

Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy

Going Above and Beyond: Striving for High-Quality Family & Community Engagement in Early Care and Education

**Findings from a Focus Group Study of Family and Community
Engagement in Center-Based Early Care and Education
Programs in Illinois**

Final Research Report

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“But, it’s going above and beyond just like when we had a mom who was in the hospital, a dad who’s working two jobs and going to school and my staff, the first thing they said was, ‘Can we bring you meals? Do you need child care? Can we help you after hours?’ They’re family to us and we’ll do what we can to take care of them.”

Introduction

Family and community engagement has long been recognized as a critical dimension of quality in early care and education (ECE) settings. ECE programs that foster strong relationships and partnerships with families and communities are more likely to enhance children’s learning and positive developmental outcomes. A family and community engagement approach recognizes that children develop within the context of families and communities and that families, communities, and ECE programs all play a role in children’s development (Bromer et al., 2011; Forry et al, 2012; Epstein, 1995; Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

As part of ExceleRate Illinois – the state’s revised Quality Rating and Improvement System for ECE programs – new standards were developed for the Award of Excellence for family and community engagement. These standards were developed over many months by a sub-committee of the state’s Early Learning Council’s Family and Community Engagement Committee and are based on extensive review of the literature and research on the relationship between strong family engagement practices and child and family outcomes.

This report gives voice to program and parent perspectives on family and community engagement practices by describing findings from a series of focus groups that were conducted across Illinois with ECE center-based directors, teachers, other staff, and parents or family members. The purpose of the focus group study was to gather information about diverse perspectives on promising practices and common challenges around working with families and communities in center-based ECE programs and to inform the state’s development of supports and resources for programs seeking to achieve the Family and Community Engagement Award of Excellence in ExceleRate Illinois, the state’s new quality rating and improvement system.

The study entailed four focus groups with staff across ECE center-based programs that received high ratings in Illinois Quality Counts, the state’s quality rating system at the time of the study. Programs from which staff were recruited included Head Start, Preschool for All, school-based pre-K, and other not-for-profit and for-profit ECE programs. Many of the programs combined funding sources resulting in blended programming. Programs varied in structure, staffing, and available resources to support families. Six focus groups were also conducted with parents and family members of children from these programs.

Direct quotations are included throughout the report from participants as well as vignettes. All names and identifying information have been changed or slightly altered to protect the privacy of participating program staff and families. See the Appendix for additional detail on research design and methodology as well as sample descriptions.

Program philosophy and policies regarding families and family engagement

Program staff vary in the emphasis they place on the role of families and family support in their programs, yet there is consensus across programs that supporting parents and families is inseparable from caring for and educating young children. Comprehensive two-generation programs such as Head Start have a mission and goal to support the development of families and parents as well as children. This focus on supporting the needs of parents is heard in the following comments from staff and parents:

“Head Start is really about the parent and the family and the children, it’s about everybody’s success.” – Center staff¹

“Head Start ... they’re not just taking care of the child, they’re taking care of us. And in taking care of us and helping us make sure we cross our Ts and dot our Is then we in turn, turnaround and taking care of our children. They’re giving us the strength which gives our children the strength.” – Parent

Other types of ECE programs emphasize their open-door policies for families as this program director and parent explain:

“The open door policy is very, very important. As a parent myself I have been to some places where you can’t get past the front door and that puts a lot of question marks in your mind and I know it does for the parents. For a parent to be able to come in anytime of the day, that helps build a level of confidence and trust in the teaching staff and in the program itself.” – Center director

“I like the fact that I can go in at any time.... They let you know that we’re here if you need anything... an open door policy... always welcome to come in at any time during class and be with your child.” – Parent

Staff roles and family engagement

Directors across center programs emphasize the importance of hiring staff at all levels who have positive attitudes toward families as the following statements convey:

“When we’re considering people for employment, that should be first and foremost, one of the things that we talk about with people we’re considering to be a member of our team [is] that the family is very important to the work that we do. And so, I think it starts before we ever meet the families. It starts with our attitude towards our families.” –Center director

“I’m hoping that all of our staff are welcoming our parents every day when they come in the site, just even dropping their child off that they’re having a conversation with them and just making it a comfortable atmosphere for them.” –Center director

Parents also comment on the ways teachers and other staff members create a welcoming environment: “And what makes me feel welcome is that all the staff is so friendly. They

¹ The term “Center” refers to all types of ECE programs including Head Start, Preschool for All, school-based pre-K, and other not-for-profit and for-profit ECE programs. “Center staff” is used to refer to focus group staff participants when their exact role at the center is not identified. “Center director” or “Center teacher” are used when the specific staff role is known.

greet you in the morning, the janitor... he's always there to greet the students, the kids."

Over half of participating staff (52%) report their programs (both Head Start and centers without Head Start) have specific staff who focus on supporting families. These staff roles are referred to by various titles including family service workers, social workers, social services workers, parent coordinators, and family engagement coordinators. Programs without family specialists report that the site or center director often fulfills family engagement activities.

In addition to specialized staff, centers report that consistency of teaching staff is an important aspect of keeping families satisfied with the program. Families gain confidence in a program when they know their child's teacher will be present and if there is an absence, it is fully explained. As one director puts it: "The same person, the same place, the same time every day...because that parent has the expectation that when they arrive at the same time every day, the same person is going to be there to accept their child. And that keeps customer service complaints to a lower level."

Formal events and activities for families

Program staff involve and engage families through a variety of scheduled and predictable events such as parent-teacher conferences, home visits to families, monthly parent coffees with the director, parent work days, parent cafes, and parenting workshops. (See Box 1) Some programs differentiate

events to accommodate needs and schedules of different groups of parents such as "donuts for Dads," daytime events for stay-at-home mothers, and evening events for working parents. One program director plans "non-confrontational" social events such as ice cream socials or movie nights as well as family engagement events where parents and children participate in activities together. Parents may feel more comfortable attending these types of events than those that are specifically focused on parenting or parent involvement. Program staff report that sharing meals and/or activities with families helps bring staff and parents together: "When you're sitting down and eating together or you're sharing a meal, you're kind of all equals at that point." Moreover, program directors report that developing annual events and traditions increases parent participation. Parents confirm that formal events for families make them feel welcome at the center and as one parent explains, build a sense of community: "A fun way for our family to get out and for my son to have ownership of his classroom and his friends and to be a part of community." Another parent describes the myriad ways to get involved at her child's center:

Box 1: Formal events and activities to involve families

- Conferences
- Parent coffees
- Parent work days
- Social events (ice cream social; movie night)
- Family meals
- Saturday programming for families
- Workshops for dads
- Observation booth
- Home visits or "front porch" visits

..Whether it's zero hours to a thousand hours, you felt like you contributed." – Parent

"At the beginning of the year ... these are the ten ways you can all volunteer. You can bring toilet tissue rolls in, empty egg cartons, or you can help clean up the classroom. ..Whether it's zero hours to a thousand hours, you felt like you contributed." – Parent

Parent-to-parent networking

Program staff and parents report the different ways that ECE programs offer families opportunities to meet and connect with other families. Field trips and parent events give parents time and space to interact with each other and form relationships that “go beyond the center.” For parents, these opportunities are an important resource and support in helping them manage the demands of raising young children:

“There are parents that haven’t faced a situation that we’ve already gone through. We tell them what we did, what helped us, what helped the child or if it’s not about the child what helped us as people and there’s always the possibility that one can help with a recommendation or a place to go That’s how we collaborate with other parents. We don’t just listen but we try to help and participate with more solutions.” – Parent

Other parents emphasize that parent-to-parent outreach efforts are often more successful than staff-to-parent efforts because parents may be more likely to listen to another parent who has been in their situation.

Parents talk about the difficulty of meeting other parents either because of schedules or their own reluctance to forge new relationships and friendships. ECE programs that facilitate opportunities for parents to network and learn together may help parents form new relationships with each other. As one mother reports: “I’m making friends with people I wouldn’t normally make friends with ... So, these [are] my Head Start girls you know what I’m saying?”

Relationship-building with families

Focus group participants spoke extensively about the ways they build responsive relationships with families of children in their programs. Program staff describe the importance of positive and non-judgmental attitudes and practices with families, care and commitment to the needs of the whole family, an openness to changing practices based on family circumstances, resources, and needs, and positive, two-way communication with families. Parents emphasize the importance of programs understanding and knowing the circumstances of individual families in the program.

Attitudes

Non-judgmental. Non-judgmental attitudes toward families emerged as a strong and consistent theme across focus groups. The following statements from program directors and staff elaborate how programs develop what one director calls a “culture of respect:”

“Our families are important, unique, they all have their own situations. Whether it’s a foster family, a biological family, a family that’s working with the state system trying to be reunified, a single mom, a mom and dad, mom and mom, dad and dad.... we have respect for our families and we meet them where they are.” – Center staff

“I think it’s really important to be non-judgmental and that’s the one thing I’m constantly on my staff about. You have to listen and be open and not immediately start critiquing how [parents] do something in order to build that trusting relationship.” --Center staff

“Meeting [parents] where they are and not placing our judgments as educators or social service providers or early childhood professionals on them.” – Center teacher

The following statements from parents at a Head Start program confirm the importance of positive program attitudes toward families:

“Most of the agencies say ‘you need, you need. You need to read, you need to do this, you need to do that’ and you start putting up a front. But, with Head Start it wasn’t that way at all. ‘Would you like to know about these trainings?’ ... because they’re asking if we want it... they’re more welcoming, they’re more welcoming to our child; if our child has snot running down their nose and all of their shirt, they don’t say ‘you need to clean him up before he comes.’ They say, ‘come’ and then ‘hey, you know there are clothes out there, would you like some?’ They don’t say ‘go get some.’” – Parent

Parent Voices: Building Relationships

Yvonne is a mother of three whose husband is recovering from a traumatic brain injury he sustained while serving abroad in the U.S. Military. When this injury first happened, Yvonne saw every day as a crisis. It was hard for her children to see their dad in that condition. Yvonne explained, “I was nearly crazy from the stress.” Eventually, Yvonne had to pull her daughter out of the center due to accumulating absences. Despite everything Yvonne’s family was going through, the center was not sympathetic to their situation.

Yvonne decided to enroll her daughter in a Head Start program the following year and was pleasantly surprised by the support her family received. Yvonne stated, “We’re military and we’re used to strangers rallying around and being there for us. And so, once you leave that base or that community you think nobody else is like that. And here, with Head Start, I got my battle buddies back.” Yvonne described how supportive the Head Start staff has been around her husband’s injury: “They simply gave me my confidence and some time to be able to deal with everything.” She also describes the ways Head Start staff welcomed her husband into the program: “They were okay with working with him and having him in the father’s group. He got more confidence back.” She elaborated on how Head Start welcomed both of them into the program: “I mean you don’t know one day from another how he’s going to feel, but when he goes it’s always ‘oh, hey, how are you?’ And they remember the face, they remember whose child he belongs to and it’s like a big family, the big family network.”

Openness to change and patience. Program staff also emphasize the importance of being willing to change practices to meet family needs and circumstances and of being open to feedback from families. Directors report updating and changing family involvement activities to respond to the needs of their families:

“I think it’s really important to get feedback and be willing to change...parents change and their needs change. ... So just being open to some change I think has really helped us kind of stay connected with our parents over time.Be open to what are parents telling you? What do they need? What would help them, you know?” – Center director

Other directors report changing communication strategies to meet family needs and giving families time to feel comfortable engaging. One director talks about the effectiveness of group activities in getting parents involved as well as repeated efforts and patience around

engaging families: “Often times if they think about it more than once, twice, three times and you just keep talking to them informally, more than formally at a conference, then sometimes they'll say ‘well, what would you suggest?’ It is a delicate balance.”

Caring and commitment. Overall, center staff see their work as more than just a job, indicating their commitment and caring towards families of children in care:

“If I see them kind of downcast, like I ask is everything okay? And if they need a moment since we have three teachers per classroom, I step outside and ‘do you want to talk?’ Sometimes people just need your emotional support. You know because you do see them every day and you have established trust and you have a relationship with them. They will ask you things they wouldn't ask their own family members. And they will want you to come for their celebrations and they'll want you to come for situations when they're in mourning. So you know it's more than just the six to six of even traditional childcare. It's more than that, when you really connect with your families.” – Center staff

“And a lot of times we see families fall apart ... I mean there's a lot of things that we do all the time that aren't part of our job description but because we're in this business because we want to help kids and families” – Center staff

Several parents talked about feeling “at home” at their child’s center: “I arrive like I’m at my own house ... they make you feel like you’re at home like you’re part of the center...” Parents and staff emphasize the importance of getting to know parents as individuals. Being greeted by name, having program staff remember details of their families’ circumstances or schedules, are all practices that make parents feel valued and recognized:

“I got noticed. They ask me how I’m doing. They help me if I need stuff. Like they’re really helpful and they’re always there if you need to talk to them. They make you feel welcome.” – Parent

Similarly, a program director also reports the importance of “knowing their names, calling them by name, asking them [about] their day; knowing who’s in their family, you know asking them how soccer was last night? Knowing their personal life.”

Communication

Across programs, staff report utilizing multiple modes of communication with families. (See Box 2) Programs emphasize the importance of tailoring communication to meet the needs and resources of individual parents in the program. For example, a large child care program that serves hospital employees relies primarily on email as the preferred communication mode. Programs serving younger families use texting and Facebook to communicate information about program events and activities. Many programs use translators or other parents to help communicate with parents who do not

Box 2: Modes of communication

- Email
- Text
- Facebook
- Bulletin boards
- Newsletters
- Calendar
- Phone calls; Monthly “check-in” calls to each family
- Weekly folders
- In person communication at drop off and pick up

speak English. The following center director summarizes how she individualizes communication strategies for families: “We communicate with them in the style in which they want to be communicatedSo, we try to individualize it. Much the same when we individualize for children, we'll individualize for a family.”

Engaging families in the program

Directors and other staff members were asked to give examples of how they engage families in their children’s learning at home and at their ECE programs. Many examples were shared about how to include and involve families in children’s learning experiences. As one director explains, educating parents is part of her program’s philosophy: “I think you have to educate the parents too, you know we’re not just educators of children.” One teacher talks about how sending home art projects gives staff “an opportunity to have conversations with the parents about how the project is going. If parents don’t participate, you can ask them about why and how to help them get engaged.”

Some programs work individually with families around their own literacy and learning in order to enhance their capacity to teach their children as the following example suggests:

“We’ve had a couple parents come to us and say, ‘well we don’t know how to read ourselves. How do you want us to read to the kids?’ And I went, ‘Tell me what you see on the picture? I’m going to do exactly what I do with the kids. Tell me what you see in the picture, and you’re reading to them. You’re not reading the words but you’re reading the pictures. So you’re still reading McDonald’s when you see it walking down the street. And the kids can help you, too. Just start going through the alphabet, you know?’ They were very grateful ... But they didn’t understand that concept at first. You know, that’s the first way to start reading.” –Center staff

Another program reaches out to parents of children whom they feel are not “ready for kindergarten.” They invite these families to special workshops with free materials on how to engage children’s learning at home. Other parents also confirm their ECE programs’ outreach efforts around helping them get involved in their children’s learning at home as is heard in the following:

“I need to bring letters, sounds, numbers into play. And I’ve never pushed that...and they gave us ideas on how to incorporate that kind of thing in play as well....So they definitely have given us very good tools to incorporate that into our home.” – Parent

A teacher describes an activity to engage families who do not speak English as their first language:

“One thing that we’ve found really popular is called the Mystery Bag. A child takes home the Mystery Bag, picks something from their home, and then with their parent or older sibling they’ll write three clues. The child gets to decide the clues. They come back and the teacher reads the clues if the child can’t read them. The children in the rest of the group get to guess what’s in the bag. There are no winners or losers and it’s very, very popular. We have a lot of families that are first-generation parents and they’re not very confident in their English. Writing clues is a safe and easy way.”
– Center teacher

Parent Voices: Getting Involved

When Krista was pregnant with her first son, she was living “couch to couch” and “didn’t know what to do.” Krista explained that at this time, things were difficult but that she was also “comfortable at home on the couch watching TV all day” and “didn’t want to do nothing.” Krista spoke about how she had been disowned from her family and described this period of her life as “darkness.”

Krista explained that when she was first approached by Head Start, she was resistant to their help but soon realized that they were not there to judge her and stated, “they told me that it was okay, that you know – ‘it’s okay that you’re in this spot because we’re going to get out of it together you know.’” Krista indicated that it was the persistence of the Head Start staff that finally got her to participate and attend a parent group. She elaborated that once she attended a group, staff encouraged her to attend the Policy Council, and although she initially resisted that too, they were again persistent. Eventually Krista joined the Policy Council and became a parent ambassador and even told her story to the City Council and local news crews to help fight funding cuts.

Krista summed up her experience with Head Start by stating, “You know and it was nice that in my time of darkness there was that light, there was that person saying you know we got this, we can get through this together.”

Engaging fathers

Program staff discuss the challenges of engaging all family members in program activities and in their children’s learning experiences. Engaging fathers in particular is cited as an area of focus for some programs since common family engagement practices most often focus on mothers. Head Start programs hold fatherhood conferences and have staff training specifically about working with fathers and examining bias towards fathers and men in child care. Other programs tailor family engagement activities to match fathers’ interests and to give fathers opportunities to get together with other fathers in the program such as Home Depot building days, cooking activities, as well as workshops focused on men’s health issues and father development. Hiring male staff members is another strategy programs use to engage fathers. Some program directors describe how small changes in program procedures can go a long way towards making fathers feel more included. One program adds a signature line on an enrollment form for fathers. Another program trains their staff to talk to fathers as well as mothers in their communications home: “We talked to our staff about if Dad answers the phone you don’t need to ask for Mom which I think sometimes is their mindset – just recognizing that father is important.”

Engaging extended family members

Grandparent involvement is particularly important for children living in multi-generational households or for children who are being raised by grandparents. Grandparents often play an important role in helping children retain their language and culture and are seen as a valuable resource for programs. Some programs invite grandparents into classrooms to volunteer. Other directors note that grandparents may need specific education around childrearing practices. A director describes offering grandparents training on caregiving practices such as putting babies on their backs for sleeping. She emphasizes that older generations of caregivers may not be as familiar with newer information regarding childrearing. A parent summarizes a program’s approach to involving the whole family: “So, whether it’s grandma taking care of the kids, whether it’s a foster parent taking care of the kids, everybody -- they are about everybody’s success.”

Engaging isolated families

Understanding family circumstances was cited as a critical component to engaging families. Learning why families do not engage in the program can help programs come up with strategies and can increase program empathy for families as the following teacher suggests:

“If they don't engage right away then I can ask that question, why? And they can tell me well, you know I'm working two jobs and I'm in school. So, then I know okay, this parent doesn't have a lot of time. And I understand things a little bit differently.”

—Center teacher

Programs offer many strategies for reaching families who may not enroll their children or get involved on their own. Going door-to-door in the community or hosting community events in local playgrounds or parks to find families are some of the strategies mentioned by programs for reaching teen parents and other isolated families. One teacher notes how a community event with preschool activities can help parents feel more comfortable with the idea of sending their child to an early childhood program.

Parents emphasize the importance of individual outreach: “Somebody reached out to us and somebody started talking to us.” Staff knowledge and skills in how to reach out to isolated families are also important. As one parent explains, “if you don't have those unique characters that can pull things out of parents that are very quiet, introverted people, ... then people will not volunteer.”

Program Practices: Engaging Isolated Families

Ms. Smith describes the importance of acknowledging the experiences and feelings of parents and meeting them where they are emotionally. Here she recalls how she shifted her own practices to accommodate a mother who was reluctant to come to the center because of her own negative experiences with school:

“This is the fourth year I've worked with this mom because I had two of her children and we met at Stop and Shop one day for a conference. We do our conferences at school but she would not come and so I said ‘I'll come to you.’ So we sat down by the back of the store and did a conference. And I said ‘now, you know this was a special circumstance, next time you're going to come to me and it's going to be okay.’ And she said, ‘I'm trying really hard but, I just, I don't like school’. And I said ‘but, it's okay, you see that we're friendly, you're going to come in and it's going to be okay.’ She does come for conferences now --- she still doesn't come in for parent/child day, but at least she comes for conferences and even an evening event.”

Setting goals with families

In addition to engaging families in program activities and in their children's learning experiences, some programs report ways they work with individual families to help them identify and set goals for their children and themselves. For example, programs help

parents set age-appropriate goals for children such as when to expect toilet training or learning to tie their own shoes. Some programs emphasize goal setting with parents of children with special needs, particularly around school readiness. The following statement from a teacher points to the kinds of collaborative and reciprocal goal setting some programs engage in with families:

“I want to make them feel welcome and that we are partners. I am a resource to them but they are a resource to me because when I individualize instruction. I need to know what are the things that trigger them? What are the things that are going on in the home? If I don’t know why this child is coming in crying, what changed, then I can’t really do what I’m supposed to do as far as academics because emotionally this child’s not ready. And I won’t know unless the father, mother trust me enough to share and to partner with me.” – Center teacher

Programs also report working with families to set personal goals beyond their goals for children. Head Start and other two-generation programs emphasize this aspect of their work with families as is heard in the following statements from a staff member and a parent:

“We see ourselves as a support for our families so they can accomplish the goals that they have for themselves. Taking care of their child is just a small piece of that and finding them the supports that they need in the community goes along with that as well.”– Center staff

“When I came in to Head Start my goal in life was just to be a mother. And when I graduated high school I was going to be married, serve a man, and make tortillas three times a day. And that’s all I was going to do. There was nothing beyond that. When I came into Head Start, I realized I can still do that but I can do a lot more. And I have done a lot more. And it’s because they made me a goal.” –Parent

Connecting families to resources

Program staff report multiple types of resources they offer families both for their children and for themselves. (See box 3) Programs such as Head Start offer an array of resources to families: “We do marriage counseling, we do finding them jobs, we help them find WIC, we help them if they’re foster parents through what resources are out there for them.” Programs without services or resources on-site, report using their personal and informal connections in the community to help parents obtain needed services. The advocacy and facilitation role that programs offer families in accessing services is emphasized by some programs as more than just offering information as is heard from the following program staff:

“We’ve contacted personal friends that are optometrists or dentists to get kids glasses, to get their teeth checked. We find shoes and clothes and coats and food ... we have many, many needs within our house. It’s daily/weekly, monthly/seasonal... getting services that are needed.....” – Center staff

“If somebody needs help with their gas bill, we figure out where they live and then we can make a connection.” – Center staff

Programs also help families to access resources by bringing services on-site at the center. One program arranges on-site therapists and mental health consultants for children during the day for working families. One director advocates for weekend and after-hours appointments at a local health care clinic for working families.

In addition to external resources and services, programs report offering families an array of assistance with basic needs including providing winter coats, on-site laundry, household items for families moving into new housing, bus fare, and school supplies for families with older children. Several programs also offer families transportation to and from the center. For rural programs, transportation services are particularly instrumental to helping families participate. Some programs provide formal transportation (i.e. school buses) while others offer informal transportation arrangements with individual families in need of help:

Box 3: Resources for families

- Employment/ job fairs
- Health care resources/ TB testing
- Housing information
- Information about other early childhood programs
- Information about school/ kindergarten registration
- Special needs services

“She was doing her GED while her little one was at school. And they arranged it where you know the bus dropped her kid off last because with her going to and from school, she didn’t get home in time for him to be dropped off at his usual time. You know they really worked with her.” – Center staff

It’s important to note that despite the many examples shared by programs about the resources they offer families, some parents were unaware that their ECE programs offered material resources although it was unclear whether the parents who reported this were in need of such resources. One mother reports her program has a coat drive once a year and delivers Christmas baskets to families in need but few other material supports. Parents who did receive resources from their ECE programs compare this support to other centers where they had not received help, suggesting that provision of resources for families may not be the norm across ECE programs and also may be something that programs offer informally to families who express a need for material assistance.

Crisis help

Beyond resources and referrals, center staff describe helping families in crisis. A center director who does not have any specialized staff to work with families accompanies families on doctor visits and “acts on the spot” with families in need. Another director helps families after a recent tornado hit their small town. Her program extended its hours for children and offered families emergency help. Other programs help individual families in times of crisis, including a death in the family, abuse, or homelessness. Parents, in turn, feel supported by program staff as the following mother explains:

“I was homeless and not being from here....they came to my home and told me about the program and gave me information about what was going on in the community and shared those things which opened me up because ...I was just dropped there with nothing, me and my baby on the floor. And they showed me things in the community, and if I needed food and furniture and it was helpful for me.” – Parent

Program Practices: Helping Families in Crisis

When a parent experiences a mental health crisis

The entire family was living in a hotel room yet she still had no social network. So, she would often just make us one of her social stops every day just to talk to another person. She would stop by the office just to have daily contact...my thing is we need to respond to her as a person at this point and realize that we may be investing a lot.... At one point, we thought probably the best thing that we could do for her would be to organize some way for people on a volunteer basis to call her and stop by - we felt that she was teetering between life and death...so, we felt we could [not] just simply say well it's not our job because it wasn't anybody else's job either.

When a parent faces deportation

One particular family I have in mind, the mother worked two jobs and the father took care of the children day to day, dropping off and picking up. The immigration officers came to the house and they took the father. The children were there, mom was at work. So, our social worker, she really became like the advocate for the family. It was a lot of trauma for the children. It took a lot of people onboard -- we have a psychologist providing consultation for the children as well as the mother. Even going to court because some of the other family members wanted the children.....So, just being there as a support, as an advocate for the parent and walking her through the process.

Help with the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

All but three of the programs that participated in the focus groups serve families who receive child care assistance from the state, an indication that many programs combine funding sources to offer blended programming including Head Start, pre-K, and child care. Many of the programs who serve families receiving assistance offer these parents help in maintaining stability within the child care arrangement despite changes in assistance received. One center, for example, offers free care to families if they lose their job and their child care assistance is terminated, on the condition that they have started to look for a new job. This center also offers parents who may have lost their CCAP funding and enrollment status in the program, free drop-in care for job interviews or job preparation. As the director explains: "We will provide that to our families whom we have a relationship with, in hopes to bring the child back into our centers." Other centers do not offer child care to parents who lose child care assistance but offer to help parents with paperwork for CCAP redetermination.

"You know we have supported a child to attend our facility because even though that parent couldn't pay or they lost their job, that child being with us was a better environment for them during the day than the alternative...we help them...we work out payment plans...we really try to work together... because in a lot of situations, home is the best place to be, but in a lot of situations it's not. And it's not best for the child or the parent. They both need a break....we're family-owned and operated, so we can make those decisions and we try to do what we can." –Center staff

Helping families with transitions

Program staff shared strategies they use to help children and families transition into their ECE program. Many strategies were shared by programs about the best ways to help children transition into ECE programs. Some programs conduct home visits when a child enrolls or invites parents on the school bus with their child for the first few days or allows parents to stay in the classrooms at the beginning of the year to help children with separation. Other programs do not invite parents or family members in the classroom for the first few weeks of the year because they find this makes separations more difficult.

Program staff also help families make the transition from the ECE center to elementary school. Overall, parents express anxiety about this transition both for their children and themselves: "I'm dreading the day that he's leaving Head Start, I'm like what am I going to do? Where's my support team?" Provision of basic information about school location and enrollment procedures are offered as well as open-house events, panels of past parents sharing their experiences, or support to individual parents around these transitions. Programs help parents navigate public school and other educational systems and procedures especially parents of children with special needs as the following example illustrates:

"I had a family that had a child that was placed into a program with only paraprofessional support. And we helped the family get a legal representative to contact the school and say this placement is inappropriate for the child. They need to be with the special education teachers. ...the parent was an ESL parent and only spoke Spanish and really didn't know her rights. She was handed a booklet for when the child turned 3 to have a transition. She wasn't handed the Spanish version. She was handed the English version. So really keeping an eye on those particular children and those particular parents so that they can know their legal rights as they transition into their home schools for services provided." – Center staff

Developing parent capacity and leadership

Part of working with families involves developing parents' competence, advocacy, and leadership skills. Many program staff have procedures to regularly gather parent feedback on program practices. As one director states: "Our parents have a lot of power and say in what happens in our agency." In addition, Head Start programs have parent-run Policy Councils and other parent-focused committees that provide opportunities for parents to have a voice in decision-making at the center. Parents who participate on Policy Council are asked to help make decisions regarding staff hiring, program services, food services, transportation, parent incentives and parent involvement. While not all parents get involved in Policy Council, those who do report the transformative nature of this type of engagement for both themselves and their children. One parent feels empowered after she is given the opportunity to speak publicly against sequestration cuts to her child's Head Start program. Another parent describes the confidence she gains from serving as a parent ambassador at her child's program: "Now I'm the parent ambassador and I sit on the board and you know this is something that seven years ago, if you knew me this wasn't me. You know I came out of my comfort."

Parent Voices: Becoming an Advocate

Jessica, a mother of three special needs children, explained how being involved with a Head Start ECE program has transformed her into an advocate for other special needs children. Her oldest son has a learning disability specific to reading comprehension, her middle son has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair, and her youngest son has a speech delay. Jessica indicated that the ECE program not only helped her children cope with their disabilities but also helped her become an advocate for them. She learned how to navigate meetings and 504 plans so that when her children entered the public school system she knew how to advocate for them – “because of the processes that they've helped me go through you know I'm able to now turnaround and say you know I know what I'm doing for my child. I know how to handle a 504 meeting. And you know I go in there with confidence.” Her advocacy expands beyond her own children. She has travelled to Springfield to talk with legislators and encourage other mothers of children with disabilities to enroll their children in early childhood education programs.

Barriers to family engagement

Providers across the focus groups report numerous barriers and challenges they face working with families. These barriers include staff training, parent circumstances, neighborhood context, and program policies. Overall, staff across programs report that low attendance at family and parent events poses a significant challenge to engaging families.

Teacher frustration and lack of training

Several program directors cite teacher and staff frustrations in working with families compared to their work with children. Directors note teacher resentment and judgmental attitudes toward families – especially around childrearing practices that are seen as impacting children's time at the center such as lack of sleep, inadequate clothing or supplies, and non-compliance with pick-up and drop-off times. One director tries to help her teachers take a different perspective on parents:

“I tell my teachers they have to realize that parents are adults and have grown into the people they are over a long period of time, you can't just get them to be a different way because you think it would be better for their child.you can't change a parent to a different person. That's a real struggle sometimes for these teachers” – Center director

Another staff member recognizes that teachers feel overburdened and some may not have the commitment to work with families if they are expected to do so beyond their work hours and responsibilities with children:

*“If they're the teacher that is weary, that really just wants to go home and be done with it, they're not gonna care. And they've been kicked a couple of times today and they're old and they're tired and they want to go home and not even think about the school.”
–Center staff*

Program directors acknowledge teachers' frustrations around working with families may be tied to their lack of training in how to work with families:

"My teachers are highly qualified and have specialized training for working with our students. But, they don't necessarily have that highly qualified training on how to speak to parents.they are the greatest at sitting and exploring and dancing with the children but ...they don't have that confidence to speak with adults." – Center director

Directors in centers without family support staff talk about the challenge of supporting teachers in their work with families:

"And I think too because our teachers have chosen this profession because they enjoy working with children, very often I spend a lot of time training ... comforting ... coaching the teachers ...they're not really comfortable educating the parents ..a lot of our job is educating the parents right along with the children and that can be a struggle." – Center director

Some program staff recognize a need for teacher and staff training on working with adults that may come from outside of the early childhood field. As one director notes, "I learned it all when I worked in public relations not from my daycare, not from my ECE classes. That came from my job experience elsewhere."

Teachers' lack of understanding and knowledge about families' lives and circumstances may also be a barrier to engaging families. Staff may not know when a parent is experiencing a crisis. Crises or difficult circumstances may prevent families from following through on certain procedures at the center or focusing on things teachers think are important such as timely pick-ups, provision of supplies, or participation in the program. Directors in Head Start and other programs with additional family support staff, emphasize the importance of having mental health consultants and other specialists on staff who understand families. These specialists may support teachers who do not have the background in working with stressed families.

Program challenges engaging families

Working conditions and lack of financial and staff support to work with families was cited across programs. Some Head Start directors report that family caseloads are too high and non-Head Start program directors cite a lack of specialized staff to work with families. Low wages, long hours, and the lack of substitutes who could release teachers from classrooms to talk with families, are also barriers to engaging families, especially in programs that do not have additional staff and administrative supports. Directors in these centers describe the challenge of getting teachers to agree to conduct parent conferences or other family engagement events outside of regular hours:

"I think time and money is what we're always up against. My staff time, my family's time, my time. I can't ask you to come to yet another meeting when you're trying to take care of your own family." – Center director

Barriers families face engaging in programs

Parents across focus groups expressed satisfaction with their ECE arrangements yet they shared several areas where they encounter barriers to engaging fully in their children's early education experiences.

Logistical barriers: Schedules, transportation, child care

The challenges of family and work schedules are cited by both parents and ECE program staff as significant barriers to families engaging in programs beyond enrolling their children. Some programs do not offer full-day programming for children. However, even parents who use full-day child care report that their centers' hours are not aligned with their work schedules and that extended evening hours would help them avoid having to find additional child care for their children. Other parents need more flexibility around pick-up and drop-off times that could accommodate the unpredictability of transportation and work hours:

“So it would be nice to have an extended hour or hour and a half to get here, because sometimes you get caught up at work, you can't get out right away and then you got to battle traffic and after 5:30 they will call -- if you don't come, they're going to call your contacts, your pick up people. If nobody comes, then they call DCFS.” – Parent

Beyond hours of operation, parents also cite long work hours, multiple jobs, and family obligations as challenges to attending family events and activities at the center. One parent says lack of child care prevents her from attending parent events at her child's center and another parent indicates that she struggles with involvement in her child's center because “I have to drop my kids off, like as soon as they open because I have to be to work by seven, so it doesn't give me a lot of time to kind of talk.”

Another teacher describes why many families do not engage: “Time, because most of the events are in the evening. They're ready to get their baby and go home.” A Head Start director explains that even families at the higher end of the income eligibility scale may be “hard to serve” since they are managing multiple part-time jobs and have considerable stress around work-family obligations.

In addition to the challenge of work schedules, families and staff both report transportation as a barrier to family engagement. Many families living in urban areas rely on public transportation which can be unreliable and unpredictable especially during winter months. Sometimes the center is not located in their home neighborhood and, as one Chicago teacher notes, parents may not want to stay after work at the center for family events when they still have a long commute home. For families living in rural areas, time and gas money required to get to the center is often a barrier to participation. For some programs that offer children transportation to the center, unintended consequences for family engagement may result where communication and interaction between program and families is minimal: “We may go months and not actually physically see a person unless we take the time as we said earlier to make that home visit.”

Parent circumstances

A range of family circumstances including health and mental health issues, literacy levels, homelessness, domestic violence, substance abuse, and incarceration may contribute to low participation by families in their children's ECE experiences. Despite awareness of family circumstances, staff report ongoing challenges around enrolling and engaging families who are experiencing a crisis or ongoing difficult circumstances. As one director explains: “The families that are least likely to follow through are some of the families that have the greatest need.”

Cultural and language barriers

Cultural views about school and childrearing were cited by some programs as shaping the ways different families engage in their children's learning and ECE programs,

although this was not emphasized as much as other barriers. As one staff member articulates:

"It's meeting the family where they're at. And that looks different for every family when you take in to consideration race and culture and their socio-economic status."
–Center staff

Resistance, fear, readiness to engage

Some parents in the focus groups reflected on their own or other parents' personal experiences around engaging in their children's ECE program. One parent describes herself as shy and hesitant to attend family engagement events. Another describes herself as an introvert who was initially resistant to participating in activities at her child's center. She attributes her eventual engagement to staff persistence and skill at working with families but indicates that if staff members do not know how to engage families, introverts like herself will not get involved. A Head Start parent indicates that it is difficult to engage parents who are afraid of change, citing her own experience: "I was a little bit afraid when they said 'we're going to help your whole family.' 'What all are you going to help me with? I just don't want you in my business. I don't want you doing this.'" This parent's experience points to the importance of staff skills and understanding about how to offer support to families in ways that are respectful and not off-putting or judgmental. For other parents, school may be associated with negative experiences which can get in the way of their participation in their child's experience at the center. Programs need to understand these personal barriers in order to work effectively with parents.

Some parents may not be ready to engage in programs. Some staff report that parents are adversarial and unwilling to acknowledge their child's or family's need for help. Yet other staff recognize that parents may be at different stages of readiness to participate. As one teacher notes, "sometimes parents are in denial for a period of time." A director explains that despite staff efforts to reach out to families, some families will avoid engagement until they are ready: "In those situations they've hidden out or not answered our calls or answered the door, we've been there, they know we're there and they know we're looking for them, but until they're ready they don't find us or we don't find them."

Neighborhood violence, safety concerns, legal issues

Safety may be an additional barrier to family and community engagement. A Chicago teacher cites gang activity during warm weather months as preventing families from participating in community events. She states: "Since the weather is nice now, they're out now, you know? You know, families are afraid to go out, to go do different things." Directors describe situations where their staff want to help families but circumstances of the families' lives pose a barrier to staff intervention and support. In some cases, staff struggle with setting limits on their help-giving efforts with families in order to protect their own safety. Program directors report needing to lock entrances to programs rather than allowing families open access to the center in order to protect the safety of staff and children.

Legal issues regarding custodial rights also pose a challenge to engaging all family members. One teacher does not engage certain family members because of legal orders of protection preventing family members from engaging with the child's center. A director indicates the importance of staff being informed about the legal nature of family arrangements, particularly with regard to who is allowed to receive information about the child and who is allowed on center property.

Public policy and system barriers

Some Head Start program directors cite shifting priorities in federal expectations around program practices and expected outcomes as creating challenges to fully implementing family engagement practices on the program level. Head Start staff members cite the recent shift to school readiness and accountability as leaving fewer resources to focus on the needs of families (i.e. programs have fewer family service workers and larger caseloads).

Head Start directors also talk about the challenge of serving families that are the most in need of support because of Head Start policies requiring a waiting list. Several Head Start staff note that the Head Start policy to have full enrollment and a waiting list presents a challenge for some programs around how to set priorities for enrollment. Some programs may have enrollment procedures that make it more difficult to engage families who have more significant needs because these families are more reluctant to sign-up and enroll their children in an ECE program.

Across ECE centers, directors describe how the child care assistance system policies and procedures present a barrier to engaging and supporting families. Directors describe administrative burdens such as time to complete paperwork and problems with timely payments to the center. Center staff also note that time helping families with the child care assistance system takes away from time they could be helping families and children in other areas.

“It’s bad overall for children. It’s bad for continuity of care. Because when that contract doesn’t come through, the child is gone and we don’t know where they’re at. And we can’t open our coffers to giving free childcare. It’s just not what we’re doing, we’ll do it for 90 days because the State is lagging so far behind. It’s a big issue for families.”

–Center staff

“The amount of time that the center director is putting into the redetermination going over 15 pages of documents, checking pay stubs, making sure everything is done right is an immense amount of time consumption by that center director.” -Center staff

Staff advocate for changing the child care assistance redetermination period from 6-months to 1-year in order to allow program directors more time to support teachers, prepare professional development, and engage families rather than helping families navigate paperwork:

“If you’re in a center that’s 100 percent subsidized, you know, this is an ongoing, continuous process all the time. It is very time consuming for that center director and is pulling them away from meaningful moments with those families.” –Center staff

One center director reports that she hires an eligibility specialist in order to separate the financial and child care assistance role from the supporting-families role. She notes that it’s helpful for teachers and directors who are engaging families in the program to not also be seen as the “money person.”

For-profit child care centers report varying approaches to helping families financially. One for-profit center director uses program profits to help families during redetermination periods or during times when families lose their assistance, suggesting a commitment to serving all families enrolled regardless of financial status. Another for-profit center director, however, expresses frustration and not as much compassion for families that are struggling financially, as the following suggests:

“When you treat them like family then yes, they let their guard down and they let you in a lot easier. If you're a business then it's a little different.So, it's hard when you have parents who want to have their kids there and want to be part of our family but we can't always be that loving parent that'll do everything for them.” –Center director

Perspectives on community engagement

There are multiple ways ECE programs engage with their communities that benefit children and families, the community, and the program itself. Programs across the focus groups report efforts to establish their presence in the community by attending community meetings and events to promote their work, and encourage enrollment. A continued presence in the community can lead to informal and personal connections which may then be leveraged into more formal relationships to improve services for children and families and even increase financial support for ECE programs.

“Keeping your name out there:” Maintaining a community presence

Several program staff work to maintain a community presence in order to market their program and recruit families. Programs advertise at community events such as festivals and fairs or within local organizations including dentists' offices, doctors' offices, banks, currency exchanges, post offices, and fast food restaurants. Programs also get their name out into the community by participating in parades and fun runs, wearing program t-shirts, and giving away items with their logo.

Frequent contact and communication at local meetings and events can also grow into community awareness of ECE programs. A staff member notes: “I think when you have regular participation and you're bringing things to the table regularly, even if it's just to report on the progress of your program, share that information, you're keeping your name out there.” A director hosts occasional networking luncheons with local health advisory members, general health providers, and social service agencies in order to increase collaborative relationships between her program and the community.

Networking at community meetings keeps programs informed of opportunities, resources, and events in the area that families can take advantage of. Through such meetings, program staff can build relationships with local government officials who can help them stay abreast of what is happening in the community. For example, one program director attends local business meetings at the police district office in order to have her program's safety concerns addressed.

Parents also expressed the importance of their child's ECE program making a name for itself in the community. One parent explains that her child's Head Start program has become a “staple in the community” because program staff members regularly attend community events. This presence has led to other parents in the community recognizing and learning about the benefits of Head Start programming.

Community partnerships

Once community relationships are established, ECE programs can leverage those relationships to participate in mutually beneficial partnerships that increase the quality of care and services that children and families receive. For example, some centers have relationships with institutes of higher education including community colleges and graduate schools. The centers benefit from these relationships through low or no cost help in the form of student teachers or interns. The institutes of higher education also benefit as they gain training sites and supervision for their students. For example, one center partners with a graduate level psychology school and utilizes mental health interns to

provide free support services to teachers, children, and families enrolled in their programs. Another program welcomes student-teachers from a local teacher education program.

Increased collaboration among ECE programs and community partners also translates into better coordinated services for children and families. For example, centers gain resources by connecting with community partners including local public libraries that provide access to free literature and often facilitate reading activities with the children. One center partners with the local Y to provide families information on the childcare assistance program; others use community partners to connect families with direct services the center is not equipped to provide including dental care, WIC, and housing. One program works with a community partner to get Saturday appointments for working parents implemented at a local medical clinic. A director uses relationships with community partners to facilitate recruitment of isolated families. She explains the strategy of recruiting families at a local firehouse or store “that’s in their neighborhood rather than even having them come to our building because now we’re even closer to where they could walk over, and they know that place, and they go there regularly.”

Community partnerships can also benefit centers financially. For example, one center partners with a local bank. The bank agrees to provide the center with a monetary donation once the bank’s employees volunteer a certain number of hours at the center.

Program directors also emphasize the importance of their programs contributing back to their community: “It’s not necessarily just about trying to get people to do stuff for you. It’s about how what you do helps the needs of the community.” To address this goal, one program requires staff to make four professional contributions to the community per year including advocacy, fundraising, or volunteering.

Collaboration across ECE programs in the community

Program directors report benefits of collaborating with other ECE programs as the following statements illustrate:

“I’ve been doing this work in the State of Illinois for over 20 years and I will tell you there was a time when school did not talk to childcare. And childcare did not talk to school. And we were almost in competition with one another ... and we are so much better with understanding everybody’s value and having these conversations than we’ve ever been.” – Center director

“I think this has been a shift in the early childhood field because you know I think for some time it was more of a competition and fighting for families. And the shift now is, let’s work together. We have so much more movement working together.” – Center director

Some programs collaborate with other ECE providers such as family child care providers and local public schools in order to facilitate coordinated services such as developmental screenings and assessments for children. One teacher invites family child care providers into her public school classroom to observe jointly enrolled children and then observes these children in the family child care home. Several centers collaborate with local public schools for assessments and professional development for teachers. One center has high school students volunteer to gain service hours. Another center partners with the local public school to recruit teen parents: “[W]e partner with the High School, which is right up the street. And so our subsidized care spots go to kids of teen parents ... so that those kids can stay in school.”

Bringing the community into the classroom

Beyond the development of systemic partnerships to promote collaborative service delivery, ECE program staff find that connecting with their community provides a richer learning environment for the children enrolled in their program. For example, ECE classrooms can be enriched by taking field trips into the community or having community members come into the classroom to volunteer or teach the children. Field trips not only serve as educational opportunities for the children but also introduce children and families to places in their community. Programs take children on field trips to nature centers, libraries, farmer's markets, and the park district. These trips introduce children and their families to these community resources and encourage them to visit outside of the ECE program.

Barriers to community engagement

Despite efforts to engage with community partners and resources, ECE staff also caution that community engagement is hard work and cite many barriers to these efforts. Directors agree that community engagement work can be “dizzying” and knowing how to balance one’s time and effort is a challenge. Directors across sites describe community engagement as time spent away from their center as the following quotes demonstrate:

“If I had one wish, I would have more time so that I could get to know and research [community resources] because I feel like I need to be focused on what's going on in the school, more so than looking outside of it, I have a -- I just -- there's just not enough of me to do that.” –Center director

Another frequently cited barrier to community engagement is a lack of respect for the ECE field from other educators. An ECE teacher explains that elementary school teachers “don’t take it seriously” when early childhood teachers try to have serious discussions or set up transition plans. She explains that many elementary school teachers feel that children “don’t learn anything in childcare.” Other program staff report that elementary school teachers see early childhood work as “babysitting.” One director notes that the local public school system can be highly territorial which makes collaboration hard. For example, information about community resources are not always shared with early childhood programs.

Staff and parents across the focus groups mention limited resources and funding as barriers to getting families enrolled in community services. For example, one staff member notes the limited supply of services for families in her community:

“There’s a lot of waitlists for families to get services. So, we refer to a really great place and it seems like it's going to be a great match and the parents really need it and they're onboard and they come back and say it's a six-month wait.” –Center staff

Community context and collaboration

Community context was cited across focus groups as a challenge to community engagement. Location, availability of services, transportation, and other community characteristics may interfere with centers’ abilities to forge collaborative relationships in the community and with families’ access to community services. Numerous staff from programs based in rural areas discuss how the isolation of their programs can impact their community engagement efforts. A director of a center in an urban business district finds

collaboration with other community organizations difficult since most of the neighborhood businesses do not serve children and families. Another director notes that his program is located between two highly diverse communities and that cultural barriers can sometimes impede communication and collaboration.

Documentation of family and community engagement

Documentation of program practices is a critical aspect of how ECE programs demonstrate quality. Box four details some of the strategies program staff across focus groups use to report and document both family and community engagement. One particularly innovative family engagement documentation strategy shared by a program director asks teachers to mark all interactions with parents on a class roster over a specific time period in order to see if “there are parents who are habitually missing because of schedules or something, to try and find a way to make sure there’s no one who isn’t getting constant contact.” Programs also have systems for storing documentation such as formal databases, portfolios for accreditation, resource binders, or individual and confidential family files. Some staff use computerized systems to document family and community engagement while others prefer paper and pencil systems. A director explains the benefits of a computerized system: “They can go on and pull up a child and look back on the medical history and the family history and as long as it’s documented in there, that’s certainly helpful to us.” On the other hand, a teacher states the benefit of paper and pencil: “It’s really hard to document the involvement online when you have the 20 kids there and you’ve got your computer open and trying to -- so, it’s a lot easier just to document it on paper.”

Box 4: Family and community engagement documentation strategies

Family engagement

- Sign-in sheets for parent meetings
- Photographs of parent events
- Parents signatures on conference or progress reports
- Newsletters
- Meeting minutes
- Logs of phone calls to parents
- Templates for notes on family goals planning, conferences, home visits
- Case notes and files for each family
-

Community engagement

- Copies of MOUs with community organizations
- Meeting notes from community meetings
- Binder of community events and resources

Barriers to documentation

Many program staff – especially teachers – express frustration with the amount of required documentation, particularly when this work keeps them away from engaging with children and families:

“As a teacher the paperwork takes so much time out of my work day. I would rather spend time with my children and my assistant teacher in the classroom ...And every single thing that I do, everything that I communicate, I have to document it on paper and there's a binder for it. That's 1 out of 10 examples, and I wish there were less requirements. Even if I write down or not, I communicate with parents. That's part of my job and part of my responsibility. But just as a teacher, in my opinion, like sometimes I feel [it's] too much.” –Center teacher

Teachers and directors both describe paperwork and documentation requirements as “so much work.” One staff member states, “It takes away from the whole point of why we became a teacher in the first place.” A director in a Head Start program reports that when he asked his staff to use a new family assessment instrument, “they threw up their hands and said ‘when are we going to have time to do that?’” Another director explains the difficulty of documenting informal conversations with families: “You're not going to have this really great conversation about sleeping, cribs, whatever, and go back to your notes on that family and write it down. You're just not, you know?”

Staff working in Head Start programs in particular express anxiety about new federal outcome reporting requirements and staff shortages: “I'm afraid it's going to take away from the services and drive us to the documentation and then we won't have as many work hours to support the families...I've got half the number of family workers than I had a decade ago.” Directors in these programs also note that their staff do not have adequate training in how to document family outcomes as the following director points out: “I've always felt that we were in the early childhood business, so we're there to support the family in everything that they do, but our expertise is in child outcomes, our expertise is not in parent outcomes.” She goes on to say that her program was recently asked to compare family and child outcomes and that getting “any valid data would be impossible” without more money, a tailored data system, and more staff specifically trained in this type of work. She also notes that it is particularly difficult to demonstrate family outcomes when accurate baseline data are not available.

Because of the complexity of documenting family and community engagement data and the time required to do so, several staff report this work does not always get documented. For example, a teacher says she does not document anything that is not explicitly monitored because she does not have time. A director reports that sometimes it looks as if his program does not provide appropriate services to a family but after digging into a situation, it often turns out that it is a documentation problem and not a service delivery problem: “So, I understand that our workers aren't just lazy, that seems to be less of a priority and it's hard to debate that when you have a caseload of 50 and you have kids melting down in the classroom.”

Staff across programs commented that relationships are difficult to measure and document and that some data reporting requirements oversimplify the depth and complexity of their work with families. One director notes: “It's not that I don't think we're doing the work, in many cases, I think we're doing the work in spite of those challenges, but we're not documenting the work and we're not really able to articulate those impacts.”

Support for family and community engagement

One of the goals of the focus groups was to gather information from programs

about the types of supports and professional development needed for programs to implement high-quality family and community engagement practices. Focus group participants were asked to share the ways they support their staff in this work as well as areas where they would like additional support.

Resources to support family engagement

The need for additional funding and resources for staff to work with families and community partners was cited across the focus groups. Increased funding would allow centers to hire staff to work with families. Additional funding could also pay for substitute teachers and/or overtime pay for teachers to work with parents during and outside of classroom hours:

“When you're short staffed and a parent comes in an emergency, I can't leave 20 students with one teacher ... So, if our center had a grant to hire a substitute teacher then I could call somebody, 'I need a substitute for like 30 minutes, I need to take care of this parent. She or he is in distress' and so, I'll be able to leave the classroom, talk to the parent, refer them to the right person and come back.” -Center staff

Some directors also report that increased funding would allow them to offer benefits to staff such as medical and dental insurance, life insurance, and retirement savings plans which might increase job tenure and motivation to work with families in addition to children.

In addition to funding, providers across focus groups indicate the need for a central statewide and community-wide database of resources related to working with families and communities. One director suggests a director's network where information about resources could be shared. A parent in one of the groups suggested a statewide parent portal where parents could connect and learn about advocacy initiatives and resources.

Policies to support family engagement

Several directors report that the policy of tiered reimbursements for quality improvements provides the opportunity for programs to help families by making additional financial resources available. For example, several providers use the tiered reimbursement received from the former Quality Rating System to help families who lose child care assistance or change jobs: “We don't charge the difference to those families. So when we're able to get through QRS that additional reimbursement support, it has really allowed us to be able to pay for more of those things for those families.”

Training and supervision

Several program directors mention they would benefit from having support networks for directors and teachers. It was clear in the focus groups that program staff enjoyed having the opportunity to talk with and learn from other programs about family and community engagement practices. The creation of additional and ongoing opportunities for programs to share ideas and resources, network, and brainstorm together could lead to improved family and community engagement practices.

Directors across focus groups emphasize the need for additional and specific staff training and education around working with families. As one director explains: “Your training, your staff, being successful with them, trickles to everything. Better communication with families, better communication with kids. And that's, I think, the key to your success is our staff.” Directors mention the need for training in social work practices and communication strategies and directors across program sectors report a need for training in data analysis and reporting in order to enhance their interactions and sharing of information with families. One director notes that the Strengthening Families training is

particularly effective in helping staff learn how to take the perspective of families: “It helped them to see things through a parents eyes.... and I think that was an eye opener for them.”

Directors across program sectors and sites also cite the need for supports and training specifically for directors around community engagement. Some directors would like training on how to be advocates in the community for their program and build community relationships. A director whose training is in early education notes that she feels comfortable in the classroom but not out in the community trying to sell her program.

The need for reflective practice was echoed across the focus groups. Staff report wanting more time to reflect and vent with their peers about their challenging experiences with families, particularly around how to set limits and boundaries with families. One director describes a situation where her program attempted to help a family in crisis. Referring to her staff she states: “There is a point where you have to realize I did what I could do...I think supervisors have to be especially cautious in being that objective voice that says ‘yeah this makes sense up to this point, or let’s step back and think about what we’re doing and what are the other alternatives or where do we need to draw the line?’”

Reflective supervision for staff was cited as an important support around helping teachers work with families:

“Reflective supervision is probably the best tool anybody could use. Just sitting down with the person periodically on a regular basis and saying ‘tell me what you were doing and how’s it working for you’ and at the end of the conversation they will have made adjustments to their process. You might ask a couple more questions, but it’s really about saying less and listening more.” – Center staff

Despite the emphasis on this type of supervision, directors and teachers discuss the challenges of building supervision into staff and program schedules. A teacher notes that supervisors do not always have the time to schedule regular one-on-one supervision meetings. A director notes, “scheduling is critical because the ones that will come back to kind of vent, they’re the healthy ones. You’re going to have a few workers that kind of just keep all this inside and you know that’s the ones that you really worry about that seem to need the least attention.” In response to the challenge of scheduling one-on-one supervision meetings, a director schedules group supervision meetings where his staff come together, develop their own agenda, and talk about concerns and challenging situations with families: “They will help each other out and often times really solving problems or sharing experiences by just creating that space.”

Programs face challenges around creating a climate of support and reflection for staff at their programs. Directors explain the struggle of navigating the dual roles of providing support to staff and monitoring performance. They note that staff often do not seek out help or share difficult situations they experience for fear of being reprimanded or receiving a negative job evaluation. A director observes that teachers are often hesitant to ask for support or help around difficult situations:

“I think among teachers in general there is a lack of recognition for the need for social-emotional support. Teachers are probably the worst profession in terms of self-care, it’s almost like they feel they don’t deserve it in some way. And it really erodes their ability to function well in a classroom. It’s never being able to separate and allow themselves time to recuperate and be ready for the next day.” –Center director

Summary and discussion of key findings

This report describes findings from a series of focus groups that gathered program and parent perspectives on family and community engagement in center-based ECE programs in Illinois. Research indicates that family engagement in ECE programs is associated with positive child and family outcomes and that strong family-program partnerships are an important dimension of quality programming. Themes from the focus groups closely align with the standards articulated in ExceleRate Illinois' Award of Excellence in Family and Community Engagement:

1. Program policies around involving families;
2. Relationship-based approaches to working with families including two-way communication, cultural sensitivity, and engaging all family members;
3. Goal-oriented approaches to working with families;
4. Community engagement and partnerships;
5. Transitions;
6. Data collection; and
7. Staff training

Overall, the report finds that teachers and directors are deeply committed to working with families and communities yet they also describe the work of engaging families as something they do “above and beyond” the work they do with children despite their efforts to integrate it into everyday practice. Programs also report challenges to engaging families and communities and suggest areas where additional support is needed. Given that the participants in this study were all staff from highly-rated programs around the state, it's particularly noteworthy that even high-quality programs struggle with this dimension of quality. The table below summarizes and discusses key findings from this report.

Table of Key Findings and Discussion

Findings	Discussion
Family engagement policies, practices & attitudes	
A. ECE programs across sectors offer a variety of formal activities for family involvement and implement an “open door” policy for families.	Individualizing activities is a promising strategy for involving families. Not all families want to or are able to engage in the same types of activities. Programs that offer a menu of options and multiple approaches to involvement and communication may be more likely to engage all families in their programs.
B. Relationship-building with families is central to engaging families in their children’s learning.	Working with families involves perspective-taking and understanding of family circumstances. Trusting relationships are central to building program-family partnerships around children’s learning. Programs that take the time and effort to learn about and interact with families may be more likely to help families reach their goals, build capacity, and become advocates for themselves and their children. (Bromer et al, 2011; Forry et al, 2012)
C. Positive attitudes of staff are an important aspect of engaging families. Among the attitudes described as most effective are respect, non-judgmental, openness to change, patience, and caring and commitment to working with families.	Positive attitudes can go a long way toward making families feel welcome. Small gestures such as greeting families by name or knowing a parent’s work schedule can be powerful actions for forging relationships with families that have the potential to contribute to children’s positive outcomes. Models of ECE programming that prioritize flexibility and sensitivity to families may help to change negative attitudes about “hard to reach” or “hard to serve” families. Programs that are open to new ideas about families may be most likely to engage families in ways that positively impact family and child well-being. (Forry et al, 2012; Bromer et al, 2011)
D. Programs have different approaches to helping families and children transition into the ECE program. Some programs encourage family participation in this process while other programs ask families to wait to engage until children are comfortable in the program.	Facilitation of transitions into and out of the ECE settings are a critical way that programs support continuity of care for children. When children experience smooth and consistent transitions between home, the ECE arrangement, and elementary school, they may have easier adjustments that foster learning and growth. The range of practices around transitions into ECE points to the need for research-based standards and guidance in this area.
Program staffing	
E. Programs that have specialized staff to work with families are able to reach out to family members including fathers and extended family, as well as be responsive to families who may need additional supports.	The intensity and reach of family engagement depends on staffing, training, support, and resources to implement family engagement activities. Programs with additional and specialized staff are able to allocate time and resources for working with individual families as well as children, and facilitating their engagement and connection to resources.
F. Skills to work with adults as well as children are seen by ECE programs as important components of staff qualifications.	Knowing how to communicate and work with parents and other adult family members may be a critical skill early childhood professionals. Programs that hire staff who know how to build partnerships with adult family members as well as nurture children’s development are more likely to have success in engaging in positive relationships with families.

Community engagement practices

G. Programs want to improve community engagement but lack adequate resources, knowledge, and time. Directors with limited administrative staff experience role burden as they are often the ones to take on family and community engagement work.

Community engagement allows ECE programs to advocate for children and families, secure needed services and resources, and educate communities about the importance of early childhood education. Yet, creating community connections requires time away from direct work with children and families. Collaborations across ECE programs around community engagement may be a promising strategy for small ECE programs with limited resources to develop community relationships beyond the program.

Documentation

H. Documentation of family and community engagement poses particular challenges. Documentation of interactions with families takes time away from working with children and families. Moreover, documentation requirements may not capture what programs actually do with families.

Documentation is increasingly becoming an important aspect of quality improvement initiatives and systems. ECE programs must demonstrate accountability by showing evidence of high-quality practices and procedures. Documentation and measurement of family and community engagement is an area where additional support and training is needed as well as strategies for programs to simplify procedures. Documentation requirements around family engagement should take into consideration the challenges of documenting relationship-based work. (Forry et al, 2012; Kim et al, 2014)

Support & training

I. Program staff lack relationship-based training on communication strategies, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution. Staff want more opportunities for reflective practice and supervision yet these supports are challenging to build into program schedules and priorities.

Reflective practice and supervision are critical components of creating more family-friendly and engaging programs for children and families. Programs that create a climate of support and reflection for their staff also model this for families. When staff feel supported and respected, they are more likely to engage in respectful and reflective practices with families and children. Programs that seek to understand and reflect on barriers to engagement rather than making assumptions about why parents do not get involved may be more successful in engaging all families.

Recommendations for support and training around family and community engagement

The report as a whole and the recommendations detailed below should serve as a guide for planning and decision-making as Illinois continues on its path to ensuring high-quality ECE programs are responsive and welcoming to all families and children and that family and community engagement practices are an integral component of high-quality programming across ECE sectors.

- 1. *Develop and widely distribute a set of resources that offer examples of promising family and community engagement practices that help to align existing standards in this domain of quality.*** Multiple sets of state-based and national standards exist for family and community engagement. The articulation of specific practices related to this area of quality may help programs meet standards across systems. This report provides many examples of family and community engagement practices that are aligned with the state's new quality rating and improvement system – ExceleRate Illinois. Examples from the field could be compiled into a resource packet for programs seeking to achieve the ExceleRate Award of Excellence in Family & Community Engagement as well as other program standards.
- 2. *Develop new resources and supports for programs around community engagement.*** Programs need additional support around strategies for developing collaborations with community organizations. Resources that detail strategies and provide examples of successful collaborations are needed. Specifically, community- or county-specific lists of resources and services for families and young children should be made available as part of ExceleRate
- 3. *Create new opportunities for ECE programs to network, share ideas, and align promising practices around family and community engagement.*** Local conferences, learning collaboratives, peer-support networks, and child care networks, offer program staff new opportunities for sharing promising practices, problem solving, and brainstorming with other programs about working with families. Many smaller programs do not have access to training and supports around this work and the opportunity to talk with and learn from other programs would help support their efforts to improve this dimension of quality.
- 4. *Provide programs financial resources and other supports for family and community engagement efforts.*** Programs need additional resources such as substitutes to allow teachers more time to work with families, staff positions dedicated to family and community engagement, and administrative support for center directors to allow more time for engaging with families and community members.
- 5. *Provide state-wide access to training and professional development opportunities focused on family and community engagement.*** New training and professional development offerings on how to work with families are needed. Training should focus on the specific skills and knowledge required to work effectively with adults including relationship-based approaches to engaging families. Training topics should include adult learning, communication strategies, reflective practice, and conflict resolution. The development of a new family specialist credential as part of

Illinois' professional development system will be an additional resource for ECE programs seeking to train staff in working with families.

6. **Implement new documentation guidelines and strategies for reporting family and community engagement practices that align with the goals and objectives of ExceleRate and provide training to programs to ensure effective implementation.** Alternative documentation strategies should aim to assess the quality of program-family relationships as well as the nuanced ways in which programs engage with families and communities. The forthcoming *Family-Provider-Teacher Relationship Quality Measure* (Kim et al, 2014) may be a promising new tool for documentation of relationship-based practices that are likely to engage families.
7. **Revise policies and procedures regarding the child care assistance program in order to allow families greater continuity of care and to reduce the administrative burden on ECE programs' work with families.** Extending the eligibility period from six months to one year would reduce ECE programs' administrative workload and allow programs significantly more time to develop relationships with and engage families around goals for their children and themselves.

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APPENDIX

METHODS

This study was designed to understand the perspectives of multiple stakeholders regarding best practices in family and community engagement by center-based ECE programs. Qualitative methods were chosen for this study because they allow the researcher to examine issues from the perspective of study participants through exploration of the meanings and interpretations given to events and ideas (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011²). Data were collected by means of focus groups because focus groups are ideal for exploratory research and their structure promotes discussion among participants (Hennink et al, 2011; Morgan, 1996³). The interactive nature of focus groups encourages participants to expand on topics of interest with one another, allowing the researcher to assess whether a theme brought up by one member in the focus group resonates with other group members.

For this study, four focus groups were held with center-based ECE program staff and six were held with parents or caregivers of children enrolled in center-based ECE programs resulting in a total of 10 focus groups throughout Illinois. Focus groups were conducted separately for staff and parents in order to reduce answer bias.

All four staff focus groups and five of the parent focus groups were conducted in English; the remaining parent focus group was conducted in Spanish. A second parent focus group was offered in Spanish but all of the participants who attended indicated they preferred to have the focus group conducted in English instead. Focus groups were held in various geographical locations throughout the state and with different types of center-based programs in order to obtain a statewide perspective on family and community engagement; three focus groups were conducted in Chicago and Aurora and consisted of staff and parents across program types, two were conducted in Springfield and were attended by staff and parents from non-Head Start programs, and two were conducted at the Annual Illinois Head Start Association conference with all Head Start staff and parents (also in Springfield but attended by programs and parents from across the state).

The Principles and Practices sub-committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council's Family and Community Engagement Committee assisted in purposeful recruiting of participants for the focus groups. Staff and parents associated with highly-rated ECE programs were intentionally recruited as they were likely to be able to report on high-quality practices in family and community engagement. Quality ratings of the programs were determined based on Quality Counts ratings (i.e., Illinois's Quality Rating System at the time of the study).

Recruitment fliers for the focus groups were distributed to potential participants by members of the Principles and Practices sub-committee who had relationships with highly-rated ECE programs around the state. ECE programs distributed fliers to parents and family members. Program staff and parents interested in participating then contacted the research team at Erikson Institute. Provided the volunteers met the criteria for participation and space was still available, they were invited to attend a focus group in their area. Due to the number of volunteers, wait-lists were generated when focus groups reached capacity and those at the top of the wait list were invited to attend if another participant cancelled.

Focus groups took place at locations and times that were deemed convenient for ECE staff and parents. Some participants received a \$25 gift card for participating in the focus groups⁴. Focus groups lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours.

Focus groups were facilitated by researchers from Erikson Institute. Focus groups followed set protocols that were developed through an interactive process. First, a brainstorming session was held with members of the Principles and Practices sub-committee to determine possible focus

² Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

³ Morgan, D. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 129-52.

⁴ In the one focus group that was exclusively Head Start staff conducted at the IL Head Start Associations' Annual Conference, staff did not receive gift cards based on staff compensation policies.

group questions based on study goals. Then, the research team refined the focus group protocol and reviewed it with the Principles and Practices sub-committee for final edits.

The protocol for the program staff was distinct from the protocol for the parents as these two groups have different perspectives and experiences. Program staff were asked to discuss best practices for family and community engagement and supports needed in these areas. Parents were encouraged to discuss what makes an ECE program exceptional with respect to family and community engagement. All participants were encouraged to respond and share differing ideas and opinions. At the end of each focus group, participants were asked to complete a short survey to collect demographic and background information.

All focus groups were audio-recorded with consent from participants and audio-recordings were then transcribed. Transcripts were entered into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 8, 2008). Survey data were entered into and analyzed using SPSS, a quantitative data analysis software program (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0, 2011). Data analysis followed an iterative process. The primary author and a research assistant independently coded several transcripts to determine general themes based on the interview questions as well as themes that emerged from the data. These thematic and emergent codes were then compared and any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Through this process, the coding scheme was both refined and definitions of codes were enhanced. This preliminary coding process was repeated on a second set of transcripts to identify any additional codes needed and to further refine existing codes. Once the final list of codes was constructed, the research team applied the codes to a third set of transcripts. Once agreement was reached, the research team divided up the remaining transcripts for final coding.

The final coding list consisted of seven main headings including family engagement, barriers to family engagement, community engagement, barriers to community engagement, documentation, barriers to documentation, and support and training.

Sample description

A total of 69 individuals participated in the focus groups; 42 ECE staff and 27 parents or caregivers. Each group's attendance ranged from 5 to 14 participants.

ECE staff and programs

The majority of ECE program participants who attended the focus groups were program directors and the remaining participants were teachers or assistant teachers or other unspecified program staff. Program participants had worked in their current positions for an average of 7 years and in the ECE field for an average of 17 years. Participants were employed by various types of programs including non-profit and for-profit child care centers, Head Start and Preschool for All programs, and others, including child care programs on a college campus. All participants reported their programs provided care for preschool age children but more variation was seen in terms of providing care for toddlers, infants, and school-age children.

All but three participants indicated their program serves families receiving child care assistance from the state suggesting that most programs combine funding sources and blend multiple program types. Only two Head Start programs and one Montessori program did not report serving families who receive child care assistance from the state. Almost all participants worked in programs that primarily speak English with children while one staff member came from a program primarily speaking Spanish with children. Half of the participants indicated their programs also used Spanish as a second language with children and families. About half of the participants worked in programs with a family engagement specialist. Detailed information about the programs represented by the 42 participants who attended the focus groups can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: ECE Program Participants – Job Roles & Program Types

ECE Staff (N = 42)	
Job Tenure	
Mean years in current position	7 years
Mean years in field ¹	17 years
Job Title	
Director	64 (27)
Other Staff	14 (6)
Teacher/Assistant Teacher ^b	22 (9)
Type of ECE center/program^c	
Non-profit child care center	36 (15)
Head Start	29 (12)
For-profit child care center	26 (11)
Preschool for All	22 (9)
Other ^d	5 (2)
Ages of children cared for²	
Infants (0-12 months)	52 (21)
Toddlers (13 months to 35 months)	75 (30)
Preschoolers (3 years to 5 years)	100 (40)
School age (6 years and up)	45 (18)
Program serves CCAP families^e	93 (39)
Program has family engagement specialist	52 (22)
Primary language spoken w/ children	
English	98 (40)
Spanish	2 (1)
Speaks second language w/ children¹	
Spanish	49 (20)
Hindi	2 (1)

Note: Numerical superscripts denote number of missing responses.

^a Other staff include: Professional development coordinator, PreK coordinator, District Manager, Site Coordinator, Education Coordinator, and Early Childhood Project Specialist

^b One home-based educator is included as a “teacher.”

^c Percentages exceed 100% because many programs blend two types of programming.

^d Other programs include: two college ECE lab schools

^e Two Head Start programs and one Montessori program did not serve families receiving child care assistance from the state.

Parents and family members

Almost all parent and family participants were mothers of children enrolled in center-based ECE programs (89%); there was also one father, one grandfather, and one foster parent. The children of these participants had been enrolled in their respective ECE program for an average of 2 years. A majority of the parents had children enrolled in Head Start programs (70%). Others had children enrolled in public preschool or did not know what type of program they were enrolled in. Only three parent participants reported receiving child care assistance to pay for their child’s program most likely because most were enrolled in Head Start programs where they receive free services. Demographic information about the participants is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

	ECE Staff (N = 42)	Parents/ Caregivers (N = 27)
Age ^{2,2}		
Mean	45 (10)	32 (7)
Range	21 to 47	24 to 66
Gender		
	% (n)	% (n)
Female	93 (39)	93 (25)
Male	7 (3)	7 (2)
Race/Ethnicity ^{2,3}		
White/Caucasian	65 (26)	33 (8)
Black/African American	22 (9)	21 (5)
Hispanic/Latina	8 (3)	42 (10)
Asian	5 (2)	0 (0)
Biracial	0 (0)	4 (1)
Primary language spoken at home		
English	-	67 (18)
Spanish	-	26 (7)
English & Spanish	-	7 (2)
Have own children		
Infants (0-12 months)	5 (2)	15 (4)
Toddlers (13 months to 35 months)	0 (0)	15 (4)
Preschoolers (3 years to 5 years)	5 (2)	77 (20)
School age (6 years and up)	48 (20)	54 (14)
Own adult children ^{0,1}	38 (16)	0 (0)
Highest education ^{1,1}		
Masters or higher	46 (19)	4 (1)
Bachelors	42 (17)	15 (4)
Associates	12 (5)	19 (5)
High School or GED	0 (0)	50 (13)
Less than HS or GED	0 (0)	12 (3)
Area of Study ^{2,0}		
ECE	50 (20)	4 (1)
Child or education related field	22 (9)	7 (2)
Business or administration	13 (5)	4 (1)
Unrelated field	15 (6)	12 (3)
Currently enrolled in education/ job training	19 (8)	-
Plan to pursue future education/ job training	67 (28)	-

Note: Numerical superscripts denote number of missing responses.