must recognize and honor the importance of responding to the uniqueness of all families, including culture, language, family structure, gender, religion, education, and socioeconomic background.

RECOMENDATION #3: All early childhood education programs should establish services that promote a strong reciprocal relationship with families that exists from the first contact and is maintained throughout their child's early childhood education experience. This family-staff connection must be respectful of and encourage the family's role in the education process and must include the families' perspective of their child's development.

SUMMARY

The good news is that Massachusetts is well on its way to improving and expanding quality early care and education for all children in the state. In order to maximize the impact, we now must recognize that the proven benefits of early education result from a blend of education and family involvement. Our state legislative and administrative structures must include the essential integration of family support in any effort to support young children.

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References

- 1 Kreider, H. Getting Parents "Ready" for Kindergarten: The Role of Early Childhood Education. Harvard Family Research Project. Harvard University: Cambridge, MA. April 2002.
- 2 Refer to the Perry Preschool Study, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child Parent Centers study as examples renowned for achieving extraordinary results for children in areas of lower special education rates, higher graduation rates, increased employment, and higher income levels.
- 3 Hendrickson, L. Federal Way District School Board. Federal Way, Washington, D.C. Policy #2180, March 1997.
- 4 Russell, K. Granville, S. Parents' Views on Improving Parental Involvement in Children's Education. George Street Research, Scottish Executive 2005, www.scotland.gov.uk.

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