

# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Parent Engagement

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January 2018

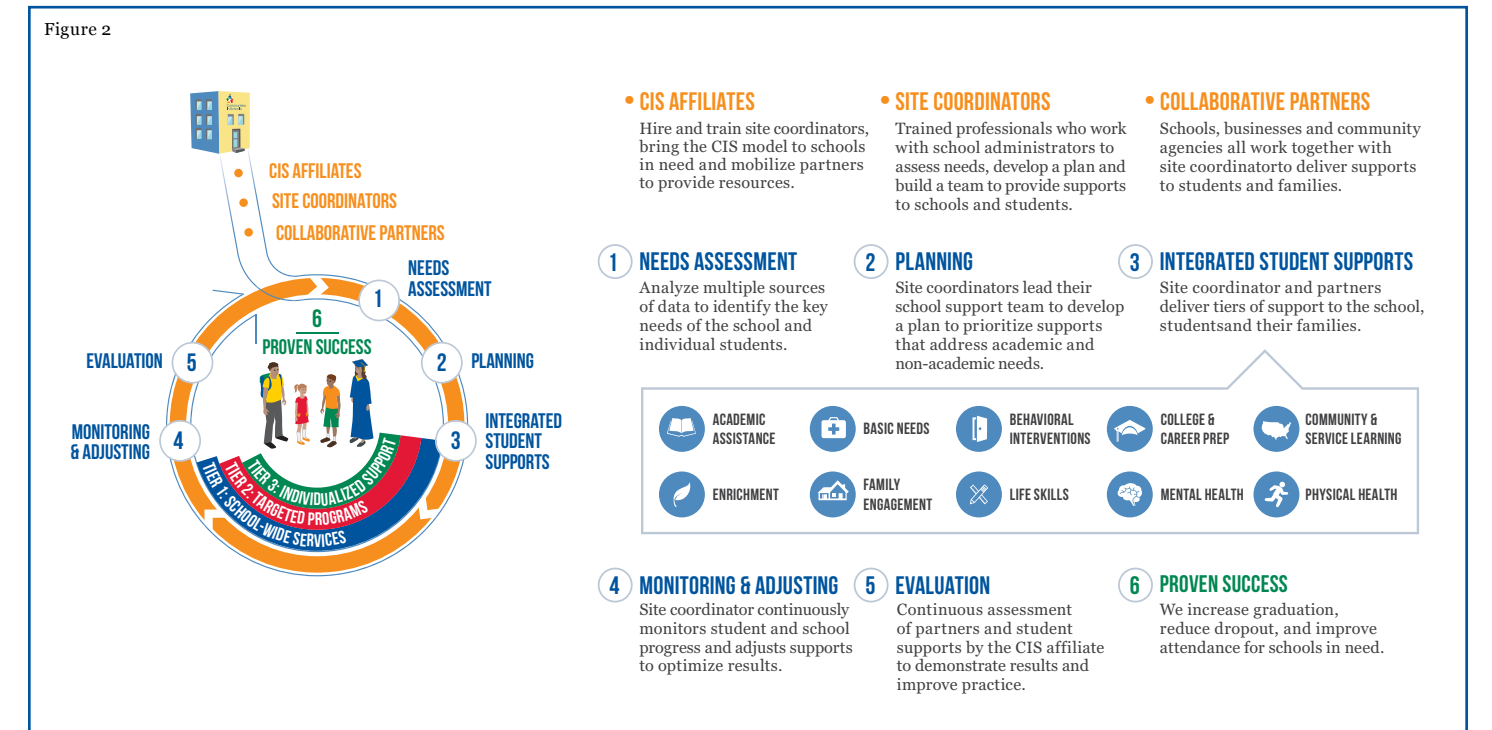
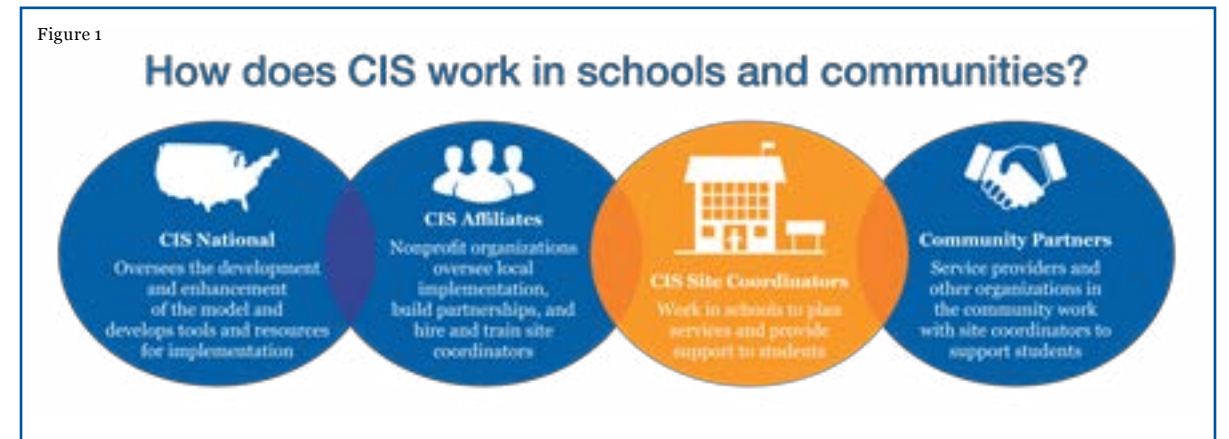


Communities  
In Schools

## ABOUT COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS AND INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of independent 501(c)(3) organizations (see Figure 1) working to keep students in school and on the path to graduation. Serving over 1.5 million students in over 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, CIS collaborates to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. In schools, site coordinators and other local affiliate-level staff are deployed to serve and connect at-risk students and families with resources via an evidence-based model of Integrated Student Supports (ISS - see Figure 2).

Integrated Student Supports are defined by Child Trends as “a school-based approach to promoting students’ academic success by coordinating a seamless system of wraparound supports for the child, the family, and schools, to target students’ academic and non-academic barriers to learning” (Moore K. A., 2014). Each year, CIS site coordinators conduct a comprehensive assessment in order to identify and prioritize risk factors, such as chronic absenteeism, teen pregnancy, trauma and violence, and poverty. Based on the results of the needs assessment, Communities In Schools focuses on 10 categories of support to best serve disadvantaged students across the United States.



## INTRODUCTION

Research shows that parent and family engagement efforts have a positive effect on the academic success of students (Jeynes W. H., 2012). Though practitioners have known about the importance of parent and family engagement for years, there has been a renewed interest in the topic with the signing of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the 2015 federal K-12 law, which warrants a deeper exploration of the issue. This brief will help simplify the complex topic of parent and family engagement by: defining and explaining parent engagement; summarizing the most current research on the relationship between parent engagement and student outcomes; and outlining specific strategies for parent engagement and troubleshooting common challenges. The brief also includes examples from the Communities In Schools (CIS) network highlighting how CIS is working with families to ensure that students are surrounded with a community of support, prepared to succeed in school and achieve in life.

## DEFINING PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

According to the CUNY Institute for Education Policy, there is no “simple and consistent definition of parent involvement” shared by scholars and educators (Miksic, 2014). Research literature broadly defines parental involvement and engagement as “parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children” (Jeynes W. H., 2007). Child Trends, an educational research center, defines parental involvement as “parent reported participation at least once during the school year in attending a general school meeting; attending a scheduled meeting with their child’s teacher; attending a school event; or volunteering in the school or serving on a school committee” (Child Trends, 2013). The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the largest child advocacy organization in the United States, recognizes that parent involvement “takes many forms, including:

- Two-way communication between parents and schools,
- Supporting parents as children’s primary educators who are integral to their learning,
- Encouraging parents to participate in volunteer work,
- Sharing responsibility for decision making about children’s education, health, and well-being,
- Collaborating with community organizations that reflect schools’ aspirations for all children” (Pennsylvania PTA, 2015)

Even though the definition of parental involvement differs throughout the literature, there has been a marked shift toward further understanding in recent years. According to the National Education Association, previous understandings of

### Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Some of the key features regarding parent and community engagement efforts under ESSA are listed below:

- “Requires districts to set aside at least 1 percent of their Title I funds for parent and family engagement activities. Of that money, 90 percent must be distributed to schools.
- Creates State Family Engagement Centers, which are the successors to the Parental Information Resource Centers funded under the NCLB law, and authorizes \$10 million in annual funding for them.
- Replaces the NCLB law’s use of the phrase “parental involvement” with “parent and family engagement” in several provisions.
- Places a new emphasis on school quality in accountability that could provide parents, civic organizations, and other community groups with greater influence in creating new definitions of successful schools.” (Ujifusa & Tully, 2016)

parent involvement were “characterized by volunteers, mostly mothers, assisting in the classroom, chaperoning students, and fundraising.” The new approach towards parental and family engagement is more inclusive and involves “mothers and fathers, stepparents, grandparents, foster parents, other relatives and caregivers, business leaders and community groups—all participating in goal-oriented activities, at all grade levels, linked to student achievement and school success” (National Education Association, 2008). The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, the newly-passed federal k-12 law that replaced its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) also recognizes the role of family and community members in a child’s development. Under ESSA, the term “parental involvement,” has been replaced by “parental and family engagement,” which highlights the important role that family members other than parents, also play in children’s education (Tully, 2016).

## PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

Research on the topic of parent engagement indicates that “regardless of family income or background, students whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The more well-planned and comprehensive the partnership between families and schools, the higher the student achievement. When parents are intentionally engaged, the performance of all children at the school tends to improve (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) (Epstein J. L., 2011). Meta-analyses of research on the issue of parental involvement and engagement have been consistent on the following conclusions:

- **Parental expectations have the greatest effect on academic achievement** out of all other measures of parent involvement including volunteering, homework help, and school event attendance (Wilder, 2013). Meta-analyses of research show that “children are likely to harbor similar attitudes and beliefs as their parents [so] having high parental expectations appear vital for academic achievement of children” (Wilder, 2013). On the other hand, research finds no positive relationship between parents helping their children with homework and academic achievement (Wilder, 2013).
- **All measures of parental involvement are positively correlated with all measures of student academic achievement.** There is a strong positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement as measured through grade point average (GPA) or combined grades than more specific areas like math or reading (Fan & Chen, 2001).
- **Parental involvement is correlated with academic achievement across all ethnicities and grades.** Research shows a stronger relationship between parent involvement and student achievement at the elementary school level than at secondary school level (Jeynes W. H., 2007) (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

The challenge for the education field as a whole is to transform this research into programs and interventions that leverage the power of parent engagement to make improvements on measurable student metrics like attendance, behavior, and course performance.

### What works for parent engagement: The role of parental expectations

Research shows that the most traditional and visible forms of parent engagement – attending an event or helping with homework– are not as strongly correlated to student success as are parental expectations, academic socialization, and parent-school trust (Jeynes W. H., 2005). Parent trust and parent expectations are positively related to credits earned per year, GPA, behavior and attendance (Adams & Christenson, 2000) (Froiland & Davison, 2014) (Jeynes W. H., 2005) (Castro, et al., 2015).

This does not mean that encouraging parents to be visibly involved in school will worsen student outcomes; all types of parent involvement are correlated to some degree with increased academic achievement. What it does mean is that what happens at home in terms of talking about school and establishing clear expectations is just as important, if not more important, than the number of hours volunteered or school events attended.

Research shows that low-income parents are less likely to feel comfortable in their child’s school and less likely to have

a trusting relationship with school personnel (Turney & Kao, 2009). Similarly, according to a report by Child Trends, “only half of low-income parents (earning less than \$25,000 per year) expect their child to get a Bachelor’s degree compared to seven out of eight higher income (over \$75,000 per year) parents” (Child Trends Databank, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial for youth-serving organizations like CIS to recognize the importance of parental engagement in student success and build ways to form trusting relationships between parents and schools.

### What factors positively influence parental expectations and trust?

Given the important role of parental trust and expectations to student achievement, what are some evidence-based interventions to increase them? Unfortunately, there is a lack of definitive research on parent trust and expectations. There are some concrete factors, however, that are positively correlated with high expectations and levels of trust. According to Child Trends, one of the most effective ways to increase parental expectations is to facilitate opportunities for parents to interact with their children in and out of school. Research findings suggest that seventy-nine percent of parents who engaged in three to four activities (like visiting a library or going to a concert) with their child in a month expected their child to finish college compared to just 12 percent of parents who did not participate in any activities with their child (Child Trends Databank, 2012). Similarly, research conducted by Adams and Christenson on the topic of family-school relationships concluded that parents are more trusting of their child’s teachers in elementary school than in the higher grades, the quality of interactions between school staff and parents is a better predictor of trust than the frequency of interactions and finally, an increase in home-school communication increases trust by both parents and teachers (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

*“A year-long qualitative study on parent involvement concluded that the most powerful key to promoting parent involvement is to ‘Make them feel more welcome.’”*

– (Froiland & Davison, 2014).

## Recommendations

It is important for youth-serving organizations to focus on inclusive parental and family engagement strategies that emphasize high expectations and academic socialization in addition to more traditional parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and other events. A parent’s expectations for their child are



influenced by a variety of factors outside of educators, but there are aspects of the school environment and communication that can be controlled. Parent engagement efforts should always be based off of a welcoming environment and two-way, linguistically and culturally appropriate communication that creates a sense of trust between parents and the school.

### Recommendation 1

**Focus on relationships:** Because research shows that the quality of interactions between parents and staff is more important than the frequency of interactions when creating a trusting relationship, school staff must be strategic with every meeting. As adults who may be a primary point of contact between parents and the school, education professionals such as CIS site coordinators must be aware of the importance of making parents feel welcome in the school environment and, if possible, help to facilitate staff-wide training about meaningful and empathetic school-parent interactions.

### Recommendation 2

**Encourage parent-child interaction:** Research shows that parents who spend more time with their children participating in activities outside of school have higher educational expectations for their child. Free community activities and organizations that provide discounted tickets to cultural events can make these opportunities feasible for low-income families.

*Providers of ISS should be aware of out-of-school enrichment activities and help to connect students and their families with the chance to interact in a low-pressure, fun environment.*

### Recommendation 3

**Engage parents early:** Researchers provide many possible reasons why the effects of traditional forms of parent engagement on academic outcomes decrease as children age. Developmentally, as children age and become more independent, parents may feel ill-equipped to help with more advanced homework. Additionally, school-based activities like field trips and enrichment opportunities occur less frequently in the later grades (Hill & Tyson, 2009). When faced with limited resources, it makes sense for youth-serving organizations to devote their parent engagement efforts in elementary school.

## CHALLENGES AND CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT

The challenges that arise in the parent engagement process are as diverse as parents and families themselves. It is not difficult to invite parents to an event or ask for volunteers, but it is difficult to engage the hardest-to-reach parents who often need to be involved the most. When families are economically disadvantaged, or English is not their primary language, increasing parental involvement in school can be challenging. Low-income families may find it difficult to attend events held at the school when hindered by transportation difficulties, chronic health conditions, or conflicts with work schedules. Those families whose primary language is not English may not feel comfortable participating in school activities, or may belong to a culture where asking questions of teachers and administrators is not a norm (Child Trends, 2013). The question then becomes, “what works and what does it look like”? The Centers for Disease Control Division of Adolescent and School Health has identified the following common challenges associated with parent engagement and creative solutions to those problems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012):

Challenges	Solutions
Scheduling conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide child care at important meetings</li> <li>Schedule more than one meeting or activity</li> <li>Host meetings off-campus at a central location</li> <li>Poll parents about what times and locations are easiest for them</li> </ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use school buses</li> <li>Provide public bus passes or tokens for students and parents</li> <li>Set up a “ride board”</li> <li>Hold events offsite or online</li> </ul>
Parents are uncomfortable at school because of previous negative experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Host informal get-togethers</li> <li>Host parent-only events at the school</li> <li>Assign greeters to welcome parents to the school</li> <li>Reach out to a parent before there is a problem</li> <li>Use parent leaders and mentors to reach out to new parents</li> </ul>
Communication and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask parents or students to translate at meetings</li> <li>Provide school publications in print and online in native languages</li> <li>Use clear and readable fonts</li> <li>Use language at the 8th-grade reading level or lower</li> <li>Avoid using professional jargon</li> </ul>

### Building School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Thoughts from a Leading Researcher

As part of this research brief, we had an opportunity to interview Dr. Epstein, Director of John Hopkins Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and National Network of Partnership Schools. In her interview, Dr. Epstein shared some of the findings from her research and that of her colleagues supporting the importance of parent engagement and the connection to student success and the importance of establishing school-family-community relationships.

According to Dr. Epstein’s research, the majority of families, regardless of income level or ethnicity, care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities so as to remain good partners in their children’s education. Further, most teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive relationships, activities, and programs. Due to this lack of knowledge, education professionals are fearful about trying to involve families. Dr. Epstein’s research showed that unless schools and teachers implement appropriate practices to build positive partnerships with families:

- Engagement interventions will tend to decline across the grades;
- Affluent communities will continue to have more positive parent engagement than those that are economically disadvantaged;
- Schools in more economically depressed communities will continue to make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having rather than intentionally focusing on positive interactions;
- Single parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school, and fathers will be less involved.

During her interview, Dr. Epstein stressed that the key to parent engagement involves a partnership between the schools, families, and the community. People in these three contexts affect children’s learning and development, but researchers often ignore a holistic study of the three concepts, preferring to study only schools or only families. She stated that school-family-community partnerships should always be used together when discussing the concept of engagement in schools, rather than simply using the term “parental engagement” (personal communication, 2015).

### The Six Types of Parent Involvement

- Parenting:** By providing parents with resources and support, schools can improve the relationship between school and home to promote student achievement.
- Communicating:** Two-way communication (home to school and school to home) is a key component of parent engagement.
- Volunteering:** Creating volunteer opportunities for parents allows schools and parents to form a mutually beneficial relationship – parents benefit from engaging with their child and being involved at school, while schools benefit from no or low-cost assistance and enrichment.
- Learning at home:** Practitioners should empower parents to engage in their child’s education in a way that makes sense for them.
- Decision-making:** Allowing parents to participate in decision-making processes at school can give them a greater sense of ownership in their child’s education and build trust through transparency.
- Collaborating with the community:** If parents are hesitant to become involved in a school setting because of previous negative experiences or issues trusting school personnel, it may be more effective to engage them in the community (Epstein, et al., 2002).

Challenges	Solutions
School staff are not trained to work with parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schedule parent meetings that do not take away from teacher planning time</li> <li>Partner with community organizations to provide training</li> <li>Provide teachers with sample model assignments that involve parents</li> <li>Communicate with staff frequently about their concerns</li> </ul>

Challenges	Solutions
Financing parent engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect and share data about parent needs and interests with decision-makers</li> <li>Apply for Title 1 funding designated for parent engagement</li> <li>Partner with community organizations to provide low-cost opportunities for parents and students to interact with each other and with the school</li> </ul>

## ENGAGING PARENTS AND FAMILIES: EXAMPLES FROM THE CIS NETWORK

CIS recognizes the importance of engaging families in schools to help to support the education of their children. As part of the delivery of the model of ISS, CIS site coordinators address many issues that prohibit families from being involved with schools such as language barriers, busy work schedules, and other family obligations.

At **Communities In Schools of Charleston**, site coordinators are co-teaching the “Parenting Partners” program in conjunction with the school district. The goal of this program is to empower parents to become vital contributors to their children’s academic success. The program consists of eight comprehensive workshops spread over the course of eight weeks. Site coordinators meet with parents once a week for an hour and a half long workshop. The workshops are broken down by material content where site coordinators talk to parents about various ways to connect with their children on an emotional, academic, and behavioral level. Conversations also include strategies to reframe parents’ interactions with their children to strengthen parent and child relationships, and parents are given the opportunity to discuss how to address different challenges.

**Communities In Schools of Heart of Texas** has parent engagement events that have been implemented regularly throughout the years, celebrating the community and allowing parents to have positive experiences at the school. The affiliate has learned that consistency is key for successful parent engagement efforts. Family members appreciate events and opportunities that they can count on year after year, such as a holiday assistance, uniform assistance, college nights, and general activities that help them get involved. CIS of the Heart of Texas has seen an increase in elementary-aged student and family involvement, likely due in part to these engagement efforts. The affiliate also organizes block parties in neighborhoods to engage with students and their families during the summer.

In February 2017, **Communities In Schools of Delaware** implemented a program called Parenting with Power to enhance parent engagement at one of their high schools. Initially the program was called Empowering Our Parents, but soon changed to Parenting with Power to provide parents with a sense of strength. As part of this program, CIS of Delaware partnered with High Impact, a program offered by Through The World Church, to understand and address the challenge of low parent engagement at the high school level. Monthly sessions held as part of this program focused on the following topics:

- Effective communication between parents and children
- Becoming advocates for children
- Financial literacy

## CONCLUSION

Parental and family engagement is crucial to the academic success of students. By recognizing the importance of school, family, and community engagement and building trusting relationships among schools and families, youth-serving organizations like CIS can adopt a more holistic approach to engage parents and families and help remove barriers to student success.

### FURTHER RESOURCES

- **Edutopia** has a list of tips, resources, and strategies for educators, school leaders, and parents to help improve and expand parent engagement efforts. <https://www.edutopia.org/home-school-connections-resources>
- **Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education** produced by IES is a detailed four-part toolkit of resources for educators and school staff to engage and build relationships with families and community members. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectId=4509>
- **Family Engagement Inventory** developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is designed to assist professionals from different fields such as, education, child welfare, juvenile justice etc. to learn more about how family engagement is defined and implemented. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/FEI/>

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### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you have quick comments or questions on this brief? Click [here](#) and let us know.

