

January 11, 2016

USDE Regional Meeting on ESSA

Comments from Vito Borrello, Executive Director National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement

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Introduction: Good afternoon! I'm Vito Borrello, Executive Director of the National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement. Our purpose is to advance high impact policy and practice in family, school and community engagement to promote children's development and improve student achievement.

I want to thank the Department for providing this opportunity. We look forward to submitting expanded written comments later this month. Our comments focus on how the Department may advance family, school and community engagement as an essential strategy to support student achievement and school improvement.

Title I is the signature federal program to ensure that all of our nation's children have access to a high-quality education, especially the most disadvantaged. It is also the first federal education program that gives parents a role as "full partners" in how the Title I program is planned, reviewed and improved. However, this intent of Title I parents' becoming full partners still needs to be realized.

Although ESSA makes few changes to the family engagement provisions in previous law, we believe that the existing Non-Regulatory Guidance, last revised in 2004, badly needs to be updated to reflect the important advances in research and practice that have occurred in the past ten years. The field needs relevant and useful guidance that includes examples of high-impact practice, and that is fully aligned with the Department's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, as well as with the forthcoming Joint Policy Statement on Family Engagement in the Early Years and Early Grades.

Revisions to the NRG in section 1116, should be guided by four principles, all of which are embedded in the Dual Capacity Framework:

1. **Family engagement is an essential strategy for promoting child development and improving student learning.** Therefore, we must build the capacity of educators to effectively engage families.
2. **Families are not "the problem" but essential partners in improving student learning.** Parents may not be experts in child development, but they ARE experts about their own children. Stronger and more purposeful relationships with families support improved instruction!
3. **Because family engagement is a shared responsibility, both educators and families need support to effectively collaborate as education partners.**
4. **Close parent-teacher communication and collaboration in developing critical literacy and math skills in class and at home leads to improved student learning.**

Although the entire NRG needs updating, I will focus today's comments on updating the parent and family engagement guidance in Title I, particularly on the school-parent compact, and Early Learning.

The law has long stated that the purpose of the school-parent compact is to show, "how parents, the entire school staff, and students will share the responsibility for improved student achievement and the means by which the school and parents will develop a partnership to help children achieve the State's high standards."

Unfortunately, the current NRG interprets "partnership" to mean that teachers, parents, and students should assume separate responsibilities for assuring student achievement. We offer three recommendations:

1. The NRG should state that the compact describe how parents and teachers will work **together**. The compact should be current, linked to the schools' achievement data, and describe how teachers in class and parents at home will help students develop the critical skills identified in the school plan.
2. Each section of the compact should be developed after parents, teachers and students have discussed the skills students need to master, and how they would like to work together. This is what "developed with and approved by parents" means.
3. Emphasize the new provision in Section 1116 about how schools should address the importance of ongoing parent-teacher communications: It states: "*Regular two-way, meaningful communication between family members and school staff, and, to the extent practicable, in a language that family members can understand.*" Notices sent home from school about student progress and annual parent-teacher conferences, examples given in the current NRG, do not satisfy this requirement.

Because it is critical to future success that children arrive ready for kindergarten, we also recommend that the NRG emphasize seamless coordination with early learning programs through the following:

1. Build strong family engagement practices from the earliest years so that families embed them into the home environment.
2. Create transition programs so that families can have a seamless transition into kindergarten and sustain the family engagement practices they have been using.
3. Create welcoming, inviting cultures at all levels of schooling. What has been modeled through Head Start, must be replicated and enhanced within K-12.

As Anthony Bryk pointed out in *Organizing Schools for Improvement*, if we want to transform schools we must understand that close ties with families and the community is an essential ingredient. If every student is to succeed, then we must raise the standard for how we will effectively engage every family in that essential goal.