

IT TAKES A PARENT:

Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act



*Executive Summary
and Recommendations*

Appleseed
Sowing the Seeds of Justice



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Preface

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the primary law that dedicates federal money to help economically poor children, has come a long way in 40 years. The role of schools has been expanded and national attention on student learning elevated. Today, public schools are faced with the tough assignment of assuring that every child reaches not only minimum standards, but beyond. That task should not be delegated to educators alone. In truth, if one wants to really transform education – It Takes A Parent.

Testing and accountability have commanded almost constant attention since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) became federal law four years ago. What is frequently overlooked is the special power of parents to lift their children to new academic heights. The partnership helps to achieve the primary aims of that law.

Without better informed and involved parents, all of the testing and data becomes, for some, the proverbial fallen tree in the forest that no one hears. Thus, NCLB should be understood, embraced, and ultimately evaluated, in part, on its success in educating and engaging parents.

NCLB says plainly that parents should be two things:

1. Informed of the academic progress of their children and the performance of their schools; and
2. Involved in meaningful ways as a partner with school officials.

This report looks at how parental involvement works in public elementary and secondary schools and what still needs to be done. While the findings and recommendations are based on research in six states and eighteen school districts, the results are symbolic of what is occurring at the more than 90,000 elementary and secondary public school buildings in the 50 states.

It is clear that as a nation we have not emphasized or financially invested in parental involvement in ways that we should. The bold vision of NCLB (portraying parents as full participating partners) remains unfulfilled. A renewed focus on parental involvement is a powerful and exciting potential direction for education in the 21st Century. Indeed it could be a key to defeating persistent achievement gaps and engaging low-income and non-English speaking parents, too many of whom still stand outside the window looking in.

Parental involvement is not a silver bullet, but is an important part of the solution. Instead of looking solely at moving principals, teachers, and students out of schools, reformers should focus on bringing parents into them. The highest achieving schools do that.

This report relies on the policy knowledge and legal acuity of Holland & Knight and DLA Piper, the technology insights of a global business firm, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, and the scholarly talents of Columbia Teachers College. Each of them dedicated enormous talent and time to the project. We are deeply grateful to them.

This report is not the ending. It is a beginning of Appleseed's work at the district, state, and federal levels to move these ideas from theory to practice, from model to reality. As a nation, we have lost four years of opportunity since NCLB's enactment to take full advantage of parental involvement. We must work now to mobilize parents to improve academic performance and address ongoing achievement gaps in our schools. We hope that you will join with us.

Edwin C. Darden
Director of Education Policy

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Executive Summary

Parental involvement is an essential element in the success of students and their schools. This simple point anchors the federal law known as the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” (NCLB). Much like its predecessor legislation, NCLB establishes state, district and school requirements designed to promote more effective parental involvement.

The belief is this: if schools provide clear, meaningful performance data to parents, then parents will become better school partners, decision-makers and advocates for their children. The law also reflects the view that effective parental involvement spurs improvements in student learning.

The focus on effective parental involvement as a way to boost overall achievement is more than just a federal requirement, however. It is supported by a long string of social science research and by the stories of schools that beat the odds. As one Georgia parent said, “When schools, parents and students work together, then children do better with their studies.”

Taken together, federal law and social science research recognize how important it is for schools and districts to provide:

- Clear and timely communication with parents about issues affecting student learning;
- An environment that supports teachers and school leaders in engaging parents about their own children as well as to benefit the school in general; and
- Key information and support for parents so that they can be effective advocates for their children and their children’s schools.

In 2005, Appleseed embarked on an examination of federal, state and local policies and practices on parental involvement. The idea was to gather on-the-ground perspectives and information, based on more than four years of experience implementing the requirements of NCLB. It is Appleseed’s hope that those perspectives, along with the parent opinions and information in this report, will enhance state, district and local efforts to promote effective parental involvement.

The report should also provide key information to federal, state and local policymakers, who constantly face the challenge of how best to structure and fund public education. (Several noteworthy practices and practical resources are highlighted throughout the report.) In particular, this report provides policy recommendations for Congress and the U.S. Department of Education to consider as they work to improve upon the parental involvement foundations established by NCLB. Reauthorization of the law that NCLB amends is currently projected for the fall of 2007.

This report is a call to action. It treats people at the federal, state and local levels to seize the moment, to mobilize on behalf of children – especially those who are disadvantaged – and to make parent power a central theme in the effort to improve academic performance.

Parents are not the magic answer. There is, in fact, no single solution for the education struggles that so many students endure. But parents cannot be relegated to the sidelines or seen as less important than “real educators.” The highest achieving schools recognize that parents have a place at the table.

Three major themes emerged from our study, based on extensive research and interviews in eighteen school districts in six states, including dozens of interviews with education leaders and community-based organizations, and two-dozen parent focus groups.

First, despite the abundant research and extensive federal requirements, schools and districts do not universally embrace parental involvement as a central strategy for accomplishing academic gains. This pattern appears to result from a mix of causes:

- The challenge of defining clear and meaningful benchmarks by which effective parental involvement can be evaluated;
- A preoccupation with the accountability elements of NCLB, such as testing and teacher quality; and
- A lack of awareness and training on how to effectively engage parents.

Second, there is less of a need for “new rules” and more of a need that existing laws be fully understood, supported and implemented. Although some recommendations in the report address gaps in present law, most recommendations document the need for federal, state, district and school officials to better implement the laws that presently exist.

Third, despite a number of significant challenges facing schools and districts, a number of notable practices and models with real promise have emerged. This report provides examples of several successful strategies that are based in research and reality.

Based on its research and interviews, Appleseed has made the following findings:

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

Based on these findings, which are explained in the report, Appleseed makes the following recommendations:

1. **Quality of Information.** States, districts and schools must provide meaningful, understandable and timely information to parents regarding key school and student performance data.
2. **Proactive, Targeted Engagement Strategies.** States, districts and schools must pursue multiple, proactive strategies for communicating with and engaging parents – particularly parents who are low-income or whose first language is not English.

- 3. Community Support.** Districts and schools should leverage their own limited resources by engaging community organizations.
- 4. Professional Development.** Federal, state and district officials need to prioritize and fund more comprehensive professional development for teachers and administrators, with special emphasis on challenges of culture and language.
- 5. Better Implementation and Stronger Accountability.** Federal, state and local policymakers and educators should recognize parental involvement as central to school improvement and place parental involvement strategies on par with other steps taken to improve student achievement.

In sum, this report makes the case that if we are as serious as we should be about promoting effective parental involvement strategies designed to improve educational opportunities and results for all students, then it is time to match our words with action. Appleseed hopes these recommendations provide an impetus for continuing efforts by education leaders, teachers, policymakers and parents to understand what is needed and what works, and to take action accordingly—promoting better student and school outcomes for all.



Recommendations for Action

RECOMMENDATION 1: Quality of Information. States, districts and schools must provide meaningful, understandable and timely information to parents regarding key school and student performance data.

The Challenge. Based in part on the reporting requirements of NCLB, states and districts amass vast amounts of detailed information about student and school performance. Much of the data must be reported, but their technical nature often results in reports that are not easily understood. In the end, a good deal of information gathered about student and school performance is not provided in a way that helps parents decide what actions they should take in response.

States, districts and schools also face major challenges in providing important student performance data in a timely fashion so that parents, teachers and administrators can act on those results.

Steps to Success. In their efforts to report student and school data, states, districts and schools should directly address the interests of parents. This means that they must:

Provide clear information that explains the meaning and intended use of performance data. States, districts and schools should ensure that reports of school and district performance are presented in ways that provide clear information and explain their meaning. In particular, states, districts and schools should take steps to provide appropriate interpretations of testing data, which should describe in simple language:

- What the test has covered;
- What scores mean and do not mean;
- How the scores will be used by the school, district or state (including specific consequences associated with the results, if any); and
- What steps parents should take with the data.

Relying on reports produced by test publishers that merely provide data-driven results, without more, will in most cases accomplish little in effectively educating parents about student and school performance.

Factor in issues of timely response when making test administration decisions. Deciding when tests will be given and when scores will be released involves balancing an array of complicated factors. A central factor to consider with respect to test administration decisions is whether parents, teachers and school officials receive test results in ample time to make use of them in the classroom and at home, as well as to make decisions about parental options under NCLB.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Proactive, Targeted Engagement Strategies. Districts and schools must pursue multiple, proactive strategies for communicating with and engaging parents—particularly parents who are low-income or whose first language is not English.

The Challenge. Just as a one-size-fits-all strategy is not effective when teaching students, neither is it effective when communicating with parents. This is especially true given the increasingly diverse population served by U.S. schools.

With demographic shifts, new challenges emerge. In particular, the growing number of language-minority students and parents calls for new and different strategies for effective parent outreach. Additionally, the challenges in reaching low-income parents also still remain. Many parents lack basic knowledge about the avenues within schools that they can pursue to become better informed about their children's education. Many schools intentionally or not, send the message that they do not want parents to participate—or to participate only in very limited ways. Moreover, school officials, teachers and counselors frequently have workloads that limit their ability to effectively connect with parents, requiring the support of organizations that can supplement their efforts.

Steps to Success. As a first step, schools must demonstrate to all parents that they are welcome at school. Holding meetings and having office hours at convenient times for parents to meet with teachers or principals are important first steps. Making available services that draw parents in – nutrition, or adult literacy classes, for example – and allowing community organizations to use schools facilities will help make schools feel more open to parents. In addition, the use of parent resource rooms, where parents can get information on successful school plans, use computers, meet other parents or meet with teachers and administrators can help open doors. Ultimately, principals must send the message in their communications and actions and through their faculty and staff that parents are part of the school community.

Second, districts and schools should work to maximize the avenues through which they reach and communicate with parents. When communicating important information, schools and districts should use several different methods to reach parents – in writing, by telephone, television and the Internet; through one-on-one and group meetings at school; and through community partners.

A number of basic but often overlooked steps are important in facilitating the flow of good information and the engagement of parents. Districts and schools should:

Translate written materials and provide interpreter services. Newsletters, website and other communications translated into appropriate languages are critically important in reaching language-minority parents. Technology is making such translations increasingly possible. Signs displayed at the school and other modes of basic communication also should be posted in multiple languages, in part to communicate that parents from all backgrounds are welcome.

Reach out beyond school house doors. To overcome parents' distrust and limited experience in being educated advocates, school officials should work with community organizations that reach low-income or language-minority families. Educators and administrators should leave their buildings to connect with families at their homes or at community events and centers.

Invest in training parents who can facilitate communications. Schools and districts should invest in efforts to provide parents with tools for access to school information and train them in ways to engage school officials and become effective advocates for their children. As the notable practices section that follows describes, there are excellent examples of school districts that hold “parent academies” or study circles to provide background to parents, to actively solicit their feedback, and to break down barriers between parents and school official. These strategies can be especially important in creating greater understanding and trust across lines of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic groups. Just as teachers and administrators need training to prepare them to work with parents, parents, too, often need help to prepare them to support their children's education.



RECOMMENDATION 3: Community Support. Districts and schools should leverage their own limited resources by engaging community organizations.

The Challenge. The role community organizations serve in supporting parents, which can lead to improved student achievement and school success, is sometimes overlooked in conversations about the critical connection between effective parent involvement and student success. As the findings reflect, many economically disadvantaged or non-English-speaking parents lack the skills or resources to effectively engage with schools or serve as their child's advocate. In short, they need help. School officials note, however, that school resources are stretched. In addition, parents often do not trust or feel connected with or understood by their schools. This reality in no small part explains the nearly universal acknowledgement by educators, parent groups and community groups about the vital impact that supporting trusted community organizations can have in helping students and schools succeed.

“Effective parental involvement can be achieved when community groups can work directly with schools and organize parents in collaboration with principals and staff.”

— Texas district official

Steps to Success. Districts and schools should include as part of any parental engagement strategy a focus on community outreach. To help build bridges and to leverage their own resources, districts and schools should:

Evaluate student needs and available resources. Before making connections between supporting community organizations and student needs, schools must identify those needs and the resources that can help meet them. The first step in leveraging community support is evaluating the needs of students and the kinds of resources that are available to meet them.

Ensure that staff are charged with making community connections. Districts and schools should clearly designate individuals who are responsible for making the necessary connections between community resources and student/parent needs. Their role should involve collaboration with other district and school leaders, as well as with community leaders and stakeholders, including parents.

Develop clear areas of responsibility and measure results. Staff positions that involve community outreach should have clear goals and expected outcomes, connected with other efforts to help improve student performance. In other words, any outreach and services coordination plan should be fully integrated and aligned with the district's overall accountability plan.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Professional Development. Federal, state and district officials need to prioritize and fund more comprehensive professional development for teachers and administrators, with special emphasis on challenges of culture and language.

The Challenge. The connection between parent and teacher and, often, parent and principal is vital in helping students reach their potential in the classroom. Too frequently, however, teachers and principals lack the necessary background and training, particularly in settings where they do not share a common cultural heritage with parents. A recurring theme in parent focus group conversations and among education leaders was the desire to better connect, but with the frustration in not knowing the best strategies to effectively do so. Frequently, the absence of good training (pre-service or in-service) was identified as a major missing ingredient.

Steps to Success.

Make training a priority. The importance of parent involvement, and effective strategies for engaging parents in their children's education, should represent significant strands of instruction in schools of education and educational administration, as well as of on-the-job professional development. Special emphasis should be placed on helping teachers and administrators understand a variety of cultural contexts and convey a welcoming environment that invites all parents to lend their support.

Provide federal incentives for training. As a matter of federal policy, Congress should ensure that all teacher and principal training funded with federal money includes attention to engaging and dealing effectively with parents, with a focus on cultural understanding and strategies to generate support at home for student learning.

Evaluate teachers and administrators on parental involvement. Criteria for evaluations reflect a judgment about what is important in job performance. Leaving out parent involvement sends a message that it is not a priority for school personnel. The same is true of state licensure standards, which reflect key job qualifications. States and districts should demonstrate the importance of teachers' and administrators' role in fostering parental involvement by establishing professional development and performance, criteria associated with parental involvement.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Better Implementation and Stronger Accountability. Federal, state and local policymakers and educators should recognize parental involvement as central to school improvement and place parental involvement strategies on par with other steps taken to improve student achievement.

The Challenge. The elements of NCLB (and its predecessor statutes) designed to give parents more of a role in their children's education have not been fully implemented. A more robust focus on parental involvement as a core accountability strategy has been impeded by a combination of factors, including an absence of clear understanding regarding effective ways to engage parents to promote better student achievement; the uncertainty regarding the ways to best measure success with respect to parental involvement; and a preoccupation with other elements of accountability that lend themselves to clearer criteria for evaluation.

These factors have, no doubt, contributed to the focus of the U.S. Department of Education, which in turn has resulted in a parallel focus in state departments of education, districts and schools. Although parental involvement has been the focus of some Department oversight and monitoring, the stronger emphasis on other elements of accountability has relegated parental involvement to back-burner status for many district and state leaders. As a result, discussions of parental involvement tend to address it as isolated or as an end in itself and of secondary importance – rather than as integral to a well-designed accountability system.

Steps to Success. As with most issues of importance in education, strong leadership at the state, district and school levels is required if the promise of parental involvement is to be realized. This means, among other things, that:

1. Districts and schools (with state and federal investment and support) should:

- Work to associate key parental engagement strategies with accountability goals so that parental involvement strategies (like testing strategies) become a key part of the ongoing school reform process. Leaders of schools that are designated for school improvement, corrective action or restructuring should view this designation as an opportunity to enlist parents in turning around the school, including negotiating and agreeing to school improvement or corrective action plans with parents and community organizations that represent them.
- Have good answers to these key questions:
 - **Goals:** How are parental involvement strategies designed to help improve student learning and school/district performance?
 - **Objectives:** By what measures will school/district parental involvement strategies be evaluated? How often will the evaluation occur? Who is responsible for follow-up?
 - **Strategies:** How are parental involvement strategies incorporated and aligned with other strategies designed to promote better student achievement and school/district performance? Are connections made with testing, school safety, attendance, etc.?

2. State educational agencies should:

- Include training in parental involvement strategies as a key component of their statewide system of support for districts and schools in improvement, and ensure that, in particular, school support teams include individuals able to train administrators and teachers in effective parental involvement approaches.
- Develop effective toolkits, notices, and networking systems to facilitate the adoption of effective parental involvement strategies by local districts.

3. The U.S. Department of Education should:

- Expand its efforts to assess the effectiveness of parental involvement strategies and efforts. Specifically, it should include in its parental involvement monitoring framework:
 - an evaluation of the nature and scope of parent involvement in the school improvement and planning process;
 - an evaluation of how and in what amount federal funds are spent for parental involvement activities, and with what outcomes;
 - an evaluation of school and district report cards and parent notices;
 - an evaluation of the state process for review of the content and timing of required parent SES and choice notifications, including the manner in which states are prepared to (and do) respond quickly when allegations of untimely and insufficient notices to parents are lodged; and
 - an evaluation of how states and districts use school choice and SES enrollment data to examine and refine, as necessary, their strategies for notifying parents and enrolling students.
- Monitor implementation of parent involvement provisions by, at a minimum, requiring information on parent involvement in Consolidated State Performance Reports. The reports should include information on use of the one percent of Title I funds required to be set aside for parent involvement activities; the percentages of Title I schools with parent involvement policies and with school-parent compacts; the percentages of schools with parent coordinators; and, for schools with school improvement or corrective action plans, the role of parents and community groups representing parents in consulting on and developing the plan.
- Provide research-based guidance to states and districts on successful parental communication and enforcement strategies.

4. Congress, in its reauthorization of the law that NCLB currently amends, should take several steps to promote more effective and educationally appropriate parental options. It should:

- Provide for an expanded role for parents in the school improvement process, including creating more detailed directives about the role parents will play in the development and implementation of any school improvement plans.

- Provide for and fund a more strategic, focused role for Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRCs), to concentrate on working with states and districts to strengthen and monitor parent involvement activities, make parental involvement activities an integral part of their strategic school-reform efforts, and build ties between schools and community groups representing and working with parents.
- Promote effective district and SES provider collaboration, as well as district and school “ownership” of SES, by requiring:
 - Districts and providers to: (1) cooperatively engage parents in the development of individual learning plans and in ongoing monitoring of student progress; and (2) exchange relevant student/classroom data through out the delivery of SES services; and
 - Schools to incorporate SES as an integral part of their Title I school improvement plans, including addressing how those services will be leveraged to improve school performance.



Conclusion

As this report's findings and recommendations show, if we are as serious as we should be about promoting effective parental involvement strategies designed to improve educational opportunities and results for all students, then it is time to match our words with action. To successfully address the challenges that we face, policymakers, school leaders, teachers and parents can pursue numerous strategies to make this vision a reality.

Those strategies must be directly responsive to the key challenges identified in this report, but they must do more. To overcome the often-cited impediment to making parental involvement central to school improvement efforts, those strategies must also be associated with clear, meaningful, and measurable benchmarks of accountability. Based on the findings and recommendations in this report, therefore, schools and districts should be able to demonstrate each of the following:

1. Parental involvement is included as a central element in any accountability plan, especially with a focus on school and district improvement goals;
2. Funding and support is provided for efforts to build the capacity of principals, teachers and parents to engage in effective parental involvement efforts designed to provide at-home and at-school support for underachieving students;
3. Staff time is dedicated to facilitating communications and engagement with low income and non-English proficient parents, with clear objectives linked to improving student performance;
4. Multiple, research-based outreach and communication strategies are pursued in order to reach parents regarding student and school performance (and actions they should consider in response); and
5. Community resources are leveraged in order to enhance the ability of schools to support parents and students in need.

It is Appleseed's hope that the recommendations in this report provide an impetus for expanded dialogue and action, focused on what is needed and what works, so that:

- Parents and community members can more meaningfully engage with schools and districts;
- School leaders and teachers who are striving to enhance student learning through multiple strategies can more effectively pursue parental involvement efforts, with positive results;
- Federal, state and local officials responsible for implementing current laws (and for developing new laws) have a better appreciation for the role that parental involvement must play in any effective school reform effort; and
- Education researchers can build on this qualitative study and frame more effective research protocols to guide a next generation of research about what works.

Many are already engaged in this effort, and some of their stories are told in these pages. But much of the real work of engaging and empowering parents – all parents – in their children's education lies ahead. Research and experience tell us that the outcome can be powerful indeed.

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