Defining family engagement

High-quality pre-K offers the promise of a wide range of benefits for Hoosier four-year-olds, especially school readiness in the form of greater academic preparedness and social and emotional maturity. While many elements of high-quality pre-K—such as low teacher-child ratios and implementation of a research-based curriculum—are frequently discussed, family engagement has received more muted attention. That is starting to change with the benefit of emerging research, coordinated efforts in other states and new family engagement requirements in Indiana’s On My Way Pre-K program.

So, what is family engagement? There is no universally agreed-upon definition of family engagement, but Indiana’s Early Learning Advisory Committee (ELAC) says it is:

“Families actively supporting their children’s learning and development, and sharing the responsibility with early care and education providers who are committed to engaging with families in meaningful, culturally respectful ways” (Indiana Early Learning Advisory Council, 2015).

SUMMARY

Family engagement in pre-K involves active partnership between families, teachers and programs to support learning and development and strengthen family well-being.

High-quality pre-K programs focus intentionally on child and family outcomes.

Indiana programs self-rate their family engagement practices moderate to high, but recognize room for growth in all areas of practice.

Indiana’s On My Way Pre-K legislation has strong family engagement provisions, but an emphasis on implementation is necessary.

Accelerating family engagement in Indiana will require greater leadership at all levels, common metrics and concerted efforts to access families’ views, strengths and assets.

by: Kent Mitchell, Vice President of Strategy and Public Policy
Arkansas has a well-regarded definition:

“Family engagement refers to the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and activities of families that support their children’s positive development from birth through age eight. Family engagement builds relationships that promote family well-being, strong parent-child relationships and ongoing learning. Family engagement happens in many places, the home, early childhood program, school and community, and it is a shared responsibility with all those who support children’s learning.” (Arkansas Head Start, 2015).

As these definitions illustrate, family engagement connotes a deep level of mutual partnership and shared responsibility for a child’s growth and development, as well as a family’s well-being. Effective family engagement in a high-quality pre-K setting is goal-driven, continuous, reciprocal and inclusive.

All families want to be engaged in their children’s education.

Hoosier families want to be engaged in their children’s education. In a 2016 statewide poll commissioned by Early Learning Indiana and the United Way of Central Indiana and conducted by Hart Research Associates, 500 registered Hoosier voters were asked at what ages they thought parent involvement was most critical. Nearly 50 percent said “all ages” and the top age-range chosen was “birth to preschool” with 30 percent.

Engagement is strong across all income levels. Federal data show that low-income parents dedicate a significant amount of time helping their children with homework (Education Week, 2017). Other data show that middle- and upper-income parents tend to be very involved in the school setting, including with parent groups, committees and volunteering. (Education Week, 2017).

As these data illustrate, the diversity of Hoosier families necessitates tailored strategies. Some Hoosier children will grow up in poverty, others in affluence. Some will be raised in two-parent families, others by a grandparent. Some will face barriers to inclusion, like language, disability and trauma, while others will not. Families face different barriers and have different strengths (Education Week, 2017).

In brief, prerequisites to effective pre-K family engagement include:

- Recognizing that all families want the best for their child and desire engagement
- Acknowledging that there is no singular playbook for engaging families given their vast diversity
- Understanding that families need multiple modalities of engagement that fit their unique strengths, barriers and children
Family engagement is important.

New research and practice are building an emerging national consensus on two points:

- **Developing authentic partnerships between families, teachers and programs is an essential component of high-quality pre-K.** Parents and other caregivers are children’s first and best teachers. They bring unique strengths that complement those of pre-K teachers and programs. Not accessing these talents leaves critical resources on the table.

- **Pre-K is a “dual-generation” strategy that offers benefits to children and families.** Access to pre-K, like child care, enables many families to pursue education and work opportunities that would not otherwise be within reach. It also connects parents to one another and to critical community supports, amplifying their social networks and resiliency.

An emerging body of rigorous research powerfully illustrates the importance of family engagement as a core component of high-quality pre-K. A recent meta-analysis by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) found that family engagement in the early years advances young children’s literacy and math skills. They also found that when parents are more engaged, children tend to do better (Van Voorhis, 2013).

Other recent evidence comes from independent, multi-year studies of a large, model pre-K program in Chicago, called EduCare. The studies found that EduCare “effectively engages parents in supporting their child’s development, learning and academic readiness, and provides parents with opportunities to further build their capacities in this area” (Educare, 2018).

Abriendo Puertas is a large-scale, evidence-based family engagement initiative across multiple states that partners with Latino parents of pre-K children. A series of rigorous studies found that it leads to the “adoption of parenting practices that enhance preschool children’s learning and preparation for school.” Among the benefits: it increased parental educational activities at home (e.g., alphabet games), expanded library use and enhanced parent role modeling (Child Trends, 2014).

We do not have to look any further than Indiana’s On My Way Pre-K program to see that access to pre-K helps low-income families to access new school and work opportunities. When parents had the opportunity to enroll their child in the On My Way Pre-K program, 51 percent reported they increased work or school hours, 35 percent were able to get a new job, and 33 percent were able to start a job-training program.

In brief, pre-K is an effective “dual-generation” strategy that leads to both child and family outcomes prized by Hoosier communities and policymakers.
Luz Santiago feels fortunate to have received an On My Way tuition scholarship for her daughter, Kaylee Mendoza (pictured). She was so glad that Kaylee would have the opportunity to learn English before she starts kindergarten and first grade. Originally Luz only thought of the program as a way to care for her daughter during work hours, but after seeing Kaylee grow and excel as a result of her schooling, she not only understands the impact of early education, but has become much more engaged in her child’s learning at home. Kaylee now knows all her letters, numbers and is beginning to read. She even reads to her mother at home, especially short stories. Luz knows that Kaylee will do better in school and in her life with a good education, particularly having such a strong beginning.
A growing body of research and practice illuminate some of the core principles of effective family engagement:

- **It is strengths-based**, recognizing and drawing out strengths, assets and talents of families; this contrasts with deficit-based approaches that label families as problems to be solved.
- **It is consistent**, recognizing that relationships and consistent, two-way communication is key to effective family engagement.
- **It is responsive to all parties**, recognizing the focus on mutual interests and action from all parties; increasingly, family engagement is parent-designed, initiated or led.
- **It is culturally competent**, recognizing that families bring diverse strengths and barriers to the table and that lack of attention to linguistic, cultural, economic and other diversity inhibits authentic partnership.

Given competing demands, leadership to elevate and promote family engagement is critical. A range of new tools help pre-K programs assess their attention to family engagement.

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership has developed a Program Administration Scale that has a specific emphasis on family engagement, asking programs to assess how welcoming their environment is to all families, the strength of their daily interactions with families and whether their staff has taken basic steps to promote family partnerships.

Indiana’s ELAC developed a family engagement toolkit (see diagram) that allows programs to self-assess their leadership in various areas of family engagement practice as either: Entering, Emerging, Progressing or Excelling. This toolkit is now a required component of On My Way Pre-K and informed a 2017 family engagement awards competition from Early Learning Indiana.

Leadership at the system-level matters as well. The federally-funded National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement has a tool to assess a state’s level of attention to family engagement in the early years. It directs system leaders to self-assess across a range of questions, such as whether early childhood agencies in the state “examine the root causes of inequity in health, early learning and family support” and identify strategies and a shared vision to address inequities. System-level leaders in Indiana are currently in the process of completing the self-assessment and receiving technical assistance to address areas for improvement.

### Tools to support family engagement

Leadership at the system-level matters as well. The federally-funded National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement has a tool to assess a state’s level of attention to family engagement in the early years. It directs system leaders to self-assess across a range of questions, such as whether early childhood agencies in the state “examine the root causes of inequity in health, early learning and family support” and identify strategies and a shared vision to address inequities. System-level leaders in Indiana are currently in the process of completing the self-assessment and receiving technical assistance to address areas for improvement.

![Indiana’s Family Engagement Toolkit Framework](image)
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AWARDS

In July 2017, Early Learning Indiana announced 14 family engagement award winners from among 141 Indiana applicants. To earn the award, early childhood programs were required to complete the ELAC self-assessment of their family engagement practices and submit a detailed questionnaire and portfolio.

Winning programs:

- Winning programs met families where they are, recognizing both family strengths and weaknesses. Many related instances of assisting families through tough times.
- Awardees built family engagement around relationships. They built systems that include phone calls home, home visits, family conferences and many other touch points.
- Programs engaged community resources to better their family engagement practices and supports. They created emergency funds, offered family take-home kits and provided wrap-around supports.

Common barriers:

- The one overwhelming barrier mentioned was time; time for the families to be engaged or time for the staff to create and be involved in events or even conversations with families.
- Many of the programs spoke about families relying on the provider to teach their child and not yet recognizing their essential role.
- Many programs still see family engagement as an “event.” They are starting to recognize that much of family engagement centers on the relationship that is built day-to-day.
- Resources were another key barrier; this includes resources and training for staff, but also resources that many of their families need.
## ELAC TOOLKIT SELF-ASSESSMENT SCORES

### Self-Assessment Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessment Areas</th>
<th>Entering</th>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Progressing</th>
<th>Excelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing relationships with families</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td><strong>32%</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing a system for two-way communication</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td><strong>31%</strong></td>
<td><strong>36%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating accomplishments and concerns</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td><strong>28%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding regular family conferences</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td><strong>33%</strong></td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating program philosophy</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td><strong>38%</strong></td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating curriculum</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td><strong>45%</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating information about parenting and child development</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td><strong>31%</strong></td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respecting and incorporating cultural diversity</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td><strong>29%</strong></td>
<td><strong>29%</strong></td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating family participation</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td><strong>30%</strong></td>
<td><strong>33%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing and improving family engagement practices</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td><strong>23%</strong></td>
<td><strong>23%</strong></td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Assist Families as Connected, Supported Members of the Community

| Supporting transitions                                                          | **30%**  | 24%      | 18%         | 19%       |
| Assessing and improving transition practices                                     | 29%      | **37%**  | 14%         | 11%       |
| Facilitating family networking                                                   | 21%      | 24%      | **25%**     | 20%       |
| Facilitating family events                                                       | 22%      | 21%      | 22%         | **25%**   |
| Facilitating connections for new and/or isolated families                        | 18%      | **35%**  | 21%         | 16%       |
| Connecting families with relevant resources                                       | 10%      | 23%      | 30%         | **33%**   |

### Empower Families as Child Advocates and Leaders

| Involving families in program and policy decisions                               | 20%      | **34%**  | 18%         | 19%       |
| Communicating child concerns and issues                                          | 10%      | 26%      | 27%         | **34%**   |
| Supporting family opportunities for leadership                                  | 18%      | 23%      | **28%**     | 14%       |

### Support Families as Safe, Healthy and Self-Sufficient Caregivers

| Connecting families with information and resources                              | 16%      | **29%**  | 19%         | **29%**   |
| Recognizing and supporting children and families experiencing stress           | 8%       | 34%      | 14%         | **36%**   |
| Communicating about developmental assessment                                    | 11%      | 22%      | 27%         | **28%**   |
Highlights of pre-K family engagement in Indiana

On My Way Pre-K expansion legislation from 2017 had a number of positive provisions related to family engagement including the following:

- Families can continue to use their pre-K scholarship at a high-quality program that best meets their needs and preferences (e.g., a center, school, ministry or home)
- Requiring programs to undertake the ELAC family engagement toolkit self-assessment
- Requiring programs to offer a range of family engagement activities
- Requiring families to take part in parent-teacher conferences and other engagement opportunities
- Requiring a shared focus between programs and families on pre-K attendance
- Specifically encouraging reading at home
- Establishing guidance on the issue of expulsion and suspension—an issue that disproportionally impacts African American children and families
- Confirming a family’s right to request an eligibility determination for special education services

Hundreds of Indiana pre-K providers have taken the ELAC family engagement toolkit self-assessment. In the coming months, new technical assistance and funding will be made available from Indiana’s child care resource and referral agencies to help selected programs overcome barriers to family engagement and improve their practices.

There are many other promising developments underway, including a revision of the state’s pre-K child development assessment, ISTAR-KR. Led by the Indiana Department of Education and Purdue University, the changes will both improve the tool and make the results more teacher- and family-friendly, enabling better teacher-family conversations about a child’s progress toward Kindergarten readiness. The assessment is already linked to Indiana’s Early Learning Foundations.

With the support of the state’s Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning, Brighter Futures—a family-facing website that gathers information on child development, facilitates searching for a pre-K program and offers other kinds of family supports—is being launched in the fall of 2017. It is intended to drive higher-quality family education and engagement in the state.
Nearly all state pre-K programs have requirements around family engagement.

The most robust state programs require family engagement activities that lead not only to child outcomes (e.g., reading at home), but activities that lead to parent and family outcomes (e.g., parent trainings or education and job supports). The following table illustrates types of services across state programs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>State Programs that Offer This Service</th>
<th>% of Total State Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement activities</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent conferences and/or home visits</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting support or training</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education services or job training for parents</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services for parents</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations to improve pre-K family engagement in Indiana

There are a number of improvements that Indiana stakeholders could make to enhance family engagement. The recommendations below are grouped to reflect areas where public sector leadership is necessary, where public-private partnerships are most appropriate and where the private sector can lead the way.

Public Sector Recommendations

Require On My Way Pre-K programs to articulate a plan tied to the ELAC toolkit self-assessment. Programs are required to conduct a self-assessment, but there is no formal requirement to develop an action plan based on the findings. Such a requirement, coupled with follow-up to track progress, would give additional fuel to family engagement efforts in the state. Given the toolkit’s holistic focus, such a requirement would facilitate an evolution to family engagement that supports not just child outcomes, but also parent and family outcomes. It could also enhance the odds of equitable family engagement, inclusive of family diversity.

Establish local family and parent advisory councils for On My Way Pre-K and within ELAC. Family and parent voices are often lacking from key policy decisions, especially at the system level. Requiring county-level family and parent advisory councils for On My Way Pre-K would help to ensure that family perspectives are included in decision-making processes as the program grows. Similar to parent councils in Head Start, the councils could be tasked with canvassing family voice and weighing in on major policy decisions. ELAC work groups could also be expanded to include family representation.

Require transition to kindergarten policies and partnerships. One important family engagement opportunity in pre-K is supporting families in the transition from pre-K to kindergarten. Effective transition supports include informing parents about school options, sharing kindergarten expectations with families ahead of time and helping families think through transition strategies unique to their
child. A written policy and partnership requirement would significantly expand attention to transitions.

**Develop measures to promote alignment around key metrics for family engagement.** Currently, there are no widely accepted measures to assess family engagement beyond child attendance. The embrace of a small number of clear metrics would help to ground family engagement practices and unify program efforts. One top candidate is a measure of program climate. There are a number of useful climate-related measures already developed for pre-K. Data for any adopted measures should be disaggregated by income, race and other measures to focus implementation on equity.

**Expand survey data about family well-being.** Various federally funded and administered surveys on family well-being, such as the National Survey of Child Health, yield important insights into the state of Hoosier families. But they would offer greater insight if expanded. Colorado is one state that has provided additional funding to expand knowledge about the state of families with young children. While the data would not be definitive, over time it can inform our understanding of the efficacy of various programs, marketing and other taxpayer investments in families with young children. It can also point to new strategic directions in which to focus efforts.

---

**Public-Private Recommendations**

**Spread awareness of Indiana’s Early Learning Foundations.** By helping educate families in child development, Indiana’s Foundations for early learning are a powerful family engagement tool. But, far too few families know the Foundations or how to act on them. A public-private marketing campaign and additional tools would spread awareness and actionable ideas for families to execute.

**Accelerate training to partner with families living in poverty.** Indiana has a high rate of child poverty—one in five children lives in poverty (Indiana Youth Institute, 2017). The impacts of poverty are felt early in life and emerging research shows that chronic exposure can significantly inhibit a child’s academic and social-emotional trajectory. Pre-K professionals are not traditionally trained in methodologies that would assist them in developing partnerships with children and families living in poverty, such as trauma-informed care and mental health counseling. Given the widespread nature of the problem, this is an area ripe for public-private partnership that cuts across fields of education, health and social work.

**Embed family engagement in leadership development.** Successful family engagement takes leadership at the highest levels—directors, technical assistance providers, funders, community leaders and lawmakers, among others. Leadership development programs accessed by early childhood professionals or those that support the field should be attuned to the role that leaders play in promoting family engagement. Changes to design and curriculum can ensure this focus.
Exchange resources and lessons across pre-K, early elementary (Kindergarten through 3rd grade) and nonprofit entities. Pre-K programs and elementary schools share common cause around family engagement. Research is clear that both benefit from more effective family engagement. There is much to learn from pre-K and K-12 pioneers, such as the Evansville School Corporation (EVSC) that has an explicit focus on parent, family and community engagement, nonprofit organizations like Stand for Children that train parent advocates, and Head Start programs with expertise in working with parents living in poverty. Community-driven opportunities for exchange and dialogue will advance the practice.

Private Sector Recommendations

Involve parents in governance. Nonprofit providers with a board of directors can engage family voices by adding a board member who is a parent of a young child. Similar to the system level, families offer a unique and needed perspective to ensure effective family engagement.

Expand advocacy opportunities for families. Significant advocacy efforts are necessary to expand access to high-quality pre-K in Indiana, improve the standing and compensation of early childhood teachers and ensure that all communities benefit from pre-K. Advocacy efforts, like All IN 4 Pre-K, led by United Way of Central Indiana, Early Learning Indiana and other partners, regularly incorporated family voice at roundtables and through the media. Ongoing efforts to engage families as advocates for policy change are critical.
References


