

Education & Learning Program: PreK–3 Family Engagement and Literacy

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The McKnight Foundation’s Education and Learning (E&L) Program is promoting family engagement as part of a literacy initiative that spans from prekindergarten through third grade (PreK–3). This brief summarizes strategies used by schools as part of the E&L Program to engage families in their children’s literacy and educate parents about effective literacy practices to use with their children at home. It also presents common challenges encountered in engaging some families. The brief concludes with teachers’ and families’ suggestions for how schools could further involve families in developing their children’s literacy.

The findings derive from parent focus groups and interviews with school staff conducted in the three districts and five schools with E&L Program implementation grants.¹ A total of 20 parent focus groups, conducted in English and Spanish, were held in May 2013 and 2014 and 52 school personnel interviews were conducted in May 2013. The perspectives of the focus group and interview participants may not represent the full population of parents and staff in these schools.

Communication About Children’s Progress

School staff used multiple strategies for informing parents about their children’s progress and what they are learning in the classroom. Literacy assessment results facilitated information sharing.

Teachers primarily communicated with parents about their children’s literacy progress through biannual parent-teacher conferences. In MPS and BCCS, conferences included communication about student performance on STEP, which the districts used to identify students’ literacy levels and inform instruction.² Teachers provided parents with their

¹ E&L Program schools with implementation grants are Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS); Wellstone Elementary School and Saint Paul Music Academy (SPMA), Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS); Jefferson Community School and Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS).

² STEP—the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress—is a developmental literacy assessment for grades PreK–3.

children’s STEP levels and gave them information about books and activities to use at home based on those levels. In SPPS, parents received similar information based on district assessments specific to that district.

Teachers also communicated via progress reports or report cards, newsletters, emails, and phone calls. All parents in BCCS, and some parents in SPPS and MPS, reported receiving weekly newsletters that informed them about what their children were learning in class, how they could prepare their children for the upcoming week, and relevant activities they could do at home. Receiving newsletters was most critical to parents in grades 1–3 because many parents reported that newsletters were the primary method through which they received regular information. Many parents also reported that teachers were accessible and responsive when parents had a question or concern.

School staff stated that STEP provided a common language for them to discuss student literacy achievement with parents. With the introduction of STEP scores as a metric for progress, teachers in MPS and BCCS were able to explain to parents where children were in their literacy development and how they were doing on specific skills. Teachers presented parents with children’s literacy goals and communicated how parents could best support their children in achieving them. Thus, if a student scored low, teachers could have a conversation with parents about what skills needed improvement and how they could support students at home.

Promoting Effective Family Literacy Practices

School personnel engaged parents in their children’s literacy education by providing them with activities to try at home and offering schoolwide literacy events and parent education classes.

Teachers provided parents with suggestions of activities to do at home to support students’ development of literacy skills. Examples of activities teachers sent home included worksheets for learning letters and words, rhyming activities, vocabulary lists, letter/word flashcards, puzzles,

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reading assignments, and websites to visit with books and activities. Parents also mentioned receiving books at community events offered by the school. Parents reported that teachers helped them select appropriate books. School staff and parents in all three districts mentioned looking together at books that are on grade level so that parents had an idea of what types of books their children should be reading.

Parents also reported that teachers gave them reading strategies to use with their children. One BCCS parent described the materials that teachers handed out at conferences:

[Teachers] give you a package that gives you a lot of things that help your child, like questions to ask your kids about the book. Like, what did you learn from that story? You're supposed to ask them the questions to make them think.

A few PreK and kindergarten teachers in all three districts also mentioned demonstrating strategies that parents can do at home with their children, such as helping their children point to the word, or the first letter of the word, while reading.

Schools helped parents learn about ways to support literacy by inviting them to participate in classrooms on special days; however, this strategy was more prevalent in PreK and kindergarten than in grades 1–3. Some schools established specific days when parents could come into the classroom to see what children were learning and how to extend learning activities at home. For example, a SPPS parent noted that Wednesdays were the official family visiting day at his child's school, and he could spend the entire day in the classroom observing and asking the teacher questions. In BCCS, PreK teachers described Stay-and-Plays, where teachers encouraged parents to participate in activities with their children at school and gave them ideas for activities to do at home.

Each district had one or more designated staff members responsible for coordinating schoolwide family engagement activities and facilitating interactions between families and school staff. SPPS had a parent engagement coordinator who created a parent engagement plan for each of the SPPS schools. She organized events for families and sometimes incorporated literacy into the events. As a result, there was better communication with parents, more family engagement events, and increased

involvement of families from various cultural groups. Spanish-speaking parents at one of the SPPS schools reported that she was instrumental in connecting them with the school:

If we have problems [communicating with the school] she helps us. She is always representing us, paying attention to us.

In both MPS schools, family engagement staff developed comprehensive family engagement plans. Each school provided culturally appropriate take-home literacy materials in multiple languages and offered a range of family literacy activities to help parents support literacy learning at home. They also held classes for parents on how to read with their children.

BCCS had a Spanish liaison who acted as a resource for both teachers and parents. She helped teachers translate materials and relayed academic information to and from Spanish-speaking parents. Parents reported that she coordinated the *Padres Con Poder* (Parents with Power) program for Spanish-speaking parents, a district parent education program. As one parent described, “[She] keeps us informed and encourages us to participate in events here that will allow us to learn to help our children better.”

Schools held family workshops and informational sessions to engage parents in supporting their children's literacy. In BCCS, PreK teachers reported conducting informal informational sessions for parents about the E&L Program, which included providing them with information about STEP. Some SPPS parents reported attending daytime parent workshops led by teachers on how to support children at home in various academic areas, including literacy. In MPS, the PreK-K Transition Specialist taught a group of parents how to lead a felt-board interactive story and provided a book and felt so they could make their own characters at home. These parents later presented the strategy to other parents at a schoolwide literacy event. MPS also gave a presentation on STEP to families in Way to Grow, one of its community partners.

All districts held family events that either focused on literacy or had a literacy component. Examples of such events included *I Scream for Books* in BCCS; Family Literacy Night, Book Club Buddy, and Winter Family Fun Night in SPPS; and monthly Family Fun Learning Night in MPS. In BCCS and MPS, parent engagement staff attended these events

to distribute books and promote literacy strategies that parents could use at home with their children. In MPS, for example, the PreK-K Transition Specialist provided a book to every student in attendance that was developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate, along with materials on how to use the specific books at home. In SPPS, Winter Family Fun Night had a story-telling component facilitated by teachers and the parent engagement coordinator. At the Book Club Buddy event, the parent engagement coordinator modeled for parents how to read to children and then discussed with them what they saw and learned so they could bring the practice home.

Districts offered special multi-session programs to strengthen general family engagement, with some districts emphasizing support for non-English speaking families. BCCS and MPS had existing districtwide parent education programs that were designed for parents whose primary language was not English. BCCS had *Padres con Poder*, where, one parent explained, “they show you how to help your child at home and how just sitting down with our children and helping them with the schoolwork makes a difference in their life.”

MPS offered a 9-hour course, *Growing to Succeed*, developed by its Early Learning and Multilingual Departments for immigrant communities, to show parents how to work with their children on academic skills at home. MPS also conducted a presentation called “Connecting Parents to Schools,” that described what it looks like to be involved at home.

SPPS had a program called *Parent Academy*, which was designed to help all parents understand how to support their children to complete school and enter either postsecondary education or the workforce. This program was called *Academia de Padres* when delivered to Spanish-speaking families.

Challenges

Interviews with school staff revealed challenges schools faced in engaging some families. Similarly, despite already increased communication, parents expressed the need for still more communication about students’ progress, more information about STEP, and more strategies to use at home.

In all three districts, school staff reported that some parents were hard to engage for various reasons. According to teachers, many parents worked late, were single parents, were homeless or

highly mobile, and were immigrants or refugees who were reluctant to interact with school personnel due to cultural and language barriers. School staff reported that due to these and other factors such as poverty, work schedules, and transportation issues, a big challenge in engaging some parents was simply getting them to come to the school.

Parents in all three districts expressed a desire for more frequent communication about their children’s literacy progress, especially parents of students in grades 1–3. In both MPS and SPPS, parents recommended having more or longer parent-teacher conferences as well as more individualized progress updates. One parent expressed concern that because she does not receive frequent updates, she does not know how her child is doing:

It’s unfortunate when we think our child is doing well and they aren’t bringing any progress reports home so we don’t really know, but then later on we come to find out that our children are not doing well at all.

In BCCS, parents expressed a specific concern that communication falls off as students move from grade to grade. As one parent described, “Moving to first grade, my son does well in that class too, but I don’t get as much communication as in kindergarten. She’s still a good teacher. I just don’t feel as connected.” Another first grade parent reported receiving very little information outside of the two parent-teacher conferences and a newsletter.

Across all three districts, several parents felt it was their responsibility to contact the school if they want more communication. As one SPPS parent shared, “I think you also have to show that you are interested. If you show you are interacting with the school, then you get reaction back.”

Several parents had questions about STEP results and why their children were not progressing on STEP; other parents had limited knowledge of STEP. Some parents in BCCS did not understand the requirements for progressing from one STEP level to the next or how to interpret STEP results on reports sent home, despite teachers’ attempts to explain it to them at conferences and opportunities to learn about it at school events. For example, one parent explained her trouble reading the STEP reports:

I honestly have no idea what STEP means. I looked at the results but I don’t know what it means.... There is something that says

where he is, where he should be, and that's the only thing I sort-of get.

These parents also were concerned about their children not progressing on the STEP, and that certain skills were “holding them back.”

In MPS, several parents were not aware of STEP by name and were not sure if it was a curriculum, assessment, or set of standards. They, too, were unsure of how to interpret assessment reports.

Several parents at one of the SPPS schools and in BCCS asked for more specific information about how to improve their children's literacy skills. For example, one PreK parent in BCCS described how she struggled with understanding what to do at home with her child: “When I get an email saying work on these letter sounds, how do I do that? For example, I'm told to work on the letter Y, and I have no clue what to do.” Similarly, a parent in SPPS expressed a desire for guidance from her teacher beyond reading more to her child:

I asked before about what I can do and the response I got back was just keep reading. And I feel like isn't there something else I can do? ... I feel like I want more, I want specific strategies.

Some SPPS Spanish-speaking parents whose children were receiving instruction in English said they could not understand the activities and books sent home because they were in English. They were told to discuss the books in their home language to support comprehension.

Across the schools, the relationship between schools and parents was primarily one directional.

All of the examples of family engagement provided by both parents and teachers involved communication and suggestions coming from teachers to parents rather than a partnership with commensurate parent input. Even though some parents acknowledged that they had to take more initiative to communicate with the school, few parents or teachers reported that parents did so.

While generally pleased with literacy instruction in the schools, some parents expressed concerns about a few of the instructional and behavioral supports provided by the schools. Some Spanish-speaking parents in MPS did not feel they had a choice if their child was placed in the English versus Dual Language program. One parent believed that

there is a district evaluation that helps the school decide the amount of English instruction that is suitable for each student. Some parents with children who were in MPS developmental dual language classrooms felt that their children were not learning to read, write, and speak fluently in Spanish. Similarly, other parents of children in the developmental dual language program felt that there should be more instruction and support in English.

In BCCS parents mentioned the effectiveness of the afterschool and pullout reading intervention programs but that many children who needed these supports could not receive them because of space limitations. SPPS parents were concerned about students missing instruction due to their removal from the classroom for behavioral issues. MPS parents were concerned about behavioral issues in the schools, but felt that school safety had improved from 2013 to 2014.

Recommendations

School staff and parents identified various ways schools were keeping families informed about their children's progress and giving parents the information and tools they need to support their children's literacy and learning at home. However, several parents reported wanting better communication and collaboration between the teachers and the parents to support children's literacy. The following recommendations stem from staff and parent suggestions for improvement:

- Schedule parent conferences around the availability of assessment results, including in spring to inform summer learning activities
- Offer more parent education to help families understand STEP and how to support their children to reach the next step level
- Strengthen partnerships between the school and parents, especially in grades 1-3; ensure that there is shared urgency when children are behind and communication and information that flows in both directions
- Tailor suggested home literacy activities to specific needs of the children rather than offering global recommendations

The E&L Program schools will continue to strengthen their communication and collaboration with families based on lessons learned from their first two years of implementation of their grants.