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# Addressing Reciprocity Between Families and Schools: Why these Bridges are Instrumental for Students' Academic Success

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## Recommended Citation

# Addressing reciprocity between families and schools: Why these bridges are instrumental for students' academic success

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## Abstract

One instrumental step in promoting overall children's academic success across the trajectory of early childhood, elementary, middle, and secondary grades is purposefully establishing positive linkages for families and schools through a shared partnership. By facilitating an ongoing collaborative approach to sustain family engagement practices both in and out of the classroom, schools can help to build parents' capacity to effectively support their children's academic development. This article is an overview of the literature based on research from the last two decades on the effects of family involvement and home to school partnerships to student academic achievement within a US context. It addresses the sociocultural implications for establishing home and school partnerships with school-wide pedagogical recommendations in supporting diverse families and K-12 educators in the collaborative work for the educational success of all children. Finally, the article identifies methods to proactively engage all families with a paradigm shift on rethinking traditional methods to skills of cultural competence that honors family backgrounds, validates cultural strengths, and corroborates with the contributions that families make to engender academic success for their children.

## Background

American schools are becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, challenging teachers and administrators to enact programs that provide quality learning environments for all students. Teachers must simultaneously meet their students' needs and the demands of local, state, and national authorities. On the other side of the equation, families expect a guarantee that their children are given a quality education and a solid preparation for their adult lives. Although all stakeholders are responsible for students' achievement, studies have significantly suggested that

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key factors in promoting student outcomes are successful home and school partnerships. Extensive studies have also documented the vital roles that families play in fostering learning experiences for their children and their relationships to academic success. Therefore, the relationship between family involvement and student achievement must first be examined to understand the greater benefits in building positive partnerships between home and school.

## Effects of family involvement

Given the popularity of family involvement as a reform movement in schools, schools across the US are increasingly encouraging families to become involved. With regards to this movement, it is also crucial to understand what is meant by family involvement given the difficulties around the issue and the complex definitions that it holds. Often described as a generic issue around interactions between educators and families, the term has included: policy-making, volunteer activities, parent education, and information sharing; however, the definition of family involvement has yet to be finalized (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 in the United States defined parent involvement as:

> the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including ensuring —
>
> (A) that parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning;
>
> (B) that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
>
> (C) that parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child;
>
> (D) the carrying out of other activities, such as those described in section 1118. (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, Sec. 9101 [32])

In addition, a leading researcher on parental and family involvement, Epstein (2002) provided a model of parental involvement discussed within six types of activities that build relationships between the family, school, and community. These six types include: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community and serve as the core for helping teachers and school professionals develop ways to involve families. Successful partnerships between families and educators have relied on these six kinds of activities to meet the needs of the child (Epstein, 2002). Central to these definitions is recognizing the inclusive term of family to acknowledge that various members such as: grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, foster parents, or friends play significant roles and responsibilities for children's education, care, and well-being (Ratcliff, 2008). Moreover, the delineations of the terms above articulate the need for quality interactions between families and educators to work more closely together for students' learning.

Extensive research has documented the benefits of family involvement and the comprehensive benefits in children's education. Henderson and Berla (1994) argued that the negative impacts of poverty and drop-out rates can be alleviated when parents take a strong interest in their children's learning at home, provide for their basic physical, emotional, and social needs, and communicate with the school. The researchers carefully reviewed and analyzed 85 studies that showed the effects of carefully planned and well implemented parent involvement activities on educational outcomes

for children, their families, and the schools. Other studies found that higher levels of family engagement correlated to cognitive advantages and higher scores on math and language-arts content areas with reduced behavior problems and more positive interactions with their peers (Domina, 2005; Rimm-Kaufmann, Pianta, Cox, & Bradley, 2003).

Parental and family influences have also been documented as extremely influential especially in the early years of children's academic experience. Izzo, Wiessberg, Kasprow, and Fendrich (1999) assessed how certain behaviors of family involvement enhance children's academic achievement and social development. Such behaviors include the frequency of educator contact with parents; the quality of those interactions; family participation in school activities; and family engagement in home activities or other extracurricular activities. Results from their three-year longitudinal study with 1205 elementary (K-3) students suggested that active family participation in school related activities led to increased student involvement and positive effects on student perception of the school. The frequency of parent–teacher contact, however, did not necessarily suggest similarly positive results, and sometimes led to poorer school engagement. A possible explanation for this association is explained by the *reason* for parent–teacher contact since frequent contacts were often related to student behavior problems. As a result, the study implied that schools should improve communication practices with families through constructive and optimistic news to promote quality relationships that ultimately support students' early learning rather than simple phone conversations based on behavior incidences of students.

Due to the positive effects of family involvement, it may be helpful to consider students' reactions and experiences on how they perceive those relationships with parents and education. For example, Marchant, Paulson, and Rothlisberg's (2001) examination of the correlation of family (parenting style and parent involvement) and school contexts on students' motivation suggested a positive relationship existed between parental values to student motivation. The study concluded that parental values on achievement were important to students' motivations, confidence, and competence. Parent involvement that emphasized achievement rather than a general parenting style was strongly related to student motivation. Students who perceived that their parents value the importance of effort and academic success generally were achieving academically and placed a high priority on grades as compared to students who imagined that their parents did not value education. The study also implied that family involvement at home versus school might differentially relate to student motivation. These findings recommend that schools should extend and encourage a range of family involvement practices both at home and school to boost academic morale, improve school performance, and reach different motivating factors in children.

Ames, de Stefano, Watkins, and Sheldon (1995) also explored the effects of school-to-home type of family involvement to measure children's intrinsic motivation. Family involvement in this study was defined as: a) providing parents with information about classroom learning activities; b) providing parents with information about the strengths and accomplishments of their own child; and c) providing parents with information about how to help their child learn at home. Weekly classroom newsletters, parents visits to the classroom, teacher prepared notes and messages to parents, telephone contacts, conferences, and ideas or tips for helping their children succeed were examples of communication strategies used in the study. Intrinsic motivation was defined as engagement and enjoyment in learning. A self-report that included items 'I like doing class work', 'I like learning new things', and 'I work hard to learn new things' measured the motivational construct of the child's intrinsic interest in learning. Results suggested that when parents receive weekly communication from their child's teacher and when children see their parents involved in their education, children's intrinsic motivation was more promising. This also explained the positive aspects of communication between families and teachers. Not only did parents gain knowledge about programs and learning at school but also a greater understanding of how they can

influence their child's learning at home. The study advocated to schools to continue providing this kind of emotional support to families to increase enthusiasm in their child's learning while nurturing children's natural curiosity to learn. Utilizing meaningful strategies in family involvement programs encourage parents to actively participate in their children's education overcoming the challenges or constraints of personal, life, and work-related demands.

## Implications of family involvement

The studies aforementioned detail countless aspects of family involvement; however, certain contextual barriers do exist to prevent successful home and school partnerships from thriving. Such constraints include but are not limited to: the bureaucratic nature of schools; the ethnic population of teachers and administrators; the lack of knowledge of teachers to involve families; and the perceptions of teachers that family involvement will threaten their role as experts (Gordon, 2004).

### Homogeneous teaching force

One major setback in collaborative partnerships with families and teachers as supported by Broussard (2003) is the homogeneity of the teaching staff. The study indicated the stark contrast between the ethnic distributions of public school teachers and administrators as compared to the diverse racial groups represented by students and their families. Most teachers come from predominantly European-American middle-class backgrounds and enter the field without much exposure to social and ethnic diversity or the skills to cope with these realities. Moreover, teachers and administrators' attitudes about parent or family engagement are seen through lens of European-American middle-class values, experiences, and assumptions. Teachers often assume that the families of their students come from or embrace the same European-American middle-class beliefs, values, and norms as their own families. Valdes (as cited in Broussard, 2003) said, 'It did not occur to school personnel that parents might not know the appropriate ways to communicate with the teachers, that they might feel embarrassed about writing notes filled with errors, and that they might not even understand how to interpret their children's report cards' (p. 214).

And although statistics point to the growing student diversity of US schools, the teaching force is still relatively homogeneous with the majority from European-American, female, suburban, and middle-class backgrounds (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). The demographic realities that are present in US classrooms demand teachers who are knowledgeable and can relate to their cultural backgrounds. Gay and Howard (2000) argue that in addition to the less diverse teaching force, the 'demographic divide' creates disparities in educational opportunities, resources, and achievement among student groups who differ in race, culture, and socioeconomic class. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) note that even though differences in race and language exist between teachers, students, and parents, there are also marked differences in their biographies and experiences. Schools are institutions with teachers and administrators who often imagine the European-American middle-class family as a standard norm and bring these assumptions into the interactions they have with students and their families. Moreover, most teachers do not have the same points of views or cultural frames of reference as their students (Heath, 1983; Sleeter & Grant, 1987, 2005) resulting in educators who adopt similar ideologies or are unprepared to empathize with students whose family backgrounds differ from their own.

### Literacy practices among cultures

Another social and cultural implication such as the differences in literacy practices among racial groups presents another challenge to establishing strong home and school partnerships. Heath's

seminal ethnographic work (1983) explored how children in the Roadville and Trackton communities have different ways of interpreting texts, asking questions, telling stories, and providing explanations in their ways of integrating written language with daily social life. The literacy practices and events that occurred in these families differ as groups use those literacy materials for purposes or to make meaning. Events that occurred in Roadville focused around coaching babies and children to develop independent skills and answer questions that involve specific information including a variety of literacy materials that were used as a means to train children to act like readers and writers; whereas in Trackton literacy events of reading the newspaper, sharing mail, or making trips to the grocery stores primarily involved talk and social negotiation, which were integral parts in carrying out those literacy practices. One example was noted in how members of the Trackton community read the newspaper emphasizing the task as a group responsibility allowing community members to participate openly adding their own previous knowledge or understandings to that particular situation rather than an explicit teaching of literacy skills in reading the newspaper. The variations in literacy practices from these two communities provide an understanding of how children negotiate the distinct literate traditions that exist within their communities while learning to navigate those differences to transition between home and school contexts. Furthermore, these examples show how differences in literacy practices could serve as potential gaps between home and school literacy because teachers could be unaware of the differences making unnecessary assumptions about students' background experiences in language and literacy-related tasks.

Social and cultural barriers such as these, along with incompatible expectations and parents' negative experiences in schools have hindered home and school partnerships for ethnically diverse families. However, these obstacles are diminished through conscientious teacher practices that recognize families as crucial members in the educational process of their children. Honing into students' backgrounds and authentically creating welcoming school environments that allow families to participate in their children's education are some of the major practices that educators can model and exemplify. This shift of behavior, attitude, and thinking are crucial and monumental steps in establishing quality family and teacher relationships, more than any other educator characteristic or family variable of socioeconomic class, parents' education, marital status, or children's grade level.

## Beyond the paradigm

With this in mind, it becomes the responsibility of schools to increase the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward diverse family styles and cultural backgrounds to promote and sustain strong partnerships with them. One effective change is moving from a subtractive model to an assets-based approach highlighting the diverse experiences that culturally and linguistically students bring to the classroom because they are navigating their way between two different worlds as they transition from home to school (Colombo, 2006). Teachers need to recognize that all cultural backgrounds and families have strengths that must be included in the education process. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) proposed that teachers should utilize the 'funds of knowledge' to capitalize on household knowledge so they gain a more sophisticated approach regarding the experiences of their students. Funds of knowledge refer to the strategic knowledge and related activities critical in understanding households' functioning, development, and well-being. Teachers who act as researchers can examine the practices in different households to gather information to effectively develop meaningful learning experiences based on their students' funds of knowledge.

Building exceptional partnerships with families involves listening to the diverse voices and perspectives of families. The uniqueness of families allows for the promotion of strengths based on family-centered practices since beliefs and behaviors of school achievement vary across cultural and ethnic groups (Muscott, 2002). Therefore, it is critical to understand how these differences

play a role in families' expectations of their children's school to provide more effective means in supporting the collaboration between home and school. Okagaki and Frensch's (1998) study suggested that Latino parents placed a higher importance on developing autonomy and conformity; European-American parents had more confidence about their ability to help their children succeed; and Asian-American parents had higher expectations for their children's educational attainment than other parents. And, while all parents wanted their children to receive A grades, Asian-American parents were less satisfied with Bs and Cs than other parents. Another study found differences in parental voice and agency across social class between the two schools. Many middle-class parents were actively involved and shared a responsibility for their children's education as compared to working-class parents who were reluctant to participate in schools because of their dissatisfaction with the school due to poor communication. This led to the belief of parents from this group to rely on the school primarily to educate their children (Vincent, 2001). These variations have produced negative teacher perceptions on parents' academic expectations; therefore, working to dispel unwarranted misconceptions should be prioritized in all teacher and family interactions. Research from Gay (2000) has suggested the idea of cultural responsiveness for professionals to analyze their own biases because teachers may interpret low family attendance at school functions as a lack of interest in their children's education. Emphasis should focus on developing positive perspectives of families of diverse students, a pivotal tool in building trusting home and school partnerships. And, as the demographic shifts in US classrooms become more apparent, there is an urgent need to prepare teachers with the tools and attitudes to implement culturally responsive and curricular practices (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Developing an understanding of how each family expresses its culture involves active listening through the use of silence, acknowledging without judging, respecting opinions, paraphrasing, empathy, and clarifying. Furthermore, positive interactions between teachers and families that limit criticism can promote efficacy and increase the opportunities for maximum family involvement. In that way, teachers can engage sensibly in authentic dialogue with parents so that they understand academic expectations while working to meticulously make explicit linkages between home and school experiences.

## From communication to collaboration

Effective communication that respects the cultural backgrounds between teachers, families, and students is imperative to the success of all students. Thus, collaborative communication produces an entire set of outcomes where both parents and teachers gain confidence in each other's roles with accurate information and mutual respect of common interests (Schumacher, 2007). Past research from Epstein (1995) noted that this respect sends a message of inclusiveness to families, reinforces their sense of belonging, and creates a context that allows children to value education. Furthermore, other researchers have recommended the need for important cross-cultural experiences between home and school that enhance those relationships. Gordon (2004) recommended that educators acknowledge the need for both school and home components for successful student learning; therefore, a commitment from educators for collaborative relationships with families is an absolute necessary. Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) emphasized that when families are involved in school communication, decision-making, and advocacy, they gain an understanding of school expectations that are pertinent to academic success. The authors recommended that accepting families as equal partners in the educational process of their children's schooling along with positive communication are key strategies to successful family and teacher partnerships. Teachers can effectively communicate to families by using an open, honest, and supportive language that they understand. Making connections between home and school promotes cultural acceptance while

allowing families to feel respected and comfortable. Thus, providing classroom curriculum and activities that respond to students' backgrounds and varied experiences fosters continued learning at home where expectations and goals are clear and reciprocated. Finally, an established two-way communication system between families and teachers provides a level playing field for all in regards to students' educational progress (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2004).

## Communication strategies

Many strategies for facilitating effective communication between families and schools exist which lead to improved collaboration and cooperation of stakeholders. One suggestion for schools is to assign a facilitator who works in partnership with classrooms, grade-levels, special areas, etc. to create a consistent person for parents to direct inquiries and/or to communicate their concerns to the school. This facilitator can build trust with families alleviating the pressure for some families who have differences in their expectations of teacher communication (Vincent, 2001). Another effective strategy is the LAFF, don't CRY strategy developed by McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, and Schreiner (2008), which provides a flexible framework for teachers to practice effective listening behaviors that are rooted in respect and empathy. When interacting with families especially in conferences, teachers employ LAFF steps to: (L) listen, empathize, and communicate respect; (A) ask questions, (F) focus on the issues, and (F) find a first step instead of CRY behaviors: (C) criticize people who aren't present, (R) react hastily and promise something that can't be delivered, and (Y) yakety-yak-yak. It is critical to remember that within this framework, and when simply communicating with families, teachers need to acknowledge students' accomplishments and strengths. In addition, teachers should welcome families by having them contribute to planning school events, procedures, routines, and activities to promote trust and enhance engagement. Providing ongoing feedback, time to problem-solve together, and encouraging families to ask questions during personal contacts are other strategies that tap into effective communication. Furthermore, reaching into families' homes through weekly newsletters, teacher-created websites, periodic phone calls, and progress monitoring reports have become increasingly positive means of communication (Galuzzo, 2011). Regardless of the strategy used, it is vital that schools and families are attuned to making decisions under current and state-of-the-art information within a functional and cooperative partnership that is supported through rapport of shared goals for students' success (Martin & Hagan-Burke, 2002; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

## Professional development for educators

Improving educational excellence for all students also requires teachers to participate in professional development programs to hone their practice to build home and school partnerships. According to Broussard (2003), in-service training should engage teachers to utilize family knowledge modules and strategies such as: role-playing, case scenarios, reflective learning strategies, and self-reflection to build respect for various family lifestyles and cultural backgrounds. When teachers commit to participating in authentic professional development programs, they embrace multicultural practices and help to dissolve deficit thinking and reject the notion that differences are shortfalls to overcome. In this way, they become more knowledgeable of the strengths that families bring to develop effective culturally responsive teaching practices, thus, meeting the varied needs of their diverse students and their families (Gay, 2000).

Holding professional membership and association is another way to help prepare current educators with the opportunity to participate in their own learning around family and school partnerships. Chavkin (2005) supported the membership of Family Involvement Network of Educators

(FINE), a national network from Harvard Graduate School of Education that brings together thousands of stakeholders including: K-12 school staff, researchers of higher education, community-based professionals, parent leaders, and policy advocates who are committed to promoting strong partnerships between schools, families, and communities. Members of FINE receive the latest research information on family involvement, strategies and tools that highlight best practices for strengthening family partnerships, and opportunities to exchange ideas or dialogue with other professionals who share the same purpose. Utilizing and accessing these professional organizations provide teachers with a wealth of resources to continue and refine their own practices in connecting meaningfully with families.

Finally, when families and teachers commit to learning together, powerful connections between home and school are created to enhance the communication. Many researchers have suggested using family or home visits to accomplish this mutual cohesion. Gordon (2004) indicated that successful family visits involve teachers going into parents' homes or a mutually agreed upon non-school location to interview families regarding their make-up, routines, parents' goals, student interests, needs, and learning styles. Meyer and Mann (2006) recommended from their study that home visits not only strengthened the home school partnerships but also resulted in more positive teacher relationships between families and their students. More than half of the 24 surveys returned (54%) from the study stated that home visits contributed to an improved relationship with parents and child while 37 percent of the surveys stated that home visits provided a better understanding of the child, parents, and/or personal situation with families. These results indicated that when teachers are knowledgeable of the strengths and challenges that children bring to the classroom, they are more empathetic due to improved communication between their students' families. As families develop trust and build rapport with teachers, they gain support in their home environments resulting in a more active role in their children's classroom and school experience. Moreover, a five-year follow-up of the original study conducted by Meyer, Mann, and Becker (2011) echoed similar consistent findings of the positive effects of home visits. Seventeen of the 29 teachers who participated in the second study were in the original study and overall findings suggested a relationship between home visits to student attendance, classroom behavior, and academic performance. Teachers in the study viewed home visits as an opportunity to learn about children's backgrounds; to explain their behaviors at school; to develop comfortable relationships with parents; to reduce students' anxiety about school; and to reaffirm the varied roles that parents play in their children's learning.

In addition, ethnographic home visits over an extended period of time allow teachers to take an active role as the learner to develop a more symmetrical relationship with families and where knowledge is exchanged, expectations are communicated, and partnerships are established for the overall academic excellence for children. Using the information gathered in these home visits coupled with the mutual trust and respect from parents, teachers can design intentional instruction based on the strengths of families (Meyer et al., 2011; Moll et al., 1992). In this way, classroom methods are continuously updated to better meet the needs of diverse students while facilitating formal intellectual development.

## Engaging families

Successfully carrying out the above goals means effectively engaging families throughout the learning process and meeting their diverse needs. Families need access to programs and services for health and nutrition including parent education courses that assist in the preparation of home environments that are conducive to students' learning. One excellent way to provide meaningful support for families is through shared expectations of homework. Assignments should provide

opportunities for children to reinforce conceptual understandings from grade-level content with realistic goals that tap into their diverse educational experiences and contexts of what, when, and how students learn. In this way, all family members are more involved in their children's learning at home as they collaborate in various cultural techniques to contribute to academic experiences at home and school. Constructive activities such as these promote a balanced approach where teachers understand families' backgrounds, where parents feel supported in their children's transition from home to school, and where students develop personal qualities and good habits that translate into positive school behaviors. In this way, families become more diligent in working with their own children to link cultural and real-life experiences from home to schoolwork while using strategies such as: encouraging, praising, guiding, and monitoring of students' learning developing their children's self-concept and confidence in both settings (Epstein, 1995).

Schools environments that establish a sense of community where families participate meaningfully are more engaging and inviting to the community. Giving families a sense of place in their children's education can be achieved through focus group discussions that elicit their input on a variety of school topics including: school governance, school-wide improvement plans, restructuring, and curriculum development give parents opportunities to participate and make decisions regarding important school issues (Gordon, 2004). Another strategy that invites family participation is opening resource centers designed specifically around families' needs and housed in a particular location on school campuses. With assistance from educators, family resource centers can offer workshops, facilitate information sharing, and provide outreach to the community – all of which create sense of agency for families. Computer literacy classes and English-as-a-second-language activities are other resources that these centers can provide serving those who may need them. Additionally, centers can utilize other families who have expertise and knowledge around unique issues to serve as liaisons in schools assisting in bridging experiences for teaching and learning between home and school. Sanders (2008) identified four main roles of liaisons as a way to connect the two environments that promote communication and collaboration among students, families, and communities. These roles are: a) direct services to families placed at risk, b) support for teacher outreach, c) support for school-based partnership teams, and d) data for program improvement. Moreover, successful home and school partnerships accomplish the tasks that family liaisons carry and work to recruit, maintain, and improve those relationships with its members (Colombo, 2006). Essentially, family resource centers serve to create and sustain positive family engagement practices that are critical to the success of home and school partnerships.

Finally, utilizing a range of enrichment activities provide families with opportunities to interact with their children's learning. For example, expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) offer structured learning environments targeted for school-age children (typically children up to the age of 12), as well as adolescents (children 12 and older). These programs occur outside the traditional school day before and after school settings; extended school year; Saturday academies; summer school; and other creative approaches that enhance student learning. As such, these programs provide a range of enrichment activities across the different content areas, arts, sciences, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Particularly for older youth, these programs draw upon various community resources such as colleges, community organizations, museums, and internships with local employers. Therefore, the success of ELOs is vital in supporting children's learning beyond the school day. According to a recent policy brief conducted by Harris, Rosenberg, and Wallace (2012), high-quality ELOs rely on positive partnerships between families that have moved beyond foundational informational sharing or occasional family participation within school activities. The research brief documented that ELOs should work as equal partners with families to a) understand children's needs; b) ensure that program's goals and activities align with children's larger learning goals; c) facilitate communication with other settings where children learn to better coordinate

learning supports (i.e. tutors, books, and other learning materials); and d) share key data and results regarding children's progress. Overall, when stakeholders are more unified in carrying out family engagement practices, children benefit from the positive influences that they offer including the support they receive from peers and families to thrive academically and emotionally in and out of school.

## Conclusion

Home and school connections that are precise, coherent, and continuous allow successful facilitation of family engagement in the educational excellence of their children. At the core, relationships based on respect and collaboration enable team members in family and teacher categories to reach mutual goals and common understanding. Rather than separate education silos, the literature has reviewed the profound effects when families and teachers work together to achieve students' academic outcomes. Building collaborative partnerships with families is a worthy endeavor and warranted in a sound research base as one of the many steps for a successful K-12 experience with great benefits to families, teachers, and students. Together, families and teachers are powerful forces of accountability in schools ensuring that all children receive the quality education that they deserve and emerge as winners.

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