

Attainable Goals? The Spirit and Letter of the No Child Left Behind Act on Parental Involvement

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Now in its third full school year of implementation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has been drawing praise and blame. It has been praised for its goals of increasing all students' learning, requiring disaggregated data to monitor the progress of major subgroups of students, and having high-quality teachers in all schools. It has been criticized for overemphasizing the importance of standardized achievement tests, setting unrealistic time lines for clearly unreachable goals, and underfunding its requirements.

Although most attention has been paid to the NCLB's requirements for annual achievement tests and high-quality teachers, the law also includes important requirements for schools, districts, and states to organize programs of parental involvement and to communicate with parents and the public about students' achievement and the quality of schools. In contrast to some other sections of the law, Section 1118--Parental Involvement--has improved over time by drawing from research in the sociology of education, other disciplines, and exemplary practice to specify structures and processes that are needed to develop programs to involve all families in their children's education (Booth and Dunn 1996; Epstein 2001). This section is also in contrast to early legislation, which mandated a few parent representatives on school or district advisory councils but left most parents on their own to figure out how to become involved in their children's education across the grades (Borman et al. 1996).

In this essay, I offer my perspectives on the NCLB's requirements for family involvement; provide a few examples from the field; suggest modifications that are needed in the law; and encourage sociologists of education to take new directions in research on school, family, and community partnerships.

SOCIOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

The NCLB's requirements represent four principles of the sociology of education that replace old ways of thinking about parental involvement with new ways of organizing more-equitable and effective programs of school, family, and community partnerships. Section 1118 recognizes the following principles.

Parental involvement requires multilevel leadership. The NCLB requires states, districts, and schools to develop and implement policies and plans to reach all families. Districts must provide professional development to build educators' and parents' capacities to understand partnerships and help schools develop goal-oriented partnership programs. State departments of education must disseminate effective partnership practices and review districts' plans. These and

other requirements redirect state and district leaders from monitoring for compliance to actively helping schools improve the quality and results of partnership programs.

Parental involvement is a component of school and classroom organization. Every school that receives Title I funds must implement a program to involve all parents in ways that support students' achievement and success in school. By requiring plans and practices that contribute to students' learning, the NCLB identifies parental involvement as an essential component of school improvement, linked to the curriculum, instruction, assessments, and other aspects of school management.

Parental involvement recognizes the shared responsibilities of educators and families for children's learning and success in school. Section 1118 and other sections (Sections 1111–19) call for educators and parents to share information and decisions about the quality of schools, students' placements, and improving programs of family involvement. Educators must communicate with all parents about their children's scores on achievement tests, comparisons and trends of test scores for all schools in a district and major subgroups of students, and other indicators (e.g., attendance, graduation rates, teachers' qualifications). In underperforming or persistently dangerous schools, parents must have information on and options to change to more successful schools or to select supplemental educational services for eligible children. In effect, the law activates the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which posits that students learn more and better when the home, school, and community share responsibilities for their success, and includes examples of the six types of involvement (*parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community*) to show how to engage families at school and at home (Epstein 2001; Epstein et al. 2002).

Parental involvement programs must include all families, even those who are not currently involved, not just the easiest to reach. Two main goals of the sociology of education are to understand inequalities in education and to design and test programs that yield more equal educational opportunities. Equity is also the stated goal of the NCLB's requirements for family involvement. The law repeatedly stresses that communications with parents must be clear, useful, and in languages that all parents can understand.

EMPHASIS ON EQUITY

The NCLB's goal of greater equity of involvement builds on two major lines of research by sociologists of education. Many studies have clearly documented the inequities of parental involvement. Although most parents report that they want to be partners in their children's education, only some parents, particularly those with more formal education, remain involved in their children's education across the grades (Lareau 1989). This is the real starting point for many schools. More and more research is finding, however, that when schools organize high-quality programs to inform and engage all families, many more parents feel welcome at school and valued by educators and become involved because of school and classroom partnership practices (Epstein 2001; Sheldon in press; Simon 2004; Van Voorhis 2003).

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Although many jurisdictions have not yet addressed the NCLB's requirements, about one thousand schools, districts, and states in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University are showing that they can use research-based tools and approaches to meet the spirit and letter of the law. For example, the Action Team for Partnerships in an elementary school serving mainly Latino and Hmong families in Saint Paul, Minnesota, writes annual plans with activities for the six types of involvement. The school conducts "Second Cup of Coffee," a monthly open forum for parents and educators to talk about testing, homework, and other topics; "Reading-at-Home" programs to engage all students and families in reading; and many other involvement activities that are linked to school goals. This school's leaders attribute gains in students' test scores of 13 percent in reading and 10 percent in math in 2004 to a combination of good teaching and family involvement.

At the district level, a local district in Los Angeles, which serves culturally diverse and economically distressed students, improved its leadership on partnerships for over five years. Through three changes in superintendents, the district leaders continued to guide the schools to develop their partnership programs. The current superintendent reported that for four years, the schools have made significant gains in scores in reading and math on the California Academic Performance Index and added, "It is not coincidental that in the same four years, the district has focused parental involvement on literacy and mathematics."

In the Seattle Public Schools, district leaders are helping the schools develop partnership programs with highly diverse families. Several departments worked together to develop presentations, web site communications, handbooks, and other publications for parents in 10 languages. The superintendent noted that these programs are helping educators "align parent involvement practices with academic goals, contributing to real systemic change in school buildings." In the past year, the district tracked over 260 activities for the six types of involvement attended by over 18,360 parents, with translated materials provided for over 60 percent of the activities.

These examples show that with committed leaders, even schools and districts in the most challenging communities can make progress in implementing programs that increase the equity of parental involvement and that support students' success in school (see these and many other examples of programs and practices in the section In the Spotlight at the web site <http://www.partnershipschools.org>).

NEEDED MODIFICATIONS

Policy by committee, like the NLCB, is never perfect. Modifications are needed to reflect recent research on effective involvement programs. For example, studies have indicated that school leaders must support teams and teamwork to conduct and continually to improve the kinds of programs that are outlined in the NCLB, but Section 1118 does not mention teamwork as an organizing structure. Most schools retain old customs of placing one person "in charge" of parental involvement, rather than a team of educators and parents who share responsibilities for planning and implementing activities that will involve all families in their children's education and meet the schools' goals for students' learning.

As another example, clearer guidelines are needed on “school-parent compacts.” Section 1118 clearly states that a compact should be a detailed plan that identifies “the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help children achieve the State’s high standards.” However, the nonregulatory guidelines are ambiguous, at one point stating the importance of detailed plans and then providing sample “pledges,” which do not reflect the legislative intent (U.S. Department of Education 2004). Because it is easier to collect forms than to develop and implement detailed plans, most schools continue their old habits of collecting pledges that are signed by parents as the “compact.” Pledges are valid, symbolic communications *if* the students and teachers also sign promises for good partnerships, but pledges do not fulfill the requirement for annual plans with scheduled activities to involve all parents in productive ways at school and at home.

Other modifications that are needed for better implementation of the NCLB by all schools, districts, and states include providing clearer guidelines for using targeted funds for involvement to support the kinds of programs that are outlined in Section 1118, paying more attention to and providing better examples for middle and high schools’ programs of family involvement, extending the definition of shared responsibilities to include community partnerships, lengthening the short period allotted for giving parents in low-performing schools information on their schools’ status and the option of changing their children’s schools, and conducting more- consistent federal monitoring of actions to meet the requirements for family involvement.

A POLICY-RELATED RESEARCH AGENDA

Across the country, leaders in states, districts, and schools that receive Title I funds are making different decisions about whether and how to address the NCLB’s requirements for family involvement. Their varied responses open a vast and important agenda for research in the sociology of education. Sociologists of education who want to conduct research that contributes to policy and practice must be willing to work with and interpret data for policy leaders and educators. They also must present their research in nonacademic journals that reach practitioners. I have discussed elsewhere how sociologists can combine attention to research, policy, and practice to improve schools (Epstein 1996).

Studies are needed of the multilevel and longitudinal effects of state, district, and school actions to *increase equity* in family involvement, including the effects of contrasting approaches on (1) outreach to families with diverse educational, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds; (2) involvement by families; and (3) results for students on academic and behavioral outcomes of interest to sociologists, including completion of homework, preparedness for class, credits earned, courses selected, attendance, attitudes and behavior in school, grades on report cards, scores on achievement tests, on-time graduation, and postsecondary plans. Such policy-related studies of school, family, and community partnerships should influence future reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title I.

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