

## Expand and strengthen partnerships with families to focus on improving children's language and reading.

Becoming a strong reader begins at birth. The cornerstones of reading success—language, knowledge, and curiosity—should be cultivated from infancy, and in every setting. To promote the language and reading development of our state's young children, strong partnerships with families are not optional. Families are experts on their children; they are the people most invested in the child's growth and development.<sup>63</sup> And families across Massachusetts are already caring for and "teaching" their children. However, while a baby's mother may know her child loves to look at books, she is unlikely to know the latest research on how to use that book with her young child as a tool for boosting language and learning for years to come. She may regularly ask her child questions while in the kitchen, point things out while on the bus, and tell stories at the grocery store,

education and life—might mistakenly be using only her limited English in the household. She does not realize that speaking in her native language, in which she can more comfortably share ideas and have rich dialogue, can boost her child's ability to *read in any language*.<sup>64</sup> It is also very likely that none of these parents are aware that the quality of a child's home language environment at age 3 is a strong predictor of 10th grade reading achievement.<sup>65</sup> If we reach out to children's caregivers and give them the information they want and need to promote their children's reading development, ultimately both the child and society will benefit. If we rely on schools only, our approach is too narrow. If we wait for kindergarten, it is too late.

### Opening Doors: School Library Supports Family Literacy

A community reading program initiated by Mary Kenslea, librarian at the Whittemore Elementary School in Waltham, has brought the signature-filled book card system back to the library, creating a social buzz in the stacks and building family literacy at home.

Participants take home new "green sticker" books, in English and some in Spanish, to read together with their families, then sign the book card on the inside cover and pass it along to another student. When five families have read and signed one book's card, the Whittemore students from those families are recognized at a school community meeting where they pose for a picture that will be affixed to the book. The book then enters the general collection for the entire community to borrow. Read Out Loud...Pass it on!, funded by a Bookapalooza grant from the American Library Association, includes a trove of books and even promotes bilingual family literacy; parents read aloud in Spanish, children read aloud in English, and the entire community benefits.

yet not know how some of these everyday actions can be the catalyst for her child's later school success. Similarly, the father of a first grader may hear his child reading words on a page with proficiency and declare the mission accomplished. He may not know that the act of reading the words on the page is necessary but not sufficient for his son to be a strong reader. And the immigrant mother—who left her own country to give her child a better

### ACTION STEP

#### Early education and care settings and schools should link family engagement efforts to children's language, emergent literacy, and reading.

When children's families and educators interact and communicate regularly about children's reading development, children from all backgrounds are more academically successful. They are more likely to attend school regularly and to graduate, and ultimately more likely to pursue higher education.<sup>66</sup> Open and ongoing communication around reading helps parents become well-versed in the language-reading connection and understand the milestones of their child's reading achievement. Only then can they become their child's reading advocate.

Unfortunately, this scenario is not commonplace. For many families, interaction with their children's learning setting is a tale of hurried drop-offs and pick-ups, a few evening social events, or an exhausting nightly ordeal focused on homework. To avoid this kind of unproductive—or even counterproductive—relationship, learning settings' should:

- regularly provide family education on children's language and reading, including strategies for reading with children;
- link language and reading to every social event that includes families;<sup>67</sup>
- achieve transparency in communicating with all parents (native and non-native English speakers) about their child's reading, especially if the child is struggling;

- plan home extension activities that support daytime learning and prioritize daily family conversation, family reading time, and word play to build up children's language and knowledge of abstract concepts;
- encourage immigrant families to use their native language for increased comfort and quality of dialogue;
- encourage consistent book reading and storytelling as a healthy alternative to TV watching and other screen-time;
- where applicable, make school libraries vibrant centers for family literacy partnerships.

## ACTION STEP

### **Early education and care settings and schools should assess and monitor the impact of their family engagement efforts on children's language and reading outcomes.**

When it comes to family engagement and partnerships, we tend to suffer from a rhetoric-reality gap. Across the state, there are many early education and care settings and schools that organize educational events, create elaborate progress reports, post information on detailed websites, send home newsletters in backpacks, hold meetings and lectures and coffees—all to encourage children's families and caregivers to stay informed about what is going on in the learning environment. Yet when it comes to enlisting families in the actual learning process and building a truly reciprocal relationship and partnership between the professionals and leaders in these settings and the families, there is much work to do.

Time and again, sharing information does not occur in either direction because of a barrier that we have not thought through carefully enough. This barrier may be language (if the parents' primary language is not English), may be the kind of language we use (opaque educational jargon), may be the times and ways in which we make ourselves available, or may be an implicit, cumulative unintended message that "we are not partners."

To truly disseminate useful information to families about how to capitalize on daily interactions with their children to boost learning, we need to think about the when, the how, and the words; we need to reach parents when they're available, in ways that make sense to them, and with words that are transparent, respectful, and easily put into action. Ultimately, if learning outcomes are not improved, then we need to modify our approach to family engagement; we

must hold ourselves accountable by critically analyzing the results of our efforts and making appropriate mid-course corrections. Suggested data to be collected as part of accountability systems:

- attendance rates at parent-teacher conferences;
- number of events with a literacy component, and family attendance;
- home reading logs to estimate family reading time;
- enrichment activities and, if assigned in the primary grades, homework, with a family literacy component.

## ACTION STEP

### **Capitalize on and strengthen the role of the community library in promoting family literacy practices.**

Community libraries across our state are committed to helping families make reading a joy and a habit. They are filled with hard-working librarians with a love of reading and a rich collection of books. These libraries offer language-building children's programming, read-alouds, and other engaging activities for kids. In our effort to raise strong readers in the Commonwealth and to raise awareness about opportunities to promote children's literacy development in the everyday, beginning at birth, we cannot overlook the potential impact of the community library; they play a vital role in the community and in the life of many of our families. Through our research, we identified three ways to increase their impact on reading outcomes:

- Revisit hours of opening. We found libraries that are often closed at times when families are in full swing and focused on extracurricular activities. For example, libraries often don't open until 9 or 10 on a Saturday. We found few libraries open on Sundays, and some even limited to the hours of 10 to 4 on weekdays.
- With the goal of meeting educational standards and enriching units of study, consider programming in partnership with early education and care settings, and also with schools. In this way, community libraries could function as an extension and a real-time resource to promote teaching and learning.
- Represent local diversity. In recent years, many of our towns have been culturally and linguistically transformed by immigration. To ensure the library remains a vital part of the community and promotes family reading, the population's diversity should be reflected via bilingual staffing, programming, signage and materials.

## ACTION STEP

### Use community leaders as conduits for helping families build children's language and reading skills.

While it is within the role of many educators and program directors, supporting children's language learning and reading could be subtly worked into the roles of other members of our communities. The leaders of our churches, temples, and mosques (including our clergy and religious education teachers), for example, are among the many committed and hard-working community leaders who have trusting, ongoing relationships with families and often share families' language and culture; the very kinds of relationships and connections that other organizations strive to build. In an effort to raise strong readers, we need to enlist these leaders' help. There are small ways in which this could be done to the benefit of the community. For example: Pastors could give families complex questions to talk about after church; Sunday school teachers could lead class conversations and then facilitate home extensions to these dialogues; ministers could help struggling families navigate school processes; educators in faith-based schools could adopt practices that meaningfully enrich their

#### Is Homework Helping?

A study of family conversation in California showed that student-initiated discussions were primarily about homework, the amount, type and the child's progress, but that there were virtually no exchanges that dealt with the substance and content of the homework.<sup>68</sup> These results suggest that we can't count on homework to inspire conversation, and yet it demands a lot of student at-home time.

students' language and reading development. Equally as impactful, these leaders could offer their buildings, familiar community settings, as locations for increasing community literacy: parent education, adult ESL classes, family reading programs, and even targeted reading support for children. These settings, and the relationships within them, are already rich with trust, knowledge, and solidarity and they therefore present ideal opportunities to teach about and influence home literacy practices that result in strong readers.

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