

Making Data Matter in Family Engagement

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We believe that investment in student performance data that is accessible, meaningful, and actionable to families is a core component of 21st century family engagement strategies. New data-sharing initiatives described here suggest that, equipped with student data, families can strengthen their roles as supporters of their children’s learning and as advocates for school improvement. Their experience offers a warrant for carefully developing and evaluating such efforts to learn how to implement them under different conditions and to ascertain their value added as part of larger efforts to make sure all children have the skills they need to succeed. States and school districts have spent over one billion dollars in the last decade to build and implement student performance data systems (Tucker, 2010a). In addition, with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, 38 states are planning to build data systems that track the achievement of students by individual teachers. Thirty-seven states are working to align K–12 data systems and higher education to produce longitudinal data for individual students (Kober & Rentner, 2011). As policymakers invest in data systems to drive decision making from the classroom to the legislature, families are important stakeholders. Research on family engagement repeatedly correlates family engagement with student achievement and is discovering more precisely what it is that families do that promotes learning and school success. Sustained family engagement in children’s learning is linked with higher grades and test scores, motivation to achieve, social competence, and aspiration for and enrollment in college (Weiss, Buffard, Bridgall, & Gordon, 2009).

Unfortunately, many strategies and interventions to promote family engagement have been disconnected from any instructional goals and do not take advantage of available data to engage families in ways that support learning or school improvement. Family engagement often consists of separate and uncoordinated programs, a state of affairs that has been described as “random acts of family involvement” (Gill Kressley, 2008). The trend toward data-driven reform opens new possibilities for families to gain access to meaningful student data that can guide their actions to support children’s learning and school success. Sharing individual student performance data with families—as well as drawing information from families about students’ interests, behaviors, and challenges—can transform the way family engagement is organized. Rather than focusing on “random acts,” family engagement elevates the strategies that support learning, continuous improvement, and successful outcomes. Collective data about student performance deepen parents’ understanding of the quality of their schools. They help parents make school choices and enable parent and community leaders to take action with schools on improvement strategies.

A Data Pathway Toward College and Career Readiness

While the examples we note are grade level specific, they suggest that to get the full benefit of sharing data with families and also students, it is useful to envision and construct a birth through high school strategy built on shared responsibility for data use among family, school, and community stakeholders. A data pathway consists of measureable benchmarks for a child's learning that begins in early childhood and continues through the school years. A family can track progress over the short term (e.g., to improve reading) and over the long term (e.g., to advance through different grade levels). Through this pathway, families can help their children stay on the right track to graduation and college and career readiness, access an array of school and community learning resources, and gradually transfer responsibility for performance-based learning to the student. Our research on pioneering initiatives suggests three elements found effective for data sharing with families: access, understanding, and action (Weiss, Lopez, & Stark, 2011).

Access. Families want to know how their children are doing in school so that they can help them at home. They benefit from timely and relevant data on attendance, behavior, and academic progress and performance. Such data are being shared through parent–teacher conferences and, increasingly, through electronic media. Because not all families have computers or reliable internet connections, some schools are providing parents access to computers and online student data by opening their computer labs to parents and extending hours of operation, others are working with community-based organizations to set up computer kiosks, and some school-community partnerships are refurbishing computers and giving them to families that complete a set of family-engagement and computer-learning workshops. Knowing the circumstances of families helps school districts design effective access to student data. In New York City, for example, one school with a high number of children from a nearby homeless shelter set up a parent room with a washer-dryer, microwave, mini-library, and computers. Parent coordinators invited parents to use the room and encouraged them to learn how to use the online student data system and to understand their child's academic performance (Polakow-Suransky, 2010). Parents in New York City are also involved in testing the formats of online data systems in order to increase user accessibility.

Understanding. Families need to be able to understand the data and know what to do with it. They need to grasp what the data suggest in terms of their child's short- and long-term development and academic progress. Data are meaningful when placed in the context of school requirements and a student's learning goals. Attendance data, for example, become useful when families know the school's expectations about the number of allowable absences, the consequences of missed school days, and the differences between excused and unexcused absences. At the Washoe School District in Reno, Nevada, high school parent workshops and communication with parent involvement staff about the use of the online data system go beyond the use of technology to incorporate information about attendance requirements and resources where parents can seek help if their teen shows signs of truancy (Crain, 2010). Understanding data so that they are meaningful takes time and regular communication. It begins with training parents—usually face-to-face—so they understand education terminology and student data within a framework of standards and assessments. In-person training can be followed by web-based tutorials about what students should know and be able to do in the

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subject areas that are being assessed. Parent–teacher conferences are ideal for making student data a centerpiece of conversations during the school year. These meetings become the “essential conversation” for improving student progress on the pathway to graduation and college and career readiness.

The Creighton School District (K–8) in Phoenix, Arizona has recreated the parent–teacher conference to focus on helping parents understand student data and take action to improve student progress and performance. Called Academic Parent–Teacher Teams (APTT), the sessions consist of three 75-minute parent–teacher group meetings and one individual parent–teacher meeting. Teachers volunteer to use this approach, and the number of classrooms using APTT has expanded since the pilot phase. During group meetings, a teacher explains learning goals for reading and math and presents data on aggregate classroom progress over the school year. Each parent receives a folder containing his or her child’s academic data and learns to interpret the child’s performance in relation to class learning goals and the overall standing of students. Teachers present the data in creative and concrete ways. For example, some teachers display a linear achievement line designating where the “average” child might score at different points in the year and then ask parents to chart where their own child falls. Teachers work with parents to set 60-day learning goals for their child based on academic scores. Parents also practice teaching skills modeled by the teacher and receive materials that they can use with their child at home (Paredes, 2010, 2011). In this way, parents become partners with teachers and work together to support continuous improvement and goal attainment.

Action. Families benefit most when schools provide resources that are linked to the data gathered from ongoing assessments. These resources offer families clear guidance about how to enable their children’s strengths to flourish, how to overcome challenges, and how to engage their children in activities and discussions that will support their overall learning and growth. In short, data must be actionable in order to produce changes in student achievement. From providing families with recommended activities that they can do at home with everyday materials, to highlighting resources in the community that they can access, schools are able to build effective opportunities for learning that respond precisely to the learning profiles of individual students. With access to data, an understanding of what that data reveals, and resources for action, families can:

- Support, monitor, and facilitate student progress and achievement in a focused and concrete way that complements learning at school.
- Inform transition from one grade level to another or one school to another so that teachers can be cognizant of and build upon the child’s unique development and interests.
- Engage in ongoing conversations with their child about planning for career and college.
- Align student skills and interest to available programs/resources in the community such as after-school programs and summer camps to further enrich learning and growth opportunities.

Data for Advocating Schoolwide Change

Beyond supporting an individual student’s learning, data on schoolwide performance can motivate parents to take action to improve their schools. School data help parents understand their school’s standing in relation to other schools, raise questions about areas where performance falls short of school goals, and work with schools as strategic partners in

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addressing these issues. Parent leaders and community groups are on the forefront of accessing and using student performance data to advocate for educational equity.

Access. Student performance data are available through national, state, district, and school websites. However, the data are not always easily accessible or presented in a format and language that parents can understand. Some parent organizations translate publicly available data into useful formats so that parents can grasp how students are performing. Other parent organizations choose to partner with research centers to conduct more sophisticated data analysis, especially when districtwide changes are sought. For example, the Community Involvement Program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University has been instrumental in providing data analysis, research, and training to the Coalition of Educational Justice in New York City, a parent-led entity composed of several community-based organizations and unions. Based on its reports, the Coalition acquired compelling information to address several issues about educational equity, including the middle school achievement gap and school closures (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, 2010).

Understanding. Parent organizations invest in training parent leaders to understand student data within an educational framework such as high school graduation and college readiness requirements, standards, curriculum, and assessment. They clarify for parents what different types of data reveal and the distinction between formative data showing student progress and summative data showing achievement. Parents, especially those from low-performing schools, gain new insights when data are disaggregated and viewed longitudinally. When they see data from high-performing schools and then look at their own school's data in comparison, they are motivated to act. Through an understanding of data, parents identify patterns, ask questions, and problem-solve on possible action steps. The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership is an organization that pioneered parent training in understanding school data as an integral part of leadership development. Through a three-part training program, parent leaders learn about the educational system; their roles as advocates; the relationship of standards, curriculum, and assessment; how to gather information about schools; and how to interpret data within the framework of standards and curriculum. Parents learn to examine disaggregated data by race and gender in order to better understand where learning gaps occur. With their newly imparted knowledge and skills, parents develop projects with other parents in their schools that focus on improving student learning and engaging families in children's education (Corbett & Wilson, 2000).

Action. Data can answer important questions, point the way to change, and improve policies, programs, and practices. Through useful data displays, parents can grasp school issues that demand action. They use data to hold schools accountable and to innovate new approaches to tackle hard issues. For example, parents in one Mississippi community became concerned about the high school dropout rate. Based on training in data interpretation provided by Parents for Public Schools, a national advocacy organization, the parents examined longitudinal data tracking students back to sixth grade. They realized that the dropout problem could be traced to a middle school student engagement problem. Parents then worked with principals and teachers and created a mentoring program that brings current high school students to the middle school to build relationships with and provide academic support for the younger students (N. Rudy, personal communication, May 25, 2011). (See Appendix 3.2 for an example of disaggregated data used in training parent leaders.)

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Conclusion

The experience of early data-sharing initiatives suggests there is enough value added in ensuring that families access, understand, and take action on student data to warrant more investment, development, and evaluation. Early results show that data sharing serves as a catalyst for meaningful communication between parents and teachers. As Bill Tucker of the Education Sector observes, “Parents will no longer be satisfied with ‘Fine’ as a response to the question, ‘How is my child doing?’ Data change the conversation so that it becomes respectful, engaging, and results-oriented” (B. Tucker, comments made at the National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement, November 9, 2010). The early initiatives also suggest that access to schoolwide data enables parents and community organizations to advocate for data-based improvements, design local solutions that take full advantage of a community’s resources, and track student progress. Although we are in the early stages of learning how to effectively share data and recognize it is not a cure-all for today’s educational challenges, we suggest it is emerging as a powerful way to leverage growing investments in state and district data systems and as a core element of family engagement strategies.

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