



Parent Information Resource Centers and Title I Compliance

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Note: *The reason for publishing this brief today, as a service from the Jeffords Center for Policy Research to Vermont school districts, parents, the Vermont School Boards Association, Vermont Superintendents Association, Vermont Principals Association and Vermont NEA is to alert all Vermont school districts to an issue that confronts the Vermont Education Community. The issue is that the Vermont Parent Information Resource Center's budget has been cut from the federal allocation. If school districts contract directly with the Center for its parent involvement services the Center will continue to serve them, if districts do not contract with the Center it will close before the opening of school in September, 2011.*

The Law and Parent Involvement

Including parents in the decision making process that results in action plans for school improvement is both good education policy and a mandate in state and federal law.¹ In 1997, the Vermont Legislature inserted the word "shall" in Act 60, to direct schools to include parents in the development, implementation and annual updating of comprehensive action plans. The most recent federal law, known as No Child Left Behind, requires all schools that are eligible for federal funding involve parents in a "meaningful way." For those districts receiving more than \$500,000, in Title I funding, districts must set aside one percent of the amount they receive and spend it on parent involvement activity. Others are asked to involve parents but there is not a specific amount they must spend.

Q. What does it mean to involve parents to meet the intent of federal law?

- A.** When parents are involved in school planning:
- Plans need to be jointly developed (schools must consult parents)
 - Plans need to include ways to sustain active parent engagement at each Title I school
 - Plans need to describe how parental engagement will be implemented into other NCLB programs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Head Start, McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act)

The problem is that if the Vermont PIRC does not receive commitments from districts to contract with district Title I funds the Center will not be able to continue to pay the staff members to provide these services.

It's important to distinguish between parent involvement in planning and implementation for school improvement and the broader concept of the school-family connection. Parent involvement in planning ensures that the perspective of parents is integral to the complicated process of changing school policies and practices that is usually dominated by elected officials (school board members) and professionals (teachers and administrators.) Getting parent voices to be heard in this process is not always easy both because the concepts that are evaluated for their worth are often described in terms that are unfamiliar to many parents (whether or not their first language is English) and because the most underrepresented families are also the least likely to pursue greater involvement.



The School-Family Connection

The school-family connection, a much broader concept, has been studied by researchers for several decades to determine the contribution that such connection makes to student achievement, well-being and success. A recent review of the research by the National Center for Community Connections with Schools found a clear body of evidence that students achieve better and are happier in school when parents are involved.² Some of the evidence clearly mixes the effects of family background with school involvement. For example, in Vermont, in 2003 the Vermont Department of Education found that students whose parents came to parent conferences and were involved in school events scored higher on state tests in reading and mathematics than students whose parents did not attend conferences.³

Q. Does it matter whether low income parents are involved in school planning if the outcome we are trying to achieve is high performance for all children?

A. Yes, it probably does matter. The research cited in the National Center's review shows that when low income parents become involved in a partnership with the school, they then have the opportunity to learn how to help their children to achieve better. A partnership means an exchange of services. Parents give their time and knowledge to the school's planning process and the school may then give them skills and knowledge they need to help their kids.⁴ A partnership also means that schools and families have shared priorities and work toward common goals. Achieving this requires that schools and families work together to articulate these goals.

Q. What's the connection between the provisions of state and federal laws and helping all students to achieve better?

A. The process of getting parents more involved in the education of their children may be an "unnatural act." That is, most parents, from time to time, have had experiences with schools that create barriers to collaboration. Most parents can recount times when they felt that their children were unfairly evaluated for athletic or academic performance. Schools have the duty to evaluate, but the evaluations are rarely done in collaboration with parents. The research cited above shows that, if parents are to be invited to become stronger partners with schools, both parents and schools will need help. This is probably one of the reasons that state and federal laws provide mandates and incentives to schools for parent involvement.

Support for Parent Involvement, Collaboration and Engagement

As stated in the beginning of this Issue Brief, federal law provides both incentive funding and the requirement for large districts to actually spend some of their federal dollars in this way. It also provides for a system of direct funding for state Parent Information Resource Centers in addition to the district funding, if and when the funding is available. These centers were designed to offer many of the services that districts needed to support parent involvement at a lower cost than would otherwise be the case. The centers, like the one in Vermont, can efficiently help districts monitor the required parent involvement, assist in meeting Title I requirements, train school staff in research based services and assist in implementing family engagement with schools. But, when the new federal budget was finally passed in April of this year, the funding for the state centers was eliminated.



Q. What's important about the fact that the direct funding of the PIRC's have been cut?

A. Aside from the fact that efficient services have been eliminated in a cost saving measure, the districts are now faced with having to create and maintain parent involvement as required by the law using the Title I funding that they receive. They can do this by contracting with the existing Vermont PIRC to provide the services that they received under the previous PIRC funding. Many districts do not know that they can and should do this. **The problem is that if the Vermont PIRC does not receive commitments from districts to contract with district Title I funds the Center will not be able to continue to pay the staff members to provide these services.**

Our Recommendation

Recognizing that parent involvement in schools is mandated by both state and federal law and that the research on school improvement and student achievement likewise supports increased parent engagement with schools, the Jeffords Center recommends that all schools allocate resources and effort in this way. Specifically, we believe that schools should look carefully at the investments they are making in school improvement and especially those Title I funds that can be used to involve parents without directly affecting local tax rates.

Endnotes

1. Title I, Part A, 1118 of the ESEA (Parental Involvement). [Section 9101(32), ESEA; VSA, Title 16, Chapter 3, § 165. Standards of quality for public schools equal educational opportunities.
2. Ferguson, C. (2008). *The School-Family Connection: Looking at the Larger Picture*. Austin, TX: National Center for Community Connections with Schools.
3. Source: Annual Report to the Vermont State Board of Education and to the Governor for the Governor's Press Conference on Assessment and Accountability H. 'Bud' Meyers, Deputy Commissioner. Fall 2003.
4. Viramontes, R. (2011). *Promoting Parent & Family Engagement in Education*. First Focus: www.firstfocus.net.



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