

PREPARING YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS: BEST PRACTICES IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

By Erika Beltrán

Summary

Evidence demonstrates positive benefits for student learning when parents and families are engaged in their children’s education. For young Latino* children, many of whom have parents with limited English language proficiency and low levels of education, parent engagement strategies can strengthen their school success and achievement. Early learning programs have the unique potential to equip parents with the tools to better support their children’s learning and success. This policy brief discusses the opportunities and challenges associated with family engagement strategies, highlights a best practice in the field, and concludes with policy recommendations for bringing these programs to scale.†

Introduction

A growing body of evidence shows that family engagement yields positive results for young children by improving their levels of school readiness and supporting their healthy cognitive and social development.¹ To be effective, family engagement programs should support parenting techniques, strengthen home–school relationships, and promote learning between parents, children, and schools. Most importantly, these programs should help families understand the importance of nurturing adult–child relationships that reinforce young children’s early learning and emotional well-being.

Family engagement is particularly important for Hispanic children, who, prior to school entry, already face several challenges such as low levels of maternal

* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

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education and linguistically isolated* households. Low levels of maternal education are tied to a child's exposure to language and vocabulary development; in 2008, more than two-fifths (42%) of Latino children under age 18 had mothers who did not graduate from high school.² Additionally, nearly one-quarter (23%) of young Hispanics lived in linguistically isolated households.³ Although the vast majority of Latino children learn English as their primary language, many have parents who are unable to provide them academic support or effectively interact with school systems because of their limited English proficiency. Compounding these challenges is that almost three-fifths (59%) of Hispanic children are from low-income families, twice the proportion of White children (27%).⁴

Latino children are at a clear disadvantage for school success well before stepping foot in the classroom, making it all the more important to ensure that they have access to comprehensive early learning programs. Research shows that a positive preschool education experience narrows the school-readiness gap and affords children lasting educational benefits.⁵ Effective family engagement strategies are a key piece of designing high-quality early learning programs.

Background

Constructive family engagement leads to increased academic motivation, grade promotion, and healthy socioemotional skills for young children, including those from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁶ Children, parents, and schools all benefit when programs are effective in helping families create a home environment that promotes learning, expresses high expectations, and supports high levels of family engagement.

The most effective family engagement strategies go well beyond traditional parent participation in school activities, such as volunteering in the classroom, which can be challenging for parents who have limited English proficiency or time constraints due to demanding work schedules (see Box 1). Successful parent engagement programs work closely with parents to meet their diverse needs and expectations, and build off of families' strengths to help parents support their children's learning and development. These programs are characterized by trust, ongoing communication, mutual respect, and attention to each party's needs.⁷

Unfortunately, not all early learning programs are successfully engaging Hispanic and English language learner (ELL) families. In 2006, the Government Accountability Office conducted a study that sought to understand how the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services could improve access to early learning and childcare programs for families with limited English proficiency. Feedback from focus groups revealed that mothers with limited English proficiency "faced multiple challenges, including lack of awareness, language barriers during the [childcare program] application process, and difficulty communicating with English-speaking providers."⁸ Given the growing presence of Hispanic and ELL children in classrooms across the country, it is essential that early learning programs employ strategies that effectively engage families.

In many cases, programs with limited resources can build partnerships with community-based organizations that have expertise in working with Latino and ELL children and families. These types of partnerships are evident throughout the

* Linguistically isolated households are described as homes in which no one above the age of 14 speaks English well.

Box 1. Components of Family Engagement Programs

Family engagement must be ongoing, reciprocal, and strengths based, and should:

- Encourage family participation
- Provide consistent, two-way communication
- Allow space for families to share their knowledge, skills, and culture
- Extend learning activities into the home
- Help parents develop a home learning environment
- Provide training to staff to help them fully engage with families

Source: Linda C. Halgunseth and Amy Peterson, *Integrated Literature Review, Family Engagement* (Washington, DC: National Association of Young Children, 2009).

country and are promising models for leveraging community resources to engage families. One such example is in Dallas, Texas where NCLR Affiliate, The Concilio, has established strong partnerships with the Dallas Independent School District (DISD), charter schools, and early learning programs.

Best Practice: The Concilio

The Concilio was formed in 1981 to improve health and educational outcomes of Hispanic families living in Dallas, and the organization's programs serve more than 10,000 individuals each year. The Concilio is especially well-known for its parent engagement program, Parents Advocating for Student Excellence (PASE). Recognizing the importance of family engagement in Latino children's school success, The Concilio worked in partnership with DISD to establish PASE in 2002. The program was initially implemented in just three schools, but it has grown significantly

and now operates in 29 schools and four prekindergarten sites.

Community partnerships have been essential to The Concilio's success and have allowed it to serve thousands of families. PASE's partnership with DISD helped The Concilio reach and engage parents who have young children enrolled in schools and programs that need additional support. Once program sites are selected, The Concilio identifies a primary contact who serves as an onsite support for setting up meetings and workshops and as a liaison between the program site and The Concilio. In addition, The Concilio employs a strategy with schools and programs to collect and track information regarding parent participation in school activities, parent-teacher conferences, and student achievement data.

To recruit participants for the PASE program, The Concilio reviews enrollment rosters to identify parents of preschool children (see Box 2). Recruitment specialists, who are often PASE program graduates, call all parents identified and invite them to an orientation session. The Concilio staff conduct intensive outreach the week prior to the orientation session by distributing bilingual pamphlets and talking directly with parents. At the orientation, recruiters explain the purpose of the program, in Spanish, and inform parents that childcare will be available during each session. Several staff members are present to encourage attendees to register for the parent engagement program then and there.

Parent participants attend a series of 30 meetings over the course of the academic school year. A new lesson and activities are introduced every week, and parents are given the opportunity to put their knowledge into practice by completing homework assignments and reporting their progress at

Box 2. PASE Curriculum

Weeks 1–6: The Art of Storytelling

These meetings emphasize the importance of early literacy and early exposure to language and reading. This part of the curriculum teaches parents about the importance of a language-rich environment and emphasizes how to build literacy skills in any language.

Week 7: College Day

Participants travel together to a local community college to learn about institutions of higher education and to better understand how to support their children's success from preschool through college. This early exposure to a college setting equips parents with basic knowledge about higher education and helps them set high expectations for their children.

Weeks 8–14: Coaching Skills

During these sessions, parents learn coaching skills to use in monitoring and encouraging their children's education in math and reading. These sessions often feature classroom teachers or education specialists and help parents understand how they can maintain their native language while supporting their children's learning.

Weeks 15–29: Learning about Your Child's School

The final sessions are focused on helping parents transition their children from preschool to the regular K–12 system. Parents become familiar with how the school system functions, assuming leadership roles in school, contributing to decision-making, and learning how to express their needs in a school setting.

Week 30: Graduation

The graduation is a celebration for all parent participants and their families.

subsequent meetings. Assignments range from scheduling meetings with teachers to reading with a child at home. These activities promote continued engagement with the child and the schools, as parents learn that involvement should be ongoing.

The Concilio hires full-time education coordinators who manage programs in multiple sites and in turn hire and support onsite instructors. The coordinators are required to have some college education and be fluent in Spanish, with preference given to individuals who have graduated from the program or participated as parent instructors. The Concilio tries to identify staff who are culturally sensitive to the needs of their clients and who have an interest in serving culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Policy Recommendations

Family engagement strategies promote school readiness and academic achievement; however, most Hispanic families face barriers to being involved in their child's education. Early learning programs provide opportune environments for engaging parents from the get-go and effective avenues for culturally and linguistically diverse families to participate. State and federal policymakers play a key role in developing systems that can support high-quality early learning programs for Hispanic and ELL children and families. What follows are federal and state policy recommendations that promote effective family engagement in early learning programs.

Federal Policymakers

Support early learning programs that promote family engagement and family literacy. Federal policymakers should support early learning programs that have strong family engagement and family literacy components, such as Head Start and Early Head Start. Family literacy programs have

shown tremendous benefits for Latino children, whose parents often need additional supports to help their children be successful in school. Comprehensive family literacy programs not only engage parents in their children's learning, but also provide English-as-a-second-language and General Educational Development services for parents. These additional services expand opportunities for employment and economic stability.

Create a clearinghouse of effective family outreach programs and provide funding to evaluate promising outreach strategies.

Federal policymakers should develop a clearinghouse of information and best practices in family engagement in early learning. This clearinghouse should include information about how programs are successfully partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) to identify and provide outreach to Hispanic families. Additionally, this clearinghouse should include information and guidance related to translating documents, as well as information about eligibility requirements for early learning programs to facilitate enrollment.

State Policymakers

Incentivize partnerships with community-based organizations to provide family engagement services. A service delivery system that incentivizes partnerships with CBOs would strengthen programs' abilities to effectively engage with hard-to-reach families. Oftentimes, early learning programs do not have the staff capacity or expertise to design comprehensive strategies that successfully engage families with limited English proficiency. Moreover, CBOs have longer histories of working in communities and have established trust among parents.

Create pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse providers to obtain credentials and certification in early learning as part of professional development plans.

In many states, the early childhood education (ECE) workforce is more culturally and linguistically diverse than the K–12 workforce. The diversity of the workforce could be leveraged to help engage families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; however, data suggest that Hispanic providers have the lowest rates of bachelor's degree attainment. Although there is a higher proportion of minorities in the ECE workforce, providers of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds tend to be assistant teachers, rather than lead teachers or directors, which can limit a program's ability to use the expertise of these providers to better serve children and families. The Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT–ELC) presents a unique opportunity to challenge states to develop career pathways for providers who reflect the diversity in the classroom and help minority providers achieve high levels of training and credentialing.*

Create professional development programs that attract and retain culturally and linguistically diverse educators. The most promising strategies for recruiting and retaining the ECE workforce, such as T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood,[†] include programs that provide scholarships, tuition assistance, flexible schedules, and increases in compensation. As states reexamine their professional development systems, it is important that these types of programs have sufficient resources to grow and expand and that they are accessible to ECE educators who speak languages other than English.

* The RTT–ELC is a U.S. Department of Education grant competition that focuses on improving state early learning and development programs for young children.

† T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood is a comprehensive scholarship program that provides the early childhood workforce access to education, helping establish a well-qualified, fairly compensated, and stable workforce in the early learning field.

Endnotes

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Katherine A. Magnuson and Jane Waldfogel, "Early Childhood Care and Education: Effects on Ethnic and Racial Gaps in School Readiness," *The Future of Children* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 169–196.
- 6 Linda C. Halgunseth and Amy Peterson, *Integrated Literature Review, Family Engagement* (Washington, DC: National Association of Young Children, 2009), http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF_Literature%20Review.pdf (accessed January 5, 2012).
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