

# How Do Families Matter?

Understanding How Families Strengthen Their Children's Educational Achievement

**FOUNDATIONFORCHILDDEVELOPMENT**

October 2009

## MISSION

The Foundation for Child Development is a national private philanthropy dedicated to the principle that all families should have the social and material resources to raise their children to be healthy, educated, and productive members of their communities.

The Foundation seeks to understand children, particularly the disadvantaged, and to promote their well-being. We believe that families, schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and government at all levels share complementary responsibilities in the critical task of raising new generations.

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## FOUNDATIONFORCHILDDEVELOPMENT

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A critical challenge for FCD's PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Initiative is to understand better how families, especially low-income ones, can strengthen the educational achievement of their children. Families are essential to their children's success in school. But what aspects of parent engagement matter for what outcomes? The Foundation for Child Development is now pursuing a fundamental reexamination of how parents affect the educational performance of their children.

Few today would challenge the importance of families being closely involved in their children's learning. Yet that ideal is an historically recent one, rooted in the child-study movement aimed at college-educated mothers during the 1920s.

Starting in the 1960s with the War on Poverty, programs seeking to improve educational outcomes for low-income children required strong parental involvement, including participating in classrooms. Current federal education policy assumes that the more involved parents are in their children's education, the more children will learn. Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, low-income parents are expected to be informed consumers of the educational effectiveness of their children's schools. The law also requires educators to involve parents in a variety of activities, such as school governance, instructing children at home, volunteering in classrooms, and learning about child development.

Journalist Dale Russakoff, in her essay for this Annual Report, charts the course of requirements for parent involvement in successive reauthorizations of Title I, the largest federal education program aimed, for the last 45 years, at narrowing the achievement gap between children from more affluent and from low-income families.

Russakoff examines the evidence for whether the vast range of efforts by schools to comply with federal requirements to engage parents have led to better achievement for their children. She notes that research is currently limited.

The lack of compelling, consistent evidence provides FCD with the opportunity to step back and question how we think about the range of activities associated with parent engagement programs, and how each may add value to children's learning. Such an inquiry can have consequences for policies and programs, specifically how funds are now allocated among competing programmatic demands aimed to enhance children's learning.

We are particularly interested in a still rare intergenerational approach that connects the increased educational attainment of parents through postsecondary and workforce development programs with their children's achievement. Research on family influences, including evaluations of international development programs to increase the education of women, attests to positive outcomes for child well-being of supporting advances in parents' own educational attainment.

As always, we fix our eyes on our long-term goal: that all children, particularly those who are at risk for underachievement, have what they require to be full participants in their communities. Their future and ours rest on achieving greater educational equity in our own country and throughout the world.

P. LINDSAY CHASE-LANSDALE  
*Chair*

RUBY TAKANISHI  
*President*



# Involving Parents: Has It Helped The Poorest Children?

DALE RUSSAKOFF

When Phyllis Hunter, former director of reading for Houston’s public schools, talks about the importance of parents to their children’s education, she begins with a tale of three mothers and an eggplant in a supermarket.

The first mother wheels her shopping cart down the produce aisle, where her Kindergartner spots an eggplant and asks what it is. The mother shushes her child, ignoring the question. A second mother, faced with the same question, responds curtly, “Oh, that’s an eggplant, but we don’t eat it.”

The third mother coos, “Oh, that’s an eggplant. It’s one of the few purple vegetables.” She picks it up, hands it to her son, and encourages him to put it on the scale. “Oh, look, it’s about two pounds!” she says. “And it’s \$1.99 a pound, so that would cost just about \$4. That’s a bit pricey, but you like veal parmesan, and eggplant parmesan is delicious too. You’ll love it. Let’s buy one, take it home, cut it open. We’ll make a dish together.”

Hunter’s parable makes clear why an attentive, engaged parent is one of life’s greatest academic advantages. It also makes clear why educators have long believed that low-income children would soar as students if only they got more support at home. But what never has been clear, despite 40 years of voluminous research, is whether myriad strategies schools are now using to engage low-income parents have actually been effective in raising their children’s achievement.



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## A Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

Nonetheless, the federal government since the 1960s has required schools serving poor children from early childhood through 12<sup>th</sup> grade to involve parents in their education. Under a little-noticed section of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), expectations of schools include arranging remedial education for parents who need it, teaching parents to use the Internet to check on a child's grades and homework, and holding workshops on how to talk with children at home about what they are learning in class.

The law also requires districts receiving more than \$500,000 a year in Title I funds—which support the education of low-income children—to spend one percent of those funds engaging parents. This year, with an infusion of money from the President's economic stimulus package, that one percent could come close to \$225 million nationally, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Despite the emphasis on accountability that defines NCLB, the law requires little oversight of how tens of thousands of schools spend their parent-involvement money or whether those efforts raise achievement. Some schools have trained teachers and rewritten curriculum to create projects on which children and parents can work together. But most schools, according to Steffen Saifer, director of the Children and Family program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, “have so much they consider more important, they've gotten good at knowing how to minimally meet the requirements.”

“It's a dilemma we all face in the area of parental involvement,” said Rosie Kelly, a U.S. Department of Education official involved in monitoring state Title I programs. “Our monitoring is for compliance. You're talking about a quality issue.”

## A Promise That Fell Short

Strategies that seemed certain to work have fallen short. A case in point is Even Start, a 20-year-old federal early-childhood program based on research found that the more educated the parents, the more likely they were to engage children in learning.

The program teaches literacy and child-raising skills to low-income parents while their children play and learn in early childhood centers. In joint sessions, parents practice sinking into comfy chairs with a book and a child, learning to create a joyful experience out of reading together.

The goal is to provide children of poverty with one of many advantages more affluent children are born with—a parent who reads to them.

Despite its promise, Even Start didn't work, at least not according to researchers funded by the U.S. Department of Education who found in 2003 that parents and children gained no more literacy skills after a year than did a control group. Although advocates insisted the study was flawed, President Barack Obama invoked these findings in targeting the program for elimination in 2010.

The demand for accountability from Even Start suggests that the Obama administration will seek similar evidence that other parent-involvement policies are working. “I am a deep believer in the power of data to drive our decisions,” Arne Duncan, President Obama’s Education Secretary, said in a speech in June. “It tells us where we are, where we need to go, and who is most at risk.”

However, existing research on parent involvement provides little to guide practice. A paper published in the Review of Educational Research in 2002 evaluated 41 studies focused on the impact of parent involvement programs, and found most to be compromised by flawed design or analysis. Emphasizing that the programs may work nonetheless, the authors found “little empirical support for the widespread claim that parent involvement programs are an effective means of improving student achievement...” They added that their findings were “particularly significant given the substantial federal support for parent involvement.”

The story of how the federal government came to demand so much from schools, while offering so little guidance, has been developing for almost half a century.



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No longer would parent involvement be defined as simply mothers coming to school to volunteer in class or run bake sales.

## More Than 40 Years of Mandates

### THE JOHNSON AND NIXON ADMINISTRATIONS

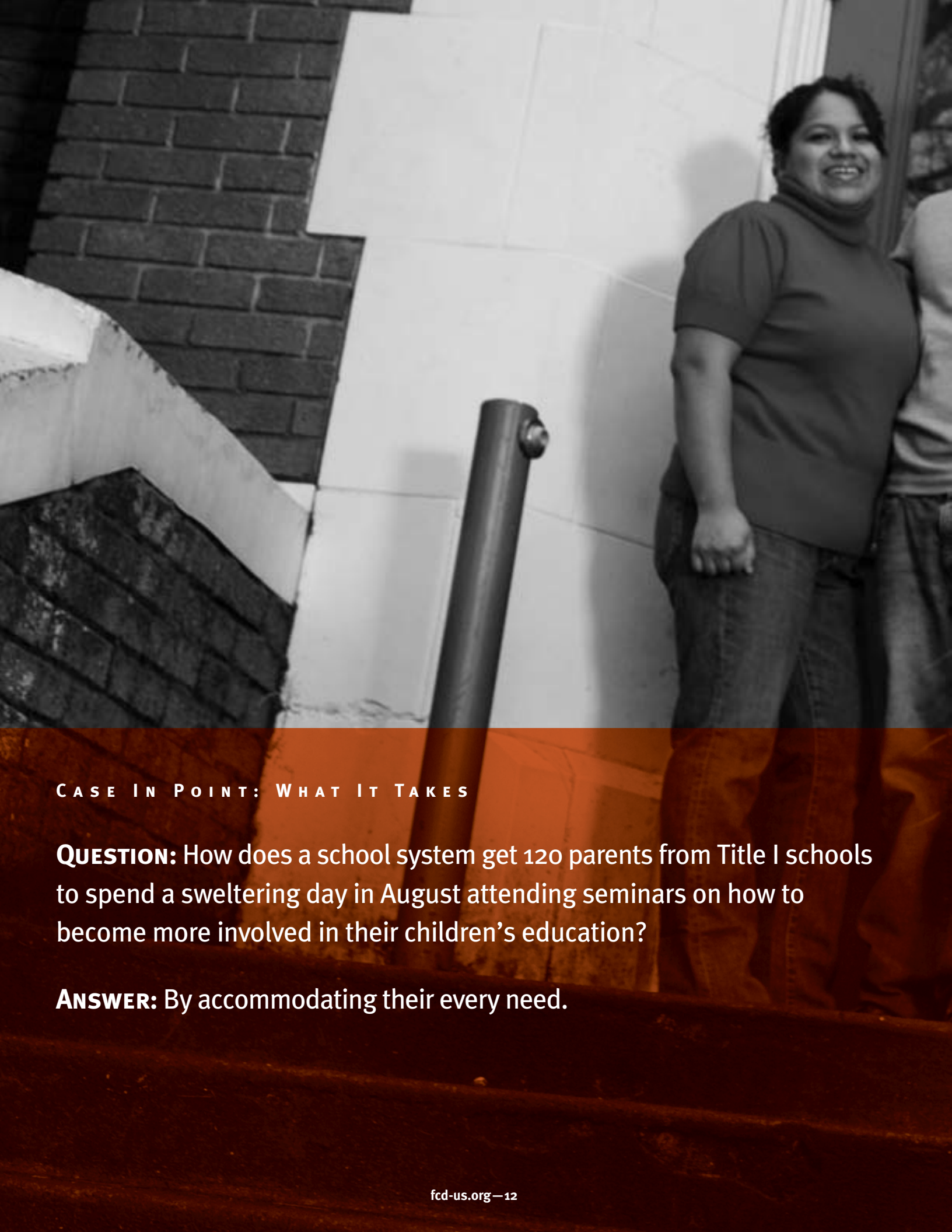
From its passage in 1965, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the largest source of federal aid to public schools, reserved an essential role for parents. Reflecting the Civil Rights era in which it was enacted, the law and its champions focused initially on securing a voice for low-income parents in policies governing their children's schools. The Nixon administration added a mandate that every school and district receiving Title I funds appoint a Parents' Advisory Council made up primarily of low-income parents who weighed in on how the funds were spent.

### THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

The councils operated haphazardly, frustrating both parents and local school officials. In 1981, Congress and President Ronald Reagan scrapped them as part of an effort to downsize the federal role in education generally. At the same time, reports of American students falling far behind those in other nations, most drastically in low-income and minority communities, galvanized national alarm about the state of public education.

### THE BUSH I AND CLINTON ADMINISTRATIONS

As the beginnings of another school reform movement took shape, Congress turned again to parents in the 1988 reauthorization of Title I, this time as partners with schools and teachers rather than outside advisers. The Clinton administration expanded this role throughout the 1990s with a surge of parent-centered education initiatives. No longer would parent involvement be defined as simply mothers coming to school to volunteer in class or run bake sales. Now, it would be a two-way relationship, with schools expected to reach out to engage parents, including those who didn't come to them—parents who worked two and three jobs, parents who spoke no English, parents whose own school experiences were not positive.

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark turtleneck and jeans, smiling in a hallway. To her left is a brick wall and a white door with a dark handle. The bottom half of the image is overlaid with a dark orange gradient.

CASE IN POINT: WHAT IT TAKES

**QUESTION:** How does a school system get 120 parents from Title I schools to spend a sweltering day in August attending seminars on how to become more involved in their children's education?

**ANSWER:** By accommodating their every need.



The New York City Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy, a division of the city Department of Education, holds monthly “Parent Academies” on Saturdays, when most working parents are free. It offers translation services in Arabic, Bengali, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Urdu and American sign language. It also provides childcare and easy access by bus and subway.

There were overflow crowds at the summer workshops on parental rights under Title I and on responsibilities of PTAs. By contrast, only four parents, all mothers, attended a workshop on how to prepare children for elementary school, where facilitator Justine Santiago taught them to turn ordinary occurrences into learning experiences.

Meanwhile, without anyone noticing, a parent-involvement success story unfolded in the childcare area where Priscilla Bush, a PTA officer at P.S. 133, dropped off her daughters, Triana, 8, and Diamond, 6. The girls spent almost the entire day playing “teacher,” with Triana flashing addition problems at her little sister, then patiently helping her count to the answer. Told of this, Bush credited their years in Head Start and its mandate to involve parents. While volunteering there one day, she observed her girls delightedly playing teacher. “I got them to do it at home,” she said, “and it’s been their favorite game ever since.”

“That’s what can come of parent involvement,” Bush said.

The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, passed in 1994, made parental participation one of eight national education goals for the year 2000, alongside such pre-existing ones as leading the world in math and science achievement and increasing the high school graduation rate to 90 percent. The same year marked the first time Congress required every school and district receiving Title I aid to develop a parent involvement plan in consultation with parents and to spend one percent of their Title I funds carrying it out. In addition, the nation's tens of thousands of Title I schools had to develop school-parent compacts, under which schools pledged to provide high-quality curriculum and instruction, to children and parents, pledged to support children's learning at home.

Lawmakers were spurred on by research indicating a strong correlation between a parent's engagement with their children's education and a child's academic achievement, attendance and attitude toward school. "Research over the past thirty years has consistently shown that greater family involvement in children's learning is a critical link to achieving a high-quality education and a safe, disciplined learning environment for every student," asserted a U.S. Department of Education paper on the Goals 2000 legislation.

While no one questioned the importance of parental support, it was not clear from the research how a school could enhance it, let alone create it for children who had little or none. And which of scores of possible approaches actually would boost a child's achievement was the murkiest question of all. "I remember thinking at the time, 'Gosh, this research is not as strong as they're saying,'" said a Democratic aide who worked on the 1994 legislation. "But there was this very strong conviction that parent involvement was a force for good in and of itself."

### **THE BUSH II ADMINISTRATION**

That conviction only deepened, but with a different emphasis, as the Bush administration put NCLB atop the congressional agenda in 2001. Now, in addition to being partners with teachers and schools, parents were to be tough-minded consumers, vigilantly monitoring school-wide performance on achievement tests and moving their children—and the public money that followed them—from failing to higher-performing schools.





## CASE IN POINT: TEACHER TRAINING – A MISSING LINK

Trish Meegan, lead teacher at Chicago’s Coonley Elementary School, posted a plea for help in 2003 on [teachersnetwork.org](http://teachersnetwork.org). “If we can’t involve parents in schools, then we do little to really impact the children we teach,” she wrote. “I know I never had a course in my teaching preparation regarding working with parents, community, etc.—creating communities of practice. Did anyone else?”

In six years, no one has responded to Meegan’s plea. Nor has her district or any of the three Title I schools where she has taught offered training. So, Meegan says, she has learned mostly from trial and error. Families of all backgrounds turn out for potluck dinners, free meals and children’s performances. But for workshops on how to help children read better or excel in math, she said, “the ones you really need to see, you can’t get.”

Meegan’s experience highlights a disconnect between the federal government’s sweeping mandates to involve parents in their children’s learning and the relatively scant training schools of education and districts give teachers to use on the front lines.

“The policies say, ‘Do this,’” said Joyce Epstein, founder of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. “The law doesn’t tell educators how to do it.”

“Schools have to design activities that enable families to draw from their strengths,” Epstein said. “If you don’t design it, and just expect it, it won’t happen.”



“We take every opportunity to explain to parents the importance of reading to their children, talking with them, building their stamina for learning.”

As such, the law contained two largely distinct visions of how parents were to help their children succeed. In the first, as consumers, they were to help all children, wielding the new right of school choice if necessary to hold educators accountable for raising everyone's performance. In the second, as partners, they were to use the strength of the parent-child bond to help their own child achieve.

The partnership role was outlined expansively in its own little-publicized section of the 2001 law, authored by Senator Jack Reed, Democrat, of Rhode Island. It laid out responsibilities for states, districts and schools to work with parents to extend learning into homes and communities, drawing on the work of Johns Hopkins University sociologist Joyce Epstein, an education research scientist. Epstein's Center for School, Family and Community Partnerships helps schools around the country work with parents and local institutions to raise student achievement.

"You don't have to give parents a college education," Epstein said. "You just have to give them a strategy for having an interesting conversation with their third grader about a book they're reading even if the parents haven't read the book."

### **THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION**

President Obama has yet to unveil his parental involvement strategy, but has made clear he wants more of it. "For our kids to excel, we have to accept our responsibility to help them learn," he said at the Centennial Celebration of the NAACP in July. "That means putting away the Xbox, putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour. It means attending those parent-teacher conferences and reading to our children and helping them with their homework."

## “It’s Kid by Kid, Parent by Parent”

But on the ground, parent involvement has meant something different in every district.

At New Haven’s Truman School, where 63 percent of 600 students in Grades K-8 qualify for free lunches, principal Roy Araujo believes more parent involvement would help his students dramatically. Barely a third of Truman students tested as proficient in language arts and under half in math, according to the school-data website, School Matters.

But Araujo said his students’ parents “have many phobias about school. Their own school experiences may not have been as positive as we’d like them to have been.” He has tried hard to break through to them, but acknowledged with regret that the results have been “hit or miss.” Officials of several other schools and districts said they lack the resources to mobilize hard-to-reach parents. “We’re not that sophisticated to know whether certain kinds of parental involvement work better than others,” said one official, who asked to remain anonymous.

By contrast, parents are a regular presence at P.S. 112 in East Harlem, where 97 percent of 340 students in grades PreK through Second Grade qualify for free lunches. They visit classes twice a month, where they serve as math and reading buddies and learn strategies to support their children’s learning at home. Principal Eileen Reiter and her staff host families at children’s writing celebrations, multicultural festivals and workshops on skills children are expected to learn in each grade. There are night classes for parents who are English Language Learners, and sessions in resume-writing and interviewing for parents who are out of work.

“We take every opportunity to explain to parents the importance of reading to their children, talking with them, building their stamina for learning,” Reiter said. “We tell them to turn off the TV. Our Second-Graders have to read 30 minutes every night, and parents help them document their reading. In Kindergarten and PreK, we want parents reading to kids. If they don’t speak English, we ask them to read in Spanish. We send them the books. It’s kid by kid, parent by parent.”

For two years, Jane H. Bryan Elementary School in Hampton, Va. has enlisted the entire community—parents, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians—to read two popular children’s books along with students. Last year’s titles were *Meet Addy*, about a 9-year-old slave girl who escapes to freedom, and *The World According to Humphrey*, about a classroom’s pet hamster. The day before each reading session, students wore stickers home to remind parents to attend the kickoff—a pizza party and a skit starring children and staff. Parents were to read aloud to younger children or to listen with them to audio CDs, following along in the book. Reading coach Stacy Walker said she financed the project with \$2,500 in Title I funds.

The excitement at school and at home had noticeable effects on children as well as parents, Walker said. After failing to meet state reading standards the previous year, Bryan students cleared the bar last year. “I could never prove it, but I believe the program must’ve made a difference,” Walker said. “Suddenly I saw real motivation, I saw children loving to read.” And after years of minimal family support, a team of parents already has volunteered to help organize the program this year.

It is clear from experiences at Bryan and P.S. 112 that committed educators can mobilize parent support that has been sorely lacking for low-income children. Yet it is also clear that many schools are spending time and money on activities that reach neither parents nor students. “What’s typically done—sending notes home in backpacks, holding parents’ nights, offering conferences—isn’t effective with low-income parents or parents who don’t speak English,” said Saifer, of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. “That’s what works in middle-class districts.”

Perhaps with the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Title I approaching, with an administration dedicated to evidence-based policy, and amid growing urgency for lowering the tall barriers to achievement facing low-income children, the time for action is at hand.

## An Enduring Challenge: How Do Parents Matter?

Education Secretary Duncan announced that his department is launching a national survey to measure levels of parent and family involvement in education nationally. What educators need more urgently from the department is scientific evidence of what kinds of support make the most difference for children's achievement.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dale Russakoff has written for newspapers and magazines for 30 years, the vast majority of that time for The Washington Post, where she focused on in-depth reporting of national politics and social policy issues, including education and child welfare. She profiled former New York City child welfare director Nicholas Scoppetta for The New Yorker and Condoleezza Rice, Lani Guinier and Bill Bradley for The Washington Post Magazine. She also teaches feature writing at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.*

The Foundation for Child Development does not accept unsolicited proposals.

### WHAT WE FUND

The Foundation for Child Development, through its PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> initiative, supports the restructuring of Prekindergarten, Kindergarten, and Grades 1 to 3 into a well-aligned first level of public education for children (ages three to eight) in the United States.

The Foundation's New American Children grants focus on stimulating basic and policy-relevant research on children (birth through age 10), particularly those living in low-income immigrant families.

FCD supports research, policy development, advocacy, communications strategies, and networks related to our PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Initiative.

The Foundation for Child Development awards an average of 14 Board-approved grants each year. Please see our complete listing of grants for details about specific grant-funded projects at [www.fcd-us.org/grants/](http://www.fcd-us.org/grants/).

### WHAT WE DO NOT FUND

- The direct provision of Prekindergarten education, child care, or health care
- Capital campaigns and endowments
- The purchase, construction, or renovation of buildings
- Grants for projects outside the United States

# FINANCIAL STATEMENTS — APRIL 1, 2008 - MARCH 31, 2009

(Condensed from Audited Financial Statements)

## Foundation for Child Development Condensed Statement of Financial Position

	<i>Fiscal years ending March 31</i>	
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2008 (restated)</b>
<b>Assets</b>		
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 2,969,867	\$ 567,934
Investments at fair value	74,630,815	114,115,206
Investment interest income receivable	13,200	120,039
Prepaid expenses and other assets	103,554	109,460
Federal Excise Tax refund receivable	88,897	64,453
Fixed assets net of depreciation	36,809	210,088
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$ 77,843,142</b>	<b>\$ 115,187,180</b>
<b>Liabilities and Net Assets</b>		
Liabilities:		
Grants payable	\$ 3,432,135	\$ 2,764,625
Accounts payable and accrued expenses	80,738	78,361
Deferred Federal Excise Tax payable	—	294,000
Total liabilities	\$ 3,512,873	\$ 3,136,986
Net assets:		
Unrestricted	71,121,731	108,991,656
Permanently restricted	3,058,538	3,058,538
Total net assets	\$ 74,330,269	\$ 112,050,194
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 77,843,142</b>	<b>\$ 115,187,180</b>

## Condensed Statement of Activities

	<i>Fiscal years ending March 31</i>	
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2008</b>
<b>Changes in Net Assets</b>		
Investment return:		
Dividend and interest	\$ 1,593,649	\$ 2,165,301
Net realized (loss) gain on investments	(3,507,803)	8,617,486
Net change in unrealized (depreciation) on investments	(31,082,968)	(9,983,435)
	\$ (32,997,122)	\$ 799,352
Less: Costs attributable to investments	315,850	294,189
Net investment return	\$ (32,681,272)	\$ 505,163
Other income	26,476	57,567
Total operating revenue and support	\$ (32,654,796)	\$ 562,730
Expenses:		
Grants to institutions	\$ 1,339,987	\$ 2,613,952
Internally administered programs	1,465,000	192,000
Direct charitable activities	1,030,313	1,026,502
Operations and governance	701,543	592,117
Grants administration	166,800	144,210
Federal excise tax	23,781	109,772
Total expenses	\$ 4,727,424	\$ 4,678,553
Change in net assets	\$ (37,719,925)	\$ (4,115,823)
Net assets at beginning of year	112,050,194	116,166,017
<b>Net Assets at End of Year</b>	<b>\$ 74,330,269</b>	<b>\$ 112,050,194</b>



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