

Improving Parental Involvement in Illinois Under the No Child Left Behind Act



An Illinois Action Plan:
Executive Summary and Recommendations
School-Initiated, Parent-Cultivated, Community-Facilitated

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Executive Summary

The logic is simple: children whose parents are involved in their education do better in school and on a number of achievement measures. Even parents showing interest in nightly homework can make an impact on a child's education. Educators realize how important parental involvement is, and research documents its importance, but too often a comprehensive parental involvement effort gets lost in the race to improve achievement scores and deal with pressing day-to-day problems in school systems.

Yet, parental involvement is more than just an accessory to education or a “feel good” measure to improve the collaboration between parents and educators. Parent involvement was included as a requirement under federal law as early as 1994 and is an important part in helping schools meet challenging achievement goals under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As a result, written into new authorizations of the law is a section – Section 1118 – mandating that schools create plans for comprehensive parental involvement programs on a local and community level. Although schools are accountable to follow the law, there is little direction on how to create plans to improve parental involvement. As a result, parental involvement programs seem like “extras” rather than essential efforts. Schools are in the dark, not only about how to engage parents appropriately, but also about how to make engagement opportunities equitable despite the parents' varying income, education, and social backgrounds.

This report explores parental involvement programs under NCLB with a focus on the challenges facing Illinois. It looks at the efforts of districts and schools to initiate and implement parental participation programs from the vantage point of parents, educators, and community leaders – the three key stakeholders – in the effort to help students improve achievement. Chicago Appleseed provides an outline for educators, policy makers, and community leaders of a model for parental involvement that prioritizes accountability and advocacy on behalf of children. In this model for parental involvement, Chicago Appleseed recommends a “Top-Down/Bottom-Up” approach to parental involvement programs. Specifically, schools and districts must work from the

top-down to initiate parental involvement and create organizational structures to foster parental involvement in schools and make it a priority amongst educators and parents. Additionally, parents must also work from the bottom-up to take advantage of those structures, and make the programs flourish. Beyond this effort, there must be action and outreach to build the capacity of parents to participate in a meaningful way.

For parental involvement to build the achievement of students, it must be: *School-Initiated*, *Parent-Cultivated*, and *Community Group-Facilitated*. Through secondary research, case study analysis, and interviews with parents, community leaders, educators, and leading educational experts, Chicago Appleseed has developed a model for parental involvement and recommendations for change in Illinois.

A Model for Parental Involvement: The Top-Down/Bottom-Up Approach to Increasing Student Achievement

Educators and parents share common achievement goals for children, but there is considerable confusion and uncertainty about how parents should be involved and what level of involvement is appropriate.

Section 1118 of NCLB does not specify how to provide technical assistance and coordinate parental involvement programs. Furthermore, and most fundamental, there are no examples, guidelines, or models as to what “effective parental involvement activities” look like and what types of techniques may have long-term and wide-reaching influence on student achievement.

The Chicago Appleseed research data demonstrates that, as a result, schools and districts are left guessing about what level and amount of parental involvement is most effective. There is also significant uncertainty about how to create parental involvement plans that impact student achievement. Parents, in turn, are willing to participate in a way that is both meaningful and effective, but do not know where to start and have a low awareness

of NCLB and its remedies. Finally, community groups help local families with a wide array of essential services and have earned the trust and attention of families. Yet, these community-based organizations remain underutilized as a resource to improve and facilitate the engagement of parents and schools.

Chicago Appleseed has developed a model for parental involvement that works to address these weaknesses and challenges and improve the state of parent involvement in Illinois overall.¹ This model of parental involvement is based on: 1) the terms of NCLB, 2) the essential elements of successful parental involvement programs as detailed by leading policy and education experts, and 3) the priority of increasing student achievement on the part of districts, schools, and parents.

This model is what we call the Top-Down/Bottom-Up approach to increasing student achievement. By this we mean that parental involvement programs must be a product of the efforts of schools and parents together. First, schools and districts must work from the top to initiate parental involvement and create organizational structures to make parental involvement possible in schools and a priority with educators and parents. In terms of a “bottom-up” approach, parents must also do their part. Parents must be responsive to the efforts of schools. In addition, there must be action and outreach to build the capacity of parents to participate in meaningful ways. In families facing social, economic, or linguistic hurdles, parents must be cultivated and coached in a manner that improves the home environment for the child and the ability of the parent to interact and advocate within schools. Coaching and cultivation allow for equitable involvement for

¹ The Chicago Appleseed model incorporates the following five findings set forth in *It Takes a Parent*:

- Too many parents fail to receive clear and timely information about their children and their schools.
- Poverty, limited English proficiency, and varying cultural expectations are among the biggest barriers to parental involvement.
- Poor communication with parents hinders their ability to exercise NCLB’s choice and supplemental education services options.
- Creative, multi-faceted communication and engagement strategies can promote better parental involvement in schools.
- Parental involvement is not uniformly valued by school leaders as a key accountability strategy.

all parents regardless of background, but also helps parents understand the most productive ways to help schools build higher achieving students.

Both Top-Down (Schools Engaging Parents) and Bottom-Up (Building the Capacity of Parents to Support Schools) efforts must exist as essential parts of a whole. Yet community groups also act as a central component to this model. Community groups can help make this relationship work. They can facilitate interactions and act as a bridge between parents and schools.

1. School-Initiated

This component builds on Joyce Epstein's model of successful parental involvement programs. An effective parental involvement program must include organized leadership and structure to diagnose local challenges within the school, create specific and pragmatic solutions, and implement change. Power is not consolidated within the group but distributed among educators, parents, and community representatives acting as a voice and "action arm" for change. This leadership and structure allow ideas to be implemented in an effective way. Through leadership and organized structure, parental involvement programs have permanency, accountability, and formal recognition within the school and act as a vehicle for teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders to collaborate on diagnosing and solving local challenges.

2. Parent-Cultivated

The first focus of parent cultivation is responding to the efforts of schools. Once schools initiate efforts to involve parents, parents must do their part to create a mutual relationship.

The second focus of parent cultivation is training parents to be better advocates for their children. This training helps to make programs more equitable for all. Parent involvement programs must cultivate the skills and capacities of parents by

acknowledging that parents of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds have different abilities to interact with schools as equals. Accordingly, for parental involvement programs to be successful, they must correct for social factors such as parents' lack of income, lack of education, or significant language barriers that may diminish their ability to advocate for their children. Training and capacity-building allow for all parents to be heard equally and effectively.

3. Community Group-Facilitated

Community groups, given their trustworthiness in the community and their keen understanding of community needs and challenges, are uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between parents and schools as well as a resource for both training and advocacy. Training and advocacy occur on two levels. First, community groups along with PIRCs can educate parents on NCLB resources available to them. Second, they can help train parents, especially those who face great disadvantage, in essential parenting skills and techniques to build their capacity to advocate for their children. Community groups can also play a diagnostic role for schools. As they respond to community needs, these groups acquire front-line information about the challenges facing parents and children that can impact education, which they can share with the schools.

Chicago Appleseed Advocacy and Action: Recommendations

Illinois data suggests that there are barriers to accomplishing the Top-Down/Bottom-Up model of parental involvement. The following section details specific, policy-based recommendations and advocacy goals that will help Illinois build comprehensive and effective parental involvement efforts under NCLB in order to increase achievement. Effective implementation of parental involvement programs requires the implementation of a systemic model that allows the interests and concerns of both parents and school districts to be taken into account.

The national Appleseed report, *It Takes a Parent*, focuses on a variety of recommendations aimed at improving parental involvement under the NCLB Act. Our companion report focuses on the need to devise and implement an approach to improving parental involvement programs in an effective and fair way specific to Illinois.

1. Avoiding One-Size-Fits-All Solutions: Conducting Individualized Needs Assessment Related to Parent Involvement as a Necessary First Step for School Districts

Parental involvement programs are not “one-size-fits-all” propositions: solutions and activities that help one community may not work as well in another community. Each of the three districts in this study – despite having mixed socio-economic and racial compositions, and comparable performance statuses under NCLB – faced their own unique set of hurdles and challenges. Accordingly, no one solution or program can fit every local context.

Yet, as the case study details, leadership structures like ATPs have the essential role of conducting an in-depth needs assessment related to parental involvement. This needs assessment should lead to the development of a Parental Involvement Plan and should involve parents, community organizations, the business community in the area, teachers, and school administrators. The assessment should take into account the particular cultural and socio-economic composition of the area and should include an inventory of community resources. This assessment is a necessary starting point for all schools before they embark on creating parental involvement programs.

2. Building Parental Capacity Through Training: Developing Community Groups as a Resource

Community groups – which already have the trust of the community and knowledge about its needs – are an important and often untapped resource for improving parental involvement programs in schools. Not only can community groups educate parents about how to be effective advocates for their children's education and act as liaisons between

parents and schools, but they can also assess the needs of the community they serve and offer equitable solutions to meet these needs.

First, Chicago Appleseed recommends that community groups share in the task of educating parents on NCLB. By this we mean that, through training, community groups can build parental awareness of 1) NCLB resources and remedies and 2) the importance of parental involvement under NCLB. Through this training, community groups can educate parents on the specific sections of NCLB – for example, Section 1118 – that directly apply to them.

However, for parental involvement to be equitable, community groups must do more than educate parents on the specifics of the law. They must also take into account the different backgrounds parents bring to parental involvement (educational status, material resources, language barriers, etc.), which can be a considerable hurdle to parental involvement. By working with families at a grassroots level, community groups have a unique vantage point on the needs and concerns of the parents they serve.

This leads us to Chicago Appleseed's second recommendation for community groups. Community groups can offer programs and training to build the capacities of parents so that they can help to improve the quality of parental involvement in schools. These programs and training should be tailored specifically to meet the needs and concerns of parents they serve. For example, if those parents have a limited educational background, community groups could support them by offering a variety of classes to build the potential of parents to be better advocates for their children in school.

Third, Chicago Appleseed recommends that community groups act as liaisons between parents and schools by opening the door for enhanced and effective communication between the two groups. Because community groups are constant barometers of parent needs, they should voice such concerns through ATP structures as well as through forums like parent-teacher associations or school boards. ATP structures and community groups

should work hand in hand to diagnose challenges facing parents and solve such challenges.

3. Expanding the Role of PIRCs: Offering Technical Assistance and Coordination to Help Connect Parents to Schools and Schools to Parents

Nationally, there are more than 70 Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) helping to facilitate parental involvement under NCLB. These organizations vary widely in their approaches to engaging parents as well as in the quality of the services they offer.

As Chicago Appleseed was conducting research and writing this report, the Federal Department of Education announced funding for a new Illinois PIRC: The Harris Center for Early Childhood Education at Columbia College Chicago, in Chicago, Illinois. As a result of this newly funded PIRC, the state of Illinois faces a time of change and opportunity.

Chicago Appleseed looks forward to collaborating with both the outgoing PIRC and the newly funded PIRC, working as a partner to ensure that parental involvement, as mandated by NCLB, is a measurable reality. Chicago Appleseed recommends that the role of Parent Information and Resource Centers be more expansive. Much of the focus of the previous Illinois PIRC had been on parent education. Yet, as elaborated above, community groups are essential resources. PIRCs can offer technical assistance to and/or collaborate with community organizations interested in actively engaging parents under Section 1118. Community program directors need schooling in what NCLB and Section 1118 entails; and PIRCs, being the experts on NCLB and its remedies, are well equipped to administer this technical assistance and training. PIRCs can help community groups approach their constituents and devise programs to engage parents and schools.

4. Constructing Parental Involvement as a State Issue: Utilizing the Resources of the Illinois State Board of Education to Promote Meaningful Parental Involvement Within Illinois School Districts

In Chicago Appleseed's interviews with educational leaders in Illinois, parents, and representatives of community organizations, a common theme emerged: Parental involvement is often seen as a local issue rather than an issue of statewide concern, resulting in two specific problems. First, some educational leaders in Illinois devalue parental involvement programs, and do not make the connection between building parental involvement and increasing student performance. Second, local districts and schools are left without comprehensive leadership and advice on how to start implementing a parental involvement program in their schools.

To counter this problem, Chicago Appleseed recommends that the Illinois State Board of Education utilize existing programs providing technical assistance to Illinois school districts to offer accountability and oversight to parental involvement programs, and to offer technical advice and support for improving parental involvement statewide. This technical advice would help refer schools to resources like Joyce Epstein's National Network of Partnership Schools or other resources that would help schools move towards a comprehensive partnership on a local level.²

5. Making the Connection Between Parental Involvement and Increasing Student Achievement: Spreading the Word

Despite the valid efforts of districts and schools, our data shows that parental involvement programs in Illinois are still regarded as accessories rather than as necessary elements of better education. Although research has proven that parental involvement improves student achievement across a wide array of measures, educators have yet to

² Recommendation 5 of *It Takes a Parent* (p. 40) highlights the importance of the role of state policymakers and educators in bringing about parental involvement: "Better Implementation and Stronger Accountability. Federal, state and local policymakers should recognize parental involvement as central to school improvement and place parental involvement strategies on par with other steps taken to improve student achievement."

recognize that parental involvement is an essential component to drive change and improvement.

Conclusion

This Chicago Appleseed report sets forth a model through which parents, schools, and community organizations can cooperate in developing partnerships for meaningful parental involvement. In so doing, Chicago Appleseed utilized existing research, its own research findings, and the findings and recommendations of the Appleseed national collaborative report. Chicago Appleseed's goal is to facilitate a process through which these efforts can be translated into specific actions and specific results for Illinois schools.

Schools and policymakers need to acknowledge the importance of parental involvement, including its demonstrated role in improving student achievement. Community organizations need to be allowed to play a pivotal role in facilitating parental involvement partnerships. Chicago Appleseed seeks to serve as a catalyst in bringing about parental involvement partnerships in Illinois.