



Harvard Family Research Project

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December 5, 2011

New Learning Opportunities Mean New Opportunities for Engagement

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FINE Newsletter, Volume III, Issue 4

Issue Topic: Expanded Learning and Family Engagement

Harvard Family Research Project Commentary

Today's children and youth are increasingly exposed to new forms of learning beyond the classroom, especially in the form of out-of-school time programs and digital media. Developments in these areas have opened up new ways that families can become involved in their children's education and development. Harvard Family Research Project's Heidi Rosenberg and M. Elena Lopez discuss the new roles for families in supporting student learning.

The recognition that today's students need knowledge and competencies beyond basic academic skills has led to a renewed emphasis on the value of out-of-school time (OST) and expanded learning opportunities to provide children with a more comprehensive set of educational experiences. Technology is also reshaping how, when, and where children learn and has brought about exciting new ways to engage students in innovative and interactive learning opportunities. Families, in turn, are increasingly making use of various forms of technology to track student performance data, to keep in contact with school staff, and to understand how to connect their children to out-of-school resources and expanded learning opportunities. This issue of the *FINE Newsletter* explores how the expansion of learning opportunities has also expanded the opportunities for families to support their children's learning.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING

Students preparing for a 21st century workplace need skills that go beyond the standard academic competencies that schools have long helped to foster. OST programming encompasses before- and afterschool programs, summer learning programs, and extended learning opportunities. These learning experiences provide valuable ways for students to gain and practice a broader array of critical thinking, problem solving, creative, and other skills that complement their school-based learning. Far from being mere extracurricular diversions, these OST learning opportunities allow students to deepen their knowledge

and skills in engaging and interactive ways. Extended and year-round learning programs also help to provide continuity and maximize learning potential during summer months and other non-school hours.

Families play an important role in facilitating children's involvement in OST and extended learning opportunities. When families understand the value of these learning experiences, they are more likely to encourage their children to become involved in programs and follow up to ensure their children continue to participate. Interest in OST learning opportunities helps to create demand for these programs and encourage communities and districts to offer more of such programming. Program quality also improves as engaged families recognize what to look and ask for in their children's OST learning experiences. Family involvement in OST programming also has a beneficial impact on family engagement in student learning overall.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH STUDENT DATA

As discussed in our recent data brief, *Breaking New Ground*, schools and districts continue to make strides in the use of technology to organize and report student and school performance data through online data systems. These data provide a rich source of information for families to help them understand how their children are doing in school, as well as how their schools or districts are performing relative to others. Parent advocates, school staff, and community-based organizations are increasingly focused on helping families to access, understand, and act on student and school performance data so they can understand what's going well and identify areas that need improvement. Parents receive training on how to access these parent portals and obtain information about their children's attendance, coursework completion, credit accumulation, and other important indicators of student progress. Some online student data systems also provide links to school- and community-based support services so families can connect their children with relevant resources and programs to strengthen skills and address academic challenges. Families are often able to use these systems to contact their children's teachers to request more information on academic progress or schedule meetings to discuss student growth.

Families are also using school-wide data to understand how well a school is serving its students—including subpopulations of students such as ethnic minorities—and identify areas for improvement. Community-based organizations help families make use of these collective data to understand how to mobilize to advocate for the changes they wish to see in their schools and communities. This collective mobilization helps empower parents to advocate not only for their own child, but for all of the children in their community, and parents' combined voices serve as a powerful force for positive educational change.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation report,¹ youth between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 7.5 hours a day, 7 days a week with media. They watch TV, play video games, listen to music, communicate via text messages, and use computers. Through these platforms, youth today share ideas, participate in social networks, and produce innovative works such as videos, games, and stories. Many educators and families have embraced the use of digital media as an educational and communication tool, while others remain hesitant and need encouragement and guidance to understand the positive potential of digital media learning opportunities. The need for parental guidance is driving education organizations to help families make sense of the dizzying array of technology aids and digital media so parents can make informed choices about how to shape their children's exposure to these new forms of learning.

In sum, as the learning landscape for children and youth changes and as schools take steps toward data-driven and student-centered learning, families are taking on new roles to support and advocate for their children's success in the 21st century.

IN THIS ISSUE

This issue of the FINE Newsletter focuses on new and expanded roles for families in supporting student learning through involvement in OST and extended learning programs, data use, and engagement with digital media. We feature several new resources from HFRP, including an essay by Heather Weiss and M. Elena Lopez, "Making Data Matter in Family Engagement," in the new *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement*, which describes how districts are making data on student performance accessible, understandable, and actionable for families. The new brief, *Year-Round Learning: Linking School, Afterschool, and Summer Learning to Promote Student Success*, authored by HFRP's Sarah Deschenes and Helen Janc Malone, discusses a particular approach to bridging the gap between schools and expanded learning programs to provide students with access to quality learning environments throughout the year. In addition, we feature the new *Family Engagement for High School Success Toolkit*, a joint venture between HFRP and United Way Worldwide, which offers guidance on developing and implementing a family engagement plan that tackles the important issue of improving graduation rates for disadvantaged youth.

This issue also features two Voices from the Field: Nita Rudy shares how parents in Mississippi are using school-wide data to identify student learning needs and advocate for school improvement actions such as providing extra instruction in critical subject areas to raise persistently low test scores, while Lori Takeuchi highlights how parents view different forms of digital media and how social and environmental factors shape children's experiences with these media platforms.

Finally, we offer a leadership profile of Eric Dearing, Professor at Boston College's Lynch School of Education, who exhorts the field to make more investments in data and evaluation so that family engagement initiatives are informed by a solid body of evidence rather than soft assumptions about what ought to be done.

1. Rideout, V. J., Foehr, U. G., & Roberts, D. F. (2010). *Generation M2: Media in the lives of 8 to 18 year-olds*. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>

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