

No Family Left Behind Family Literacy and Public Schools

The federal *No Child Left Behind* Act will impact almost every school in Connecticut and the nation. It amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the largest federal funding source for public education, including Title I and other programs which effect how schools spend important federal dollars. What is new in the law? The legislation mandates that schools intensify efforts in literacy and adopt new measures of accountability. Perhaps most importantly, it recognizes that to close the achievement gap, schools must enlist the support of families. For example, Title I funds must be used to provide substantial and meaningful opportunities for *all* parents to participate in the education of their children.

Successful School-Based Family Literacy Programs...

Send the message to all families that what you do at home makes a difference. Everyday activities are the foundation for learning in the home, but how you get things done matters. See back for ideas.

Give specific attention to cultural issues. Incorporate oral history; encourage family traditions and native language in family-linked homework assignments. Are families in the school encouraged to tell stories with children? Talking about events that go beyond the here-and-now uses de-contextualized language that promotes brain development. Do families know it is helpful to read to children in their native language rather than struggle with English or not read at all?

Meet parents where they are – both figuratively and literally. Schools think of some parents as hard to reach because they do not come to the school, but they are somewhere in the community. Does the school engage other community agencies and organizations, such as medical offices and churches, in getting information to families?

Plan sustained involvement strategies. A few workshops or flyers is not enough interaction to impact home learning. Do all teachers, staff and administrators see communication with families as an important part of their job? Do they consistently treat parents as welcome partners with valuable assets to share?



How can schools help all families support their child's learning at home? Some parents are reluctant to engage with their child's school for a number of reasons: perhaps English is difficult for them, or they had unsuccessful past school experiences. Some parents struggle with their own literacy and feel unsure of how to help their children. Family literacy provides an excellent framework for schools to join efforts with families, to help everyone succeed.

Intergenerational family literacy programs succeed by combining family empowerment with skill development for children and adults working together. Research shows this approach to be more promising than separate child and adult education programs. No Child Left Behind provides both the mandate and resources to help schools harness the powerful potential for families to support student learning and increase achievement in your school. All schools

can use principles of family literacy, and federal funding, in these critical efforts (see box). For more information, or technical assistance, please contact Judy Carson, (860) 713-6576 or judy.carson@po.state.ct.us.

Family: Donde comienza el aprendizaje!

In any language, family literacy is fun and good for the whole family. And because family literacy involves day-to-day activities, every family is doing something and can easily build family learning into their lives. This is the theme of the popular orange booklets developed by the State Department of Education and the Statewide Family Literacy Initiative. And this is why the booklet, "Family: Where Learning Grows", has been translated into Spanish. Over 100,000 of the English version and 40,000 of the Spanish have been distributed to date, by school districts, individual schools, libraries, social service agencies, pediatricians, and others. If you would like copies, in English or Spanish, contact Wendy Harwin, (860) 713-6585 or sde.partnership@po.state.ct.us.

- Take chores one simple step further and learn more while you get things done. For example, compare food labels in the grocery store. Whose favorite has more nutrition or the least fat? Or try calculating how much gas your car needs and how much it will cost to fill up. Who came closest to the real figure?
- Jazz up family time and have fun with family literacy. Ask everyone to draw what they did today and discuss the works over dinner. Make a map of your neighborhood from memory and try following it together. Did you forget anything?
- Even TV presents opportunities. Try creating a family rating system, and rating shows and movies. Or follow a sport. Look up scores and statistics in the newspaper. Turn the sound off and try your own "play-by-play."



Strengthening Families & Literacy in Connecticut

Children who are read to start school with a vocabulary of some 30,000 words. When this is not the practice, children may start with just 5,000 words. This startling disparity is just one reason that the Connecticut Family Literacy Initiative organized a statewide Action Forum on strengthening family literacy in Connecticut. "These differences are before kids get to kindergarten, and have to do with family literacy," said Janice Gruendel, co-director of Connecticut Voices for Children. Her compelling presentation on Connecticut's disparities provides thorough evidence that a family approach to literacy is the key to closing the achievement gap and improving student success. (See *The Case for Family Literacy*, www.ctkidslink.org.)

The good news is that whether or not they read well, there are many things all parents can do to give their children a learning boost, and close the achievement gap that is already widening when children start school. At the forum, State Education Commissioner Theodore Sergi told participants that educators have underestimated the power of the family in educating children. "I do think we have this obligation on the school side to reach out" he said. "There is so much more time and ability to influence the early reading success of children in the family that we have failed to take advantage of." From the forum comes a renewed sense of the importance of increasing family literacy services in Connecticut.

From Talk to Action: 3 Communities Take the Lead

What is literacy? What does a person need to know today? What is a literate family, or literate home environment? So began conversations that recently brought people together in each of three communities to work collaboratively to address local literacy issues. Citizens of Meriden, New Haven and Stamford piloted a new Study Circles guide on families and literacy developed by the Study Circles Resource Center, in conjunction with the Connecticut Family Literacy Initiative. Study Circles are small, democratic discussions that provide ways for people to build community and resolve local problems. As a result of the successful pilots, communities continue to convene around the issue and are working family literacy into their strategic plans for school and community programs. For a copy of the Study Circles guide contact Harriet Feldlaufer, (860) 713-6579, harriet.feldlaufer@po.state.ct.us.