



# Policy Brief

## High School

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### **Strengthening Parents' Ability to Provide the Guidance and Support That Matter Most in High School**

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August 2008

#### **Introduction**

A convincing body of evidence confirms what common sense suggests: The higher the expectations of parents, the steadier their guidance and support, and the greater their sense of partnership with teachers and other staff, the better their child's chances of academic success.

Perhaps at no stage of schooling is parental involvement more vital than in the upper grades. Regardless of a family's socioeconomic status or background, young people with involved parents are more likely to attend school regularly, earn a high school diploma and continue to postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup> But survey findings make clear that too few parents understand — let alone provide — the kind of involvement and support that matter most during students' high school years. And relatively few state policies give schools and districts guidance on how to meaningfully involve parents of secondary-level students in their child's education.

This policy brief reviews:

- Research on the types of parental involvement that positively impact high school students
- State and local policies and practices that reflect and reinforce a commitment to parental involvement
- The parental involvement component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

#### **Parent involvement matters — And parents of teens need to know that**

Research suggests that regardless of a family's educational, racial or socioeconomic background, students whose parents are actively engaged in their education — from the early grades on, both at home and at school — are more likely to reap numerous academic and social benefits. Yet a 2002 synthesis of research on “the influence of family and community involvement on student academic achievement and other outcomes” found that not all forms of parental involvement at the high school level are equally effective. During the high school years, the most effective types of parental involvement are those that help steer teens' academic decisions.<sup>2</sup> And research suggests that the greatest achievement outcomes are realized when parents provide their high school-aged children with the following types of guidance:

- Communicating and upholding high expectations
- Providing structure, insisting on responsibility, and paying close attention to students' progress
- Helping young people identify, explore and understand the requirements of post-high school education, training and employment options
- Assisting their child with homework, course selection, test preparation, and financial aid applications.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it is troubling that a majority of American parents see themselves as less obliged — and/or no longer able — to provide academic guidance and support once their children reach high school. In a 1998 nationwide survey of parents and teachers by Public Agenda, only 30% of parents agreed with the

statement that “less parental involvement in later grades means a student’s academic work will suffer,” while 63% of parents responded that less parental involvement in a child’s education in the upper grades is essentially positive: “a sign the student is learning to be independent and to manage school on their [sic] own.”<sup>4</sup> Yet in a 2006 survey by Civic Enterprises, LLC, many young high school dropouts indicated their parents had limited communication from or proactive involvement with their school until they were on the verge of leaving school; seven out of 10 supported more parental involvement.<sup>5</sup> These and other findings underscore the need for raising public awareness that supporting students’ academic and social development during the high school years is a collaborative enterprise.

Among the defining features of high-performing schools is that parent involvement is viewed not as an impediment or an add-on, but rather as a vital force for change and improvement. In a review of several dozen studies on family/school/community connections over the past 20 years, researchers Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp found that:

When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement. And when families and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, studies suggest that school districts make positive changes in policy, practice and resources.<sup>6</sup>

## **Policies and practices that reflect and reinforce a commitment to parent involvement**

Several state policy levers and local practices hold the potential not only to increase parental involvement at the high school level, but also to improve the quality of that involvement. These policies seek to:

- Develop and implement a formal parental involvement policy
- Reach out to and communicate with parents on academic expectations
- Recognize and accommodate parents’ needs
- Develop the capacity of school staff to engage and interact with parents
- Develop parents’ capacity to interact and engage with fellow parents, school staff and community members
- Develop policy benchmarks and evaluate the impact of parental involvement.

### ***Developing and implementing a formal parent involvement policy***

Parents of high school students may be less engaged in their children’s learning simply because they don’t know what activities provide meaningful supports for their adolescent. As state and local policymakers consider parental involvement policies, such elements should be drafted, implemented and regularly reviewed in partnership with parents. These policies should clearly delineate the respective roles and responsibilities of parents and school staff and specify the actions they will take together to improve students’ achievement and readiness for postsecondary education and employment.

**Ohio** is one of 17 states that requires all districts, local boards or schools to implement a parental involvement policy.<sup>7</sup> State statute directs all districts to develop parental involvement policies to support “consistent and effective communication” between schools and families, and to “provide the opportunity for parents ... to be actively involved in their” child’s education. Parents must be informed of the importance of their involvement in their children’s educational success.<sup>8</sup>

Legislation directs the **South Carolina** state superintendent of education to “promote parental involvement as a priority for all levels from pre-K through grade 12, with particular emphasis at the middle and high school levels where parental involvement is currently least visible[.]”<sup>9</sup> The state’s parental involvement policy is also unique in that districts must communicate to all parents what is expected of them:

- Modeling desirable behavior, and stimulating thought and curiosity
- Communicating and upholding high expectations for academic achievement

- Monitoring and checking homework, and ensuring school attendance and punctuality
- Attending parent-teacher conferences and, when possible, other school events
- Building partnerships with teachers to promote successful school experiences.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Reaching out to and communicating with parents on academic expectations***

Research suggests that one of the most vital ways parents can be involved during the high school years is by setting high academic expectations of their children and supporting them in achieving those expectations.

**Ohio** statute requires all local boards of education to inform parents about techniques, strategies and skills to use at home to enhance their children's academic success, and how and when to assist their children in classroom learning activities.<sup>11</sup>

**Florida** law directs the department of education to develop guidelines for all districts to use in developing a parent guide that is disseminated to all parents. The aim of the parent guide is to inform parents of what they need to know about their child's educational progress and how they can help their child to succeed in school. Required elements of the guide are: information on their child's progress toward meeting state and local "expectations for academic proficiency," and "[o]pportunities for parents to learn about rigorous academic programs that may be available for their child, such as honors programs, dual enrollment, advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, ... Florida Virtual High School courses, and accelerated access to postsecondary education."<sup>12</sup> Legislation specifies that the Florida Partnership for Minority and Underrepresented Student Achievement must work with districts to provide parents with information on Advanced Placement (AP) and other advanced courses, on the value of these courses in preparing for college-level curricula and postsecondary admissions and financial aid opportunities, and on procedures students must follow to sign up for such courses.<sup>13</sup>

Every Florida district must also create and disseminate a checklist of what parents can do to strengthen their involvement in their child's educational progress. The checklist must be distributed annually to all parents and must "focus on academics, especially reading, high expectations for students, citizenship, and communication."<sup>14</sup>

Research indicates students are more likely to seek information about college preparation from their parents than from teachers or counselors, and yet many parents do not know where to turn for this information. Parental outreach efforts at the high school level should seek to address this information gap. A growing number of states require all high school students, in conjunction with a parent and school staff member, to develop and annually update a personal graduation plan that sets out the courses a student will take each year of high school to be prepared for the student's stated postsecondary or career goals. A small but growing number of states have gone one step further, adopting policies to provide all parents of high school students with information on their student's progress toward completion of graduation requirements, the college admissions requirements in their state, current tuition costs at public postsecondary institutions, financial aid options and procedures for filling out financial aid applications. The ECS policy brief "[Involving Families in High School and College Expectations](#)" offers greater detail on these state efforts.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Recognizing and accommodating parents' needs***

Nearly half of the recent dropouts in the 2006 survey by Civic Enterprises indicated that their parents' work schedules prevented them from keeping up with what was happening in their child's school.<sup>16</sup> State policy should encourage schools to offer as much flexibility as possible in addressing parents' needs and concerns regarding involvement. Schools should be urged to create options for parents who work fulltime, or for whom transportation or childcare are a problem. Among the means of providing this flexibility:

- **Scheduling parent/staff meetings.** Teachers and principals should be willing to "[hold] meetings and [have] office hours at convenient times for parents," including mornings, lunchtime, evenings and weekends, or even to schedule home visits, when necessary.<sup>17</sup>
- **Incorporating parent resource centers and/or parent involvement advocates.** A school or district can select "parent involvement advocates" and/or create and staff a "parent resource center" that promotes and coordinates all parent involvement activities, support and information.

**Arkansas, Louisiana and South Carolina** utilize this approach as part of their overall involvement policies.

- **Coordinating bus or carpool service** to and from school parent involvement activities.
- **Providing childcare** during school parent involvement activities.
- Holding meetings and other activities at **locations that are easier for all parents to get to**, such as a community center.

Addressing such barriers demonstrates school commitment to maximizing parent participation, which can help overcome some parents' reluctance to be involved.

Research suggests that Asian, Latino and African American parents of high school students are as active in their children's education as White parents, but in somewhat different ways.<sup>18</sup> Thus it is important that school-based parental involvement programs be sensitive to these differences. **South Carolina's** parental involvement and best practices training programs offer one example: by statute, programs must include "practices that are responsive to racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity[.]"<sup>19</sup>

For schools serving large populations of students and parents whose first language is not English, translation of outreach materials is critical, as is the availability of language interpreter services for school/teacher meetings and forums. If 15% or more of students in a public school speak a single native language other than English, **California** requires all communications to parents by the school or district to be in both English and the native language, and provides that family responses may be either in English or the native language. To evaluate the quality and effectiveness of these efforts, the state department of education must "determine the types of documents and languages a school district translates to a primary language other than English, the availability of these documents to parents or guardians who speak a primary language other than English and the gaps in translations of these documents."<sup>20</sup>

### ***Developing the capacity of school staff to engage and interact with parents***

Preservice training and professional development that heighten teachers' awareness of the positive impact of parental involvement in the upper grades, and that improve the ability of teachers and other staff to work with parents, are also critical. Yet a 1997 Harvard survey found that many state teacher certification requirements "did not mention working with parents or families" and that certification requirements that did include preparation on family involvement often applied only to candidates for elementary-level certification.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, many secondary-level teachers lack the preparation, strategies and experiences to successfully engage parents, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

A 2004 Harvard analysis advises, "[P]reservice teachers should have a comprehensive picture of the many benefits of ... broadly defined parent involvement, as well as be aware of key areas that can make them more effective when working with students and their families." Such training and professional development can have strong ripple effects, especially at the high school level, where parental involvement is not a presumed component of schooling. As the Harvard analysis suggests, "[R]equired courses [in teacher preparation programs] about adolescent development should debunk long-standing myths and inform prospective middle and high school teachers of the power that parent involvement has to positively affect achievement. Empowered teachers will empower parents to be involved and expect more from their adolescents. Empowered parents can inspire their teens to do better at school and in life."<sup>22</sup>

**Arkansas and South Carolina** mandate parental involvement training for teachers, administrators and school staff. Arkansas requires teacher preparation programs to incorporate information on "the importance of parental involvement and how to successfully encourage parents to be partners in their child's education."<sup>23</sup> Inservice teachers must complete at least two hours of professional development "designed to enhance understanding of effective parental involvement strategies," while administrators must complete at least three hours of professional development on "effective parent involvement strategies" and "[t]he importance of administrative leadership in setting expectations and creating a climate conducive to parental participation."<sup>24</sup> South Carolina, meanwhile, directs the state board of education to establish criteria for staff training on research-based school efforts demonstrated to increase parental involvement.<sup>25</sup> Teacher and principal preparation programs in the state must incorporate parent

involvement training that addresses key issues such as establishing and maintaining parent-friendly school settings, raising awareness of community resources that strengthen families and help students succeed, and other topics appropriate for fostering parent/teacher relationships.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Developing parents' capacity to engage and interact with fellow parents, school staff and community members***

The flip side to developing teacher capacity is developing parents' leadership capacity. Recognizing the influence strong parent leaders can have on not only improving schools and increasing student achievement, but also getting other parents more involved, **Kentucky** has focused on developing parent leaders in schools. The [Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership](#), founded in 1997 by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, offers a variety of programs aimed at bringing together parents, teachers, community members and school administrators for training, information and experiences that help them work as partners to raise student achievement. More than 1,300 parents across the state have participated in institute-sponsored programs and activities designed to strengthen their leadership skills and make them "effective advocates for improved education and higher achievement for all students."

**Maryland** has likewise established a [Parent Leadership Institute](#). Since 2003, more than 100 parents from across the state have completed the federally funded institute's six-day program, which focuses on strengthening leadership skills and broadening parents' understanding of Maryland's standards-based assessment system and NCLB requirements.

Any parent of a public school student in the state is eligible to apply for the program. The application process is competitive, with approximately 20 parents chosen to participate free of charge in each session. Targeted for selection are parents of students who attend Title I schools and schools in need of improvement.

### ***Developing policy benchmarks and evaluating impact***

Ideally, a parental involvement policy also should include (1) guidelines for measuring whether it is working and (2) a regular evaluation component. The evaluation should review both the content and effectiveness of the policy, including an assessment of how well it is contributing to improving academic quality, and barriers to increased involvement and ways to address them, especially for parents who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. A policy should also address the question, "Evaluation against what?" to help ensure that policy goals have been clearly stated.

**Louisiana** directs the state board of education to annually evaluate the effectiveness of parent involvement policies through quarterly meetings convened by the state superintendent of education, including a review of problems in increasing the participation and involvement of parents in the learning of their children and in the life of the schools. From such meetings, the board must generate suggestions and recommendations.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Parental Involvement Component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act**

The NCLB Act requires schools receiving Title I funds to have a formal parent involvement policy that is developed, implemented and regularly reviewed and updated in partnership with parents. The law also mandates that schools identify and overcome barriers to involvement, and that districts help schools build the capacity to effectively implement the policy.

Many observers contend the full potential of this NCLB requirement has yet to be realized, saying this is primarily due to many schools' unwillingness to "make it an educational priority," coupled with a lack of enforcement. In addition, since relatively few high schools receive Title I funds, far more elementary than secondary schools are required to develop the parent involvement policies mandated by NCLB.

The Prichard Committee's [Center for Parent Leadership](#) recommends that for state policymakers, it is important to monitor how districts carry out the Title I parent involvement requirements and to ensure that

districts “have strong, up-to-date parent involvement policies” that parents had a role in developing and approving. The center additionally suggests that states can provide resources, training and technical assistance to schools and districts to support the policies, such as through professional development, multicultural resources and mini-grant programs.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

While research undeniably demonstrates the positive impact of parental involvement at the high school level, far too many parents of teens feel their involvement is either unnecessary or beyond their capacity to provide. Well-considered state policy supports can demonstrate to all parents the need for their continued support in the upper grades, and can ensure they receive the information they require to offer their child meaningful and effective assistance.

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## ***Equipping Education Leaders, Advancing Ideas***

<sup>1</sup> Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. [report online] (Austin: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002, accessed 5 August 2008); available from SEDL: <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>2</sup> Catsambis, Sophia, *Expanding Knowledge of Parental Involvement in Secondary Education: Effects on High School Academic Success*. [report online] (Baltimore: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, 1998, accessed 5 August 2008); available from CRESPAR: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report27.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Public Agenda, “Playing Their Parts: What Parents and Teachers Really Mean by Parental Involvement,” Public Agenda, 1999, <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parent/parent6.htm> and <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parent/parent6d.htm>, (accessed April 18, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio, Jr., Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. [report online] (Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, LLC, 2006, accessed 6 August 2008); available from Civic Enterprises: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>6</sup> Henderson & Mapp, 8

<sup>7</sup> Kyle Zinth, *Parental Involvement in Education*. [report online] (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2005, accessed 4 August 2008); available from ECS: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/59/11/5911.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>8</sup> OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 3313.472

<sup>9</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-28-150

<sup>10</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-28-170 AND 59-28-180

<sup>11</sup> OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 3313.472

<sup>12</sup> FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1002.23

<sup>13</sup> FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1007.35

<sup>14</sup> FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1002.23

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Dounay, *Involving Families in High School and College Expectations*. [report online] (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2006, accessed 16 April 2007); available from ECS: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/70/37/7037.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>16</sup> Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison, 9-10

<sup>17</sup> Appleseed, *It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act*. [report online] (DC: Appleseed, 2006, accessed 6 August 2008); available from Appleseed: <http://appleseednetwork.org/Portals/0/Documents/Publications/TransfromEduNoChildLeft.pdf>; Internet.

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<sup>18</sup> Henderson & Mapp

<sup>19</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-28-140

<sup>20</sup> CAL. EDUC. CODE § 48985

<sup>21</sup> Angela M. Shartrand, Heather B. Weiss, Holly M. Kreider, M. Elena Lopez, *New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers for Family Involvement*. [report online] (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1997, accessed 24 April 2007); available from the U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NewSkills/chptr2.html>; Internet.

<sup>22</sup> Harvard Family Research Project, *Research Digest: Adolescence: Are Parents Relevant to Students' High School Achievement and Post-Secondary Attainment?*. [report online] (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006, accessed 25 April 2007); available from Harvard: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/digest/adolescence.html>; Internet.

<sup>23</sup> ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-15-1705

<sup>24</sup> ARK. CODE ANN. § 6-15-1703

<sup>25</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-28-130

<sup>26</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-28-140

<sup>27</sup> LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 17:406.2

<sup>28</sup> Anne Henderson, Bonnie Jacob, Adam Kernan-Schloss, Bev Raimondo, *The Case for Parent Leadership*. [report online] (Lexington: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2004, accessed 25 April 2007); available from the Prichard Committee: <http://www.centerforparentleadership.org/case.pdf>; Internet.