



Colorado Department of Education  
Expelled and At-Risk Student Services Program

**Family Involvement in Schools:  
Engaging Parents of At-Risk Youth**

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Heather MacGillivray & Gretchen Mann of the National Center for School Engagement at the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children,  
[www.schoolengagement.org](http://www.schoolengagement.org)*

*Contacts at Colorado Department of Education, Prevention Initiatives:  
Cindy Wakefield, Principal Consultant, [wakefield\\_c@cde.state.co.us](mailto:wakefield_c@cde.state.co.us).  
Judith Martinez, Senior Consultant, [martinez\\_j@cde.state.co.us](mailto:martinez_j@cde.state.co.us)*

# **Family Involvement in Schools: Engaging Parents of At-Risk Youth**

## **Introduction**

Extensive literature from the past three decades establishes that family involvement in schools increases student achievement and attendance. Based on this research, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 now requires schools to involve parents in their child's education and the school's improvement plan. Remarkably, even though NCLB is Title I compensatory education legislation and is designed for at-risk families, the research that guides the parent involvement mandates of this legislation is not based on at-risk families (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Clark, Salinas, Jansorn, & VanVoorhis, 2000). This study was designed to address this gap in the literature.

Research has shown that parent involvement is associated with better academic success, improved behavior, higher enrollment in post secondary education, safer school environments, and enhanced parent support for teachers and schools (Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Minke & Anderson, 2005). Building collaborative relationships between schools and families takes time and resources, however, Minke & Anderson (2005) contend that it empowers parents to support their child's educational progress over the long term. For example, trusting, two-way communication establishes supportive relationships between parents and the school enhancing the family's capacity to be a life-long advocate for their child. As the education system grows more complex and parents are increasingly faced with more and more choices, this kind of supportive relationship is essential (Lopez, Kreider & Coffman, 2005). Current educational policies provide opportunities for parents to have voice in standards development, strategic planning and school governance. According to the Education Commission of the States (1996), 24 states have passed legislation that mandates family involvement in educational systems.

## **Findings**

The following research questions were addressed in this study.

1. How is parent involvement addressed or adapted for parents of at-risk students? This is based on Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement (See Appendix A)
2. What factors help or hinder the connection between at-risk parents and schools?
3. What current practices are effectively engaging parents of at-risk youth?

To answer these research questions, we conducted a study with programs that are funded under Colorado's Expelled and At Risk Student Services (EARSS.) Interviews with program and school staff, parent focus groups and program observations were conducted. Participants included program staff and the parents of students served in these programs. Thirty-one staff were interviewed. Five parent focus groups were conducted with a total of 32 parents. Parents were asked to reflect on the entirety of their experiences with schools, not just their experiences with the EARSS program. Finally, we observed approximately seven program activities designed to serve parents (see *Acknowledgements* on page 13 for list of groups involved.) Additional information on methodology and analysis for this study can be found in Appendix B.

Based on the analyses, we found convergence between staff perspectives and parent perspectives on several key areas including:

- Establishing strong relationships

- Creating good communication
- Questioning assumptions and negative labels
- Welcoming climate for students in transition

Both parents and staff discussed the challenges of having assumptions and negative labels of parents and students. Reentry to school after dropping out, expulsion or placement in an alternative setting was discussed mostly by parents but also by some staff. Finally, both parents and staff suggested strategies and supports to enable family involvement. Each of these themes will be discussed in the next sections.

## Strengthening Relationships

Parents in the focus group stressed the importance of a good relationship with teachers and school staff. Interestingly, if parents were connected with one key person at the school, they were more engaged and more satisfied with the school. For some families, this relationship grew out of the challenges they were experiencing with their child. For example, one mother talked about her daughter's adjustment to high school. Due to excessive absenteeism, they were connected to the Director of Attendance who helped the student and her family with adjustment issues. Since that time, this family has stayed connected to this school administrator and has called on him for other issues (Parent Focus Group).

Parents also described partnering with the school to create positive academic outcomes for their child. For example, one family talked about how they worked with the school when their teen was skipping,

*"...Once my girl had one of their friends call and they know our voice so they called us up and said did you guys just call? We said no. They said well somebody just called for your child. We're like no; you keep her in school... So they're on that. They know the parents you know, which parents belong to what kid."* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent described how she bonded with the school social worker regarding her son's challenges. Instead of a blaming environment, the social worker expressed empathy and a shared commitment to positive behavior change (Parent Focus Group). One parent reinforced this need for the teacher and parent to be on the same page with the student. He said,

*"Sometimes you know the kids will try to make it, look like it's the teacher fault when you know it's not... You know, I'll call the teacher and get the story. I don't try to make a big old conflict."* (Parent Focus Group)

Parents appreciated this kind of mutual respect when it comes from teachers and school staff. Unfortunately, many of the parents in the focus groups experienced disrespectful treatment from the school. One parent said,

*"There's no tolerance for parents to voice their concerns about their own child."* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent in the same focus group echoed this sentiment saying,

*"It's frustrating for a parent to even voice your opinion in (this school district) because you'll always be wrong and they'll always be right."* (Parent Focus Group)

Like parents, staff who participated in the interview process also stressed the importance of the relationship between school/program and parent. They focused on several ways to strengthen relationships with parents. Staff reported that parents feel more important when the school demonstrates that they care about each student and their school success. One staff person said,

*“We need to focus and build trust. This comes from one-in-one meetings and calls home. Really giving a family personalized attention. They are a priority. Even though there are many families to work with, each family needs to feel that they are special and cared for.”* (Staff Interview)

Another staff explained that her approach was to communicate very directly with parents by saying,

*“We care about your child, let’s work together.”* (Staff Interview)

Most staff talked about the willingness of the school/program to have an open door policy. This means, literally, that the door of the school, principal’s office, and teacher’s classroom is open to every parent for the purpose of encouraging communication, feedback, and discussion. Staff noted in many instances that parents work hard, may have two jobs, have other children to care for, and have conflicting schedules.

*“Parent conferences need to happen at the mercy of the parents, because they can’t fit into a box of 1 to 5...Totally at the schedule of the parents.”* (Staff Interview)

Allowing for flexibility, such as the open door policy helps to accommodate parents’ busy lives. One staff person says,

*“The school pretty much operates on an open door policy. They welcome parents at any time they want to drop in.”* (Staff Interview)

In addition to a caring staff and a welcoming, open door policy, staff reported that it was important to start early with parents by establishing a relationship with parents while students are in elementary school and middle school. Building this relationship and educating parents early in the academic process will help them to better understand their child’s academic challenges and successes.

**In summary,**

- Parents and staff recognized that a good relationship with the school was critical to a child’s success.
- If one person at the school connected with the family, the parents were engaged, satisfied and felt heard.
- Parents felt that good relationships were built on mutual respect.
- Staff thought that good relationships were built early and based on a caring and welcoming environment.

**Create Good Communication between the School and Home**

Parents explained that there are a variety of communication channels between the home and school, including phone calls, emails, letters and mini progress reports. Home visits were not very common for the parents participating in the focus groups, however some thought that home visits would be helpful. A common concern of parents was that the strength of the communication seemed to vary by teacher. One person said,

*“It varies by teacher. Some teachers you’ll never hear from them unless it’s a parent-teacher conference.”* (Parent Focus Group)

Parent-teacher conferences were common in four of the five focus groups. However, some parents felt that the parent-teacher conference was not an adequate method of communication. One parent said,

*“They (schools) have their predetermined meetings before you even get there. Even a parent-teacher conference is already predetermined and whatever you say is not going to matter.”* (Parent Focus Group)

This comment highlights the importance of developing parent ownership of the parent-teacher conference through shared agenda setting and decision-making.

Another important parent suggestion about communication was the need to communicate positive student information instead of only the negative. For many of these parents, their children have struggled with school and the result has been that school contact means that their child is in trouble. For example some parents in one focus group said,

*“I guess focusing on the bad stuff is what has been going on.”* (Parent Focus Group)

*“But if they weren’t looking for our son being trouble, we would never hear nothing from the school.”* (Parent Focus Group)

*“We want to hear the good things you know. We don’t always want to hear the bad things.”* (Parent Focus Group)

However, some parents said they received positive communication. For example, a parent shared that staff called to “say ‘we had a good day,’ so they are good about that” (Parent Focus Group).

Many parents expressed a strong need to hear about problems at school early; before it has escalated to suspension or expulsion. One parent described her conversation with the school saying,

*“Why haven’t you (school) done something for us and taken the initiative? Now you are calling me to tell me that you are suspending him (my son)?”* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent described a more positive experience with his school saying,

*“And they let us know when there is even a smidge of a problem instead of letting it snowball into a massive big one.”* (Parent Focus Group)

Unfortunately this lack of early communication and prevention can result in serious discipline problems at the school. For example, one parent described,

*“And this was just a conflict between her and a girl that started off, well I don’t like your jeans or your shoes or something. And it just went from there and after a month, this was the end result and my daughter ended up in jail. So I think before something like that gets going to that extent, us as parents have the right to know if our child is in any trouble at school.”* (Parent Focus Group)

Finally parents expressed a need for the school to initiate communication with the home. Some parents wanted weekly progress reports while others were content to receive emails. Parents clarified that email is great but not all parents have access to email or the online school information systems (e.g. Infinite Campus or Parent Bridge). Additionally, parents strongly recommended that all materials be provided in Spanish as well as English.

Most staff believed in the importance of communication when describing “parent involvement.” The ways in which staff communicate with parents includes technology (phone, cell phone, internet, online parent portal such as Infinite Campus), written communication (letters, newsletters) and face-to-face interaction (meetings, parent/teacher conferences, home visits); the same avenues identified by parents. One staff reported,

*“Communication by phone and by email...We struggle with that especially. Many families don’t have internet and many families don’t have phone because it has been disconnected. That is when I do a home visit – knock on door and leave a note.”* (Staff Interview)

Some staff also stated that because of technology, communication is better in general.

*Parent communication is much more effective (and) at an all time high, (parents are) much more aware – due to electronics and very much improved quick call, messages and technology is the reason.* (Staff Interview)

However, it was noted that the reliance on one form of communication could potentially be damaging, as stated by one staff person,

*“Some parents are at risk of losing their job because they continually keep receiving calls from school.”* (Staff Interview)

No matter the type of communication, what is ultimately important is to make a connection with the parent. For some staff, the face-to-face connection is the most important. One staff states,

*“We are creative with our resources. Catching parents whenever or wherever you can. In the parking lot, at the grocery store, lunch hours, etc. Let them know that you care and are taking the time out of day to make a connection even if it is brief.”*

For other staff, the message delivered through communication is crucial. As mentioned above, parents tire of hearing only the negative about their child. It is off putting to them and it doesn’t enhance the relationship between school and parent. A staff person says,

*“We strive for weekly contact. Whether good or bad. But focus on something good and identify the challenges.”* (Staff Interview)

#### **In summary,**

- Parents think the quality of communication between the school and home varied by teacher and school.
- Parents and staff agree that finding a balance between “good” and “bad” news home is important.
- Parents want early communication about issues before problems escalate.
- Parents and staff both want mutual initiation of communication through weekly reports, emails and phone calls.

#### **Question Assumptions and Negative Labels**

Parents in the focus groups talked at length about their children being labeled as ‘trouble makers’. They also described how that label followed students between classes and schools. Parents were frustrated that this resulted in students being pushed through or pushed out of the

school system instead of being given a second chance. One parent described her child's teacher in this way,

*"I just feel like she gets fed up and she has the kids pegged. So she basically, you know kind of, treats them differently than she does the other ones."* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent reflected on his child's disciplinary problems saying,

*"I think it's unfair for the school to criminalize them and that is basically what they do. They put at-risk kids at risk and they are already at-risk."* (Parent Focus Group)

Parents were very concerned about how past behaviors haunted their student even if they changed classes or schools. One parent explained,

*"I enrolled (my child) at this school because we used to live in a different place and we had a meeting with the vice principal who says I want to let you know that we're not going to tolerate this bullying and blah, blah, blah. And it's like excuse me, you don't even know her. I mean how did you hear this, there are towns between this school and that one. All you saw in her record was relations she had in the third in fourth grade and here she's in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade."* (Parent Focus Group)

Parents felt this past 'baggage' resulted in schools 'giving up' on their child. The negative labeling, assumptions, and lack of 'second chances' for students strains the relationship between the family and the school. However, when teachers and schools give second chances, parents and students respond favorably. As one parent explained,

*"We've had some teachers that have actually taken that time and not listened to what other people had said and got to know Jose. And he's like an A student in that classroom."* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent contrasted the alternative schools with the mainstream high school her child had previously attended, saying,

*"I have never had a problem worrying about suspension here. They (teachers and school administrators) are more involved in keeping the kid in school and working with them than kicking them out."* (Parent Focus Group)

Parents mostly talked about the negative labeling of their children, not their family. However, one woman talked about her experience with the school saying,

*"You've got the school basically undermining you and making you look like garbage and therefore you child looks at you like your garbage."* (Parent Focus Group)

Staff experiences with families of at-risk youth differed slightly from the parents. They talked more about how to help them shift their perspective of school to be more open or nonjudgmental. The first step is to not allow the parent's past school experience influence their child's current school experience. If parents can change their perspective, then maybe the child can as well. As one staff puts it,

*"Many of these parents had bad experiences with school when they were younger, so we try to reframe school engagement. We invite them into the school and introduce them to teachers and show them where their kids eat lunch and learn to do math. The school is welcoming and the staff is nice."* (Staff Interview)

Another staff expands,

*"Kids see where the parents place their priorities; the kids will model that as well. So if school, education, and learning math is not a priority for mom and dad, the kid is not going to take it seriously either."* (Staff Interview)

Staff reported that keeping parents informed by presenting a balanced picture of what is happening with their child in the school could also affect a parent's perspective. Parents in the focus groups also expressed this same desire for information. One staff said,

*"Focus on what's going well. Create a trusting relationship with the parent. Show them that their child is important to us. Present a balanced picture and don't focus on the negative."* (Staff Interview)

Other staff reiterated,

*"Always bring out the good, positive in their child. See the good in the family, no judgment passed."* (Staff Interview)

*"We all have a common goal and we all want them (students) to be successful."* (Staff Interview)

In summary,

- Parents felt that to build a good relationship with the schools, schools need to let go of the students' past and give students a second chance.
- Parents need to know that schools care about their child's success no matter what challenges they are facing.
- Staff felt that parents need help in letting go of past personal experiences that may be influencing their child's current school experience.
- Staff need to present a balanced picture to parents about their child's current school experience.

## Welcoming Climate for Students in Transition

Many of the parents in the focus group had children who were enrolled in alternative schools. These parents expressed their concerns about the process of returning to the mainstream school. Some parents were frustrated that the original school did not keep track of the students after they moved to the alternative school. For example, one parent said,

*"I mean if you had a case manager at your home school that's supposed to be following their progress no matter where they're at. They are getting paid to do that job but it's not happening, you know so I asked what is your role?"* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent was worried that even if her child returned to the mainstream high school, she would be treated differently.

Many parents were concerned about the quality of education that students were receiving in the alternative schools. One parent explained that her son returned to the mainstream school and *"he couldn't integrate into the environment again and now he's back in this school. One of the things this school doesn't do is really prepare them scholastically to be up with the kids at the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade level."* (Parent Focus Group)

Another parent expressed that,

*"Instead of facing the issues that they (the school) may have a problem here, they are going to stick them in front of the computer and have them do it online."* (Parent Focus Group)

Some parents whose children had dropped out of school explained that when they tried to reenroll their child in school, the school was disrespectful and unwelcoming. One parent described how her child was rejected from several schools after her expulsion.



*“I went to a charter school and they turned me down. Then I went to another school and they turned me down. It got me pretty mad because the counselors between the two schools had talked. First, she was already at a school and then after she talked to the counselor, they denied her, they didn’t want her ... I went to the school board and I tried to get to the bottom of it. Nobody answered me back and it was just chaos.”* (Parent Focus Group)

According to staff, reentry for students focused on the process of getting them back to their home school following participation in an outside program. Reentry incorporates the strategies of what staff and parents have already found to be extremely important: communication and relationships.

*“It is the reaching out that we do to parents – with the letter home, to phone calls. We are constantly in communication to parents about what skills are necessary to transition child back to the home school, whether it is credit recovery or behavior modification. We talk about attendance, achievement, performance, credits attained. What needs do the parents have around attendance? Do they need help getting kid to school? Yes, then let’s talk about options. What needs do parents have around child’s performance? Do they need family therapy to solve some issues at home so that the kid can sleep better? Yes, then let’s talk about the options and what will look like.”* (Staff Interview)

Many staff also reported the use of reentry/transition procedures, which are typically put into place early in the program. Otherwise some transition plans are more spontaneous. Most plans appear to include academic progress reports, frequent meetings between school and family, social and behavior reports, and future goals. A staff person reports,

*“There is a transition meeting before going back to home school. Students prepare a presentation as a part of this meeting. Students will send out invitations to important adults to come and listen. This is just a private family meeting. The student feels proud of the work that they have done in the program no matter how big or small. Once families transition back to the home school, they are always welcome back into Parent Empowerment groups.”* (Staff Interview)

According to staff, it is the addition of community resources that aide in reentry. These resources can range from mental health services and medical care to housing assistance and food stamps. These ancillary services provide that extra boost of support that parents need. One staff reports,

*“Involve the home school, teachers, principal, and social workers. Bring them in to the weekly and bimonthly meetings to see the changes in the student and the accomplishments. I will stop by the school after they have transitioned to check on them. I will even organize afterschool activities like working at a restaurant for a child if it looks like they need to get away from the bad environment. They are always welcome to come back here for support.”* (Staff Interview)

In summary,

- Parents need to feel that their children are welcomed back to mainstream schools after dropping out, being expelled or attending an alternative educational setting.
- Parents concerns about the quality of education in alternative settings must be addressed.
- Staff identified maintaining the established communication and parent relationship throughout the reentry process.
- Staff felt that connecting parents and students to community resources was a valuable tool for successful transition.
- Staff need to start the transition process early to cover all bases in making sure the student has a positive transition.

### **Suggested Strategies and Supports**

Parents suggested many strategies that would enable them to fully support their children's education and become more involved at the school. For example, parent workshops, parenting classes or informal parent self-help groups were considered helpful for learning how to *"help deal with the stress of the kids because I know being a parent, my kid stresses me out. I don't know what to do with him, you know."* (Parent Focus Group)

However, some parents suggested that teachers also need training to help them understand the psychology of troubled youth and learn how to effectively discipline students. This resonated with one parent who reminded the group that the school needs to deal with problems as a 'community'.

Many parents talked about enjoyable school events that they had helped to organize or simply attended. Parents suggested that schools have dinners, celebrations, sports events, parades, festivals, or art shows. In our observations, these low-key events created an informal environment that facilitated friendly rapport between families and school staff. Many parents talked about volunteering when their children were in elementary school but most did not know how to volunteer in middle or high school. Schools need to explore how to provide these kinds of opportunities for parents. Finally, one parent suggested that the school should bring together teachers and key school staff with the family and students to dialogue about challenges. She said,

*"What they really need to do is pull us all together with the kids and everybody and just everybody say their opinion. It might get a little riled up but it could be good."*

Parents also recommended a variety of supports that would help them to fully engage with the school and improve their child's educational outcomes. One parent suggested that,

*"You've got to get a look at what's going to help the family because if you can make the family solid, you're going to make the kid solid."* (Parent Focus Group)

Parents had an assortment of ideas concerning what families need. For example, many felt that parents needed access to resources. Some parents felt that schools should take the lead in helping families to access resources. In one of the five focus groups, the parents talked extensively about the cost of school supplies and uniforms. One parent said, *"The school*

*expects more out of students than they did when I went to school. And I only make \$10 an hour you know. I do construction.*” Another parent explained that they are expected to buy uniforms, which is hard when you don’t have the money. Some parents in the group were able to inform the others about available resources in the community. However, it calls into question how many of these parents would otherwise have known about these resources.

Many parents talked about supports to help students with their homework. A few parents expressed frustration that teachers were not available to help their children with homework. Others were frustrated that they could not help their child with their high school level homework because it was too difficult. One focus group explained that there was not homework at their school. Some people thought this was a great solution because,

*“They do it all in class. If they don’t understand it, the teacher walks around and kind of helps them out.* (Parent Focus Group)

Other parents wanted the school to send work home so that they could help their child improve. One parent said,

*“But he can’t actually tell me what grade level he is, what he needs to work on. I asked if he could bring homework home in the area’s he’s weak in, like spelling but nothing has come.”* (Parent Focus Group)

Parents also advocated for some basic supports to enable families to attend school events. Almost all parents recommended that schools provide childcare, food, translation services and assistance with transportation. Additionally, some parents suggested that events and parent-teacher conferences should be held on the weekends when the parents are not working. Many parents felt that evening events were difficult to get to due to scheduling conflicts.

Staff and parents ideas about supports were very similar. Staff identified several supports and strategies in order for parents to be more engaged in parent activities. Staff agreed with the parents that meeting some of basic needs of parents such as transportation, food, and/or childcare is the key to increased participation. One staff reports,

*“I always have a lot of families who don’t have cars. I am always amazed; 5 – 7 families don’t have cars. So for IEP(Individual Educational Plan) meetings, we go pick them up. We make those adaptations because it important for them to be involved.”* (Staff Interview)

Parents may have late night or early morning shift work. It is important to be mindful of this when scheduling activities and offer meetings later in the day or on the weekends. As with any parent, providing written invitations and follow-up calls of events are helpful reminders.

As previously stated in the section regarding reentry, staff identified the usefulness of connecting parents to community supports and resources. It is important to note that linking parents to services can happen at any stage of parent involvement. Parents would also benefit from a school liaison or advocate when interacting with the school, especially for discipline issues. One staff reports,

*“The majority of parents are involved in DSS (Dept. of Social Services). We have become a mediator between parents and DSS - a go between. We listen to parents and DSS and provide feedback. Parents are pretty rigid at first. They think that we are just another state agency. As they work with us, we become a support for them and gain their trust.”* (Staff Interview)

**In summary,**

- Parents suggested parenting workshops, classes and informal self-help groups.
- School should have fun events that parents can coordinate or simply attend.
- Parents need access to community resources to help with basics and school supplies.
- Childcare, food, translation services, weekend scheduling and assistance with transportation are needed to enable parents to attend school events and activities.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study demonstrate the union of parents and program staff belief that family involvement is an important investment. They both agree that as good practice it is necessary to establish strong relationships and good communication. Without either of these, there is no connection or sense of caring. They both discussed the challenges of making assumptions and negatively labeling students and their families. Reentry to school after dropping out, expulsion or placement in an alternative setting was concerning mainly for parents, although, there were several staff who commented and discussed the process of reentry. Finally, parents and program staff talked at length about what they need in terms of strategies and supports.

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Adams 14 CASASTART (Commerce City)  
Boulder PREP 2 (Boulder)  
CASASTART (Monte Vista)  
CCS Family Advocacy Program – (Denver)  
Changing the Culture in Brighton Middle Schools (Brighton)  
Choice Points Service Learning Academy (Canon City)  
Clear Creek County School District Alternative Program  
Columbine Refocus Middle School (Denver)  
Delta Opportunity School DOS (Delta)  
Douglas County Academy Program  
Eagles Nest School For Boys (Woodland Park)  
Expelled and At-Risk Student Services (Boulder)  
Expelled and At-Risk Student Services (Ignacio)  
Extended Learning Program - At-Risk Student Services (Leadville)  
Futures Academy (Pueblo)  
Middle School Truancy Program (Denver)  
Montbello Expelled & At-Risk Program (Denver)  
PBS Expelled Services (Adams County)  
Pine River Valley High School (LaPlata 11)  
Polaris Program (Kremmling)  
Positive Behavior Support (Jefferson County)  
Positive Education and Attitude Through Knowledge (Colorado Springs)  
Project ATTEND (Sheridan)  
Project Respect (Pueblo)  
Rocky Mountain Youth Academy (Conejos and San Luis Valley)  
Success Through Early Intervention Program (Englewood)  
TABS Tiered Academic and Behavior Supports (Colorado Springs)  
Transitional Opportunities Center (Grand Junction)  
Weld 6 PBS (Greeley)  
WPHS Compass Project-Guiding Students Toward Success (Woodland Park)  
Y.E.S. Youth Experiencing Success (Moffat)

## APPENDIX A

# Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement

### **TYPE 1**

#### **PARENTING**

Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.

### **TYPE 2**

#### **COMMUNICATING**

Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.

### **TYPE 3**

#### **VOLUNTEERING**

Recruit and organize parent help and support.

### **TYPE 4**

#### **LEARNING AT HOME**

Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.

### **TYPE 5**

#### **DECISION MAKING**

Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

### **TYPE 6**

#### **COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY**

Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Joyce L. Epstein, Ph.D., et. al.  
Johns Hopkins University  
<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm>  
3505 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, MD 21218-3843

## APPENDIX B

### METHODOLOGY

To answer these research questions, we conducted a study with programs that are funded under Colorado's Expelled and At Risk Student Services. Interviews with program and school staff, parent focus groups and program observations were conducted. Participants included program staff and the parents of students served in these programs. Thirty-one staff interviews were conducted using a structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). Five parent focus groups were conducted with a total of 32 parents using a structured interview protocol (see Appendix D). Parents were asked to reflect on the entirety of their experiences with schools, not just their experiences with the EARSS program. Finally, we observed approximately seven program activities designed to serve parents. These included parent workshops and parent events such as dinners or holiday celebrations. (See *Acknowledgements* on page 13 for list of groups involved.)

Analysis occurred throughout the data collection process (Mertons, 2005). This recursive progression allowed the findings to be constructed and systematically generated as new data were collected. Transcripts were imported into Nvivo, a computer aided software package for analysis. Through this process, open codes were developed and dropped. Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) breaks down the textual data of field notes and transcripts into manageable pieces. After all data were collected, a tree structure of the codes was developed in Nvivo. All transcripts, field notes and memos were imported and subsequently coded to these "tree nodes" (codes). As needed, additional codes were added, deleted or merged. Comparisons, syntheses, patterns and themes were developed. We reported preliminary findings from the staff interviews at a large networking event in October 2007. Staff members provided feedback, additional questions and interpretations. Additionally, during data collection, our emerging ideas were often developed into questions for the next interviewee. After we completed all coding of the data, text at each code was printed, reviewed and reflections were noted in the margins. This process helped us to develop overarching themes that are written in the findings section of this report.



## APPENDIX C

### Family Involvement EARSS Program Staff Interview protocol

Hi, this is \_\_\_\_\_ from the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. We are the evaluators of the Expelled and At-Risk Student Services grant that you receive from the Colorado Department of Education. I believe the name of your program is \_\_\_\_\_. Is that correct?

I am calling about your mid year report and to ask you some questions about your parent involvement strategies.

Would you be able to answer questions about the numbers that were submitted? If not, who should I call?

Would you be able to answer detailed questions about your program? If not who should I call?

This conversation will probably take about 30 minutes do you have time to talk with me now or should we schedule something for later this week?

*Schedule time if they cannot speak now.*

1. Okay, first can we just verify the data on your mid year report.

*Review numbers of parent involvement – ask about any inconsistencies or questions. Update the spreadsheet in the EARSS folder.*

2. How would you define or describe parent involvement with school?
3. How are the parents of your students involved with their child's education?
  - Volunteer at school
  - Help with homework and learning at home
  - Attend parenting classes
  - Decision making roles
  - Parenting instruction
  - Community collaboration
  - Communicating
4. Tell me about your parent involvement strategies that are funded as a part of your EARSS grant.
5. How are these services tailored for students who are expelled or at risk of expulsion?

- Do they differ from the services you provide to other families in your schools who may not have high risk students
  - Cultural competence
  - Language
  - Content of program
  - Staffing
6. When you work with a family whose child has been suspended or expelled, how do you repair their relationship with the school and reengage them with their child's learning?
  7. How does the school welcome families of your students into the school setting?
  8. What kind of communication strategies do you use with parents of your students?
  9. What else would you recommend as a good practice for involving parents of high-risk youth?
  10. What kinds of parent involvement activities or events to you have scheduled that might be helpful for us to observe? We would like to get a deeper sense of good parent involvement practice.
  11. Finally, would you be willing to help us pull together a group of 8-10 of your parents for a focus group on parent involvement with schools? We are particularly interested in parents of high-risk students; the kinds of students that you serve in your program. The purpose of the focus group is to find out best practices for involving families with schools.

Thank you so much for your time. If you have any other thoughts or ideas, please do not hesitate to contact me. These data will be used to create report on how to involve parents of high-risk students.

Name of Interviewee:

Best way to Contact (phone, email):

## APPENDIX D

### EARSS Parent Focus Group Protocol October, 2007

Before we start, I want to make sure you signed and received a copy of the “Consent Form,” which explains the study and gives us your permission to participate. [*Make eye contact and get visual agreement*] Thank you.

I think we’re ready to begin. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I work for the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. I’ll be leading our discussion. I am going to tape-record the discussion, but only so I can listen to it carefully later. Is that okay? [*Make eye contact and get visual agreement*]. Very good. Thank you. Everything we talk about is confidential – only I will listen to the tapes. Also, no one outside of this group will know your full names, so your participation is anonymous. This also means that we will all agree here in this room to keep everything we share today to ourselves and not to take it outside this room. This will be especially important because some of you may know each other. Do we all agree? [*Make eye contact and get visual agreement*]. Very good. Thank you.

I am conducting this research for the Colorado Department of Education as part of the evaluation of the Expelled and At Risk Services Grant. This program funds the \_\_\_\_\_ that your child participates in. The purpose of this research is to find out more about how to meaningfully involve parents in their child’s education. This is especially important if your child has been suspended, expelled or has been having trouble with school. This is an opportunity for you to tell us what you think about school climate, school policies and your involvement with the school. This information will be reported in a way to help other schools better involve parents.

Each of you was asked to talk with me because you have first-hand knowledge about the school. Each of you has important things to say, so I’m going to make sure each of you gets time to tell us your thoughts and feelings. Please feel OK about disagreeing with anything I say, or things that other people say. The research needs your honest thoughts and feelings.

Each of you also has made some sort of sacrifice to be here today. So I want to pay attention to the time. In order to move the conversation along efficiently, there may be times when I may need to stop you or indicate the need to move on to another topic. This is not meant to be disrespectful in any way, but, rather, is done to ensure that we end this group discussion on time. If you have additional thoughts or ideas that you feel you did not have an opportunity to share during the focus group, I would be happy to stay and talk with you after the group has finished. Are there any questions or concerns about this process that you would like me to answer?

Please speak up whenever you want to, or if you want to be the next one to talk, please let me know by raising your hand. Remember, what we want today is your honest thoughts – there are no “right” or “wrong” answers and no one is here to judge another for what he or she thinks. I want to remind you that you are free to **NOT** answer any question you feel uncomfortable about, but I hope you will want to share your thoughts and ideas. [*Establish ground rules and write them on the black board or flip chart*]

### ***Ground Rules/ Group Norms***

- Only one person talks at a time. It is important for us to hear everyone's ideas and opinions.
- There are no right or wrong answers to questions – just ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.
- It is important for us to hear all sides of an issue – both the positive and the negative.
- Everyone participates, but no one dominates.

Great. Let's get started.....

#### **Parents:**

1. To begin, let's go around the group and tell us your first name and a little bit about your son(s) or daughter(s) (age, grade,).
2. As a parent, describe your experience with the school throughout your child's education?
  - Relationships with the teachers, support staff and administration?
  - Changes between school grades
3. What has the school done to get you involved with your child's learning?
  - Think of one or two times when you felt really engaged by the school – describe them
  - Outreach activities from the school
  - Help with homework
4. How are you currently involved with the school and your child's education?
  - Volunteer experiences
  - Governance involvement
  - Teacher contact/ collaboration
  - How have you been involved in the past?
5. Ideally, how would you like to be involved?
  - What are the barriers to that kind of involvement?

What would help overcome those barriers?

6. Tell me about the communication between you and the school?
  - Phone calls, written correspondence, teacher conferences, informal communication
  - How does it work for you?
  - How could it be improved?
7. For those of you whose child(ren) has been expelled or suspended out of school, can you talk about how the school communicated and supported you?
  - What would have helped you and your child at that time
8. Based on your experience as a parent, what else you think I should know about parent involvement.

Thanks for your time and energy tonight. If you have any other thoughts or want to make more comments, please do not hesitate to contact either of us. Here are our cards so you can reach us. We also want to thank you for your participation with a \$20 gift card. Please do not leave without getting it.