Early Childhood Center, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Indiana University

Family engagement is not a new concept. Once called parent involvement and then parent engagement, the early childhood field now uses the term *family engagement* to emphasize the reciprocal, collaborative nature of the family-school relationship and to acknowledge the potential importance of family members other than just parents. Family engagement practices can occur in many different forms (e.g., informed decision-making regarding early education, family engagement at school, family engagement at home with child learning, home-school communication).

On a national level, a large body of research has consistently shown that family engagement occurs in multiple ways and is associated with improved child outcomes in several domains. Much of family engagement research at the early education level has focused on the promotion of home-based learning. Research suggests that encouraging literacy activities at home may benefit all families with young children. Reading at home with children is associated with increases in children’s early literacy and language skills (Voorhis et al., 2012). Sénéchal and Lefevre (2002) showed that exposure to books at home related positively to children’s vocabulary and listening comprehension skills in kindergarten and first grade and these skills directly related to children’s reading ability in third grade. Engaging families is particularly effective for children who were lagging behind at the beginning of the school year (Landry, et al 2012, Fantuzzo et al., 2000). Multiple studies show that this type of home-based interaction is also associated with improved positive social emotional skills (Voorhis et al., 2012). Promoting home-based learning activities may have a secondary effect of creating more positive parent-child relationships (Landry et al 2012). Family engagement at the preschool level also positively predicted improved mathematics skills and negatively predicted problem behaviors at the end of the year (Powell, et al., 2010).

In addition to directly affecting child outcomes, family engagement can influence family attitudes. Families report feeling more empowered (i.e., competent) when in a family-centered program that explains options and allows families to make their own choices (Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, 1996). Jinnah and Walters (2008) demonstrate an association between family engagement and family satisfaction as well. Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues (2003) suggest that family attitudes toward education are a strong predictor of child outcomes. Children of parents who are satisfied and have positive attitudes toward education are more likely to have positive outcomes. Across the country, states and private foundations are recognizing that winning the hearts and minds of families is as important as curriculum and instruction. These organizations have created several frameworks to translate research to practice (e.g., Head Start, NAEYC, PTA, Strengthening Families). One example is the Flamboyan Foundation, which has created an empirically-based rubric for family engagement. It focuses on influencing the beliefs and mindsets of teachers first, then developing relationships and communication systems between teachers and families through targeted home visits. The Flamboyan Foundation’s framework also includes sharing core instructional program information and data with families in an accessible way to allow for effective home learning and goal setting (Spielberg, 2011).
Indiana has not adopted a cohesive framework for addressing family engagement. Although there are no system-wide initiatives to address family engagement in the state, there are isolated efforts, such as the Department of Education’s new and voluntary Family Friendly Schools program that has a strong foundation in research-based family engagement practices. Individual programs are piloting research-based programs such as Raising a Reader or the Parent Teacher Home Visit Program. However, these are exceptions. System-wide, early education programs have little to no guidance concerning family engagement. The Paths to Quality (PTQ) system does very little to directly address family engagement (with the exception of Level 4; NAEYC accreditation standard #7 involves family engagement). The initial EEMG data on 29 preschool programs rated PTQ 3 or 4 showed relatively low levels of parent-reported family engagement (average score of 1.8 out of 4) and medium levels of home-school communication (average score of 2.93 out of 4).

Indiana needs to recognize that in order to see the desired improvement in child outcomes, the early education system must commit to a comprehensive framework of family engagement. This framework must recognize that family engagement involves not only helping families to make informed choices about the type of early education program they need, but also ensuring that families have opportunities to participate in their child’s program. It must also create a collaborative atmosphere that encourages communication and provides specific guidance to families about how to effectively reinforce learning at home.

The Early Childhood Center (ECC) is uniquely prepared to contribute to this effort. Based in Indiana, the ECC has worked successfully with various state systems, and has an understanding of the unique strengths and challenges Indiana faces. The ECC will focus on creating a strategic plan that works within the existing structure of Indiana’s early education system. For example, the existing Paths to Quality system could be adapted to include a family engagement component that would allow childcare providers as well as preschools to consider strategies for family engagement alongside health and safety, the learning environment, and curriculum. This would also allow families to consider levels of family engagement as they choose a program and would make engaging with programs an expected component of a high quality program.

Our Proposal:

The immediate goal of this proposed project is to develop a strategic plan for advancing family engagement practices among Indiana’s early childhood programs. Our long-term goal is to ensure that Indiana’s early childhood programs strengthen their families’ capacities to support their children’s learning and development at home, to advocate for and make informed choices concerning their children’s care and education, and to become strong partners in furthering their children’s educational success. To accomplish these long-term goals requires a strategic plan that has four key elements:

1. A well-defined framework of essential, evidence-based, family engagement practices that all early childhood programs should implement;
2. A baseline assessment of current early childhood program practices in Indiana and program capacity for implementing family engagement practices;
3. A clearly defined statewide system for providing the guidance, resources, and supports needed by local programs to implement the practices described in the framework; and
4. A timeline of recommended actions for facilitating adoption of the proposed family engagement framework, the establishment of strategic partnerships with statewide capacity for supporting local program improvements, and the dissemination of needed resources to enable both state and local efforts.

**Goal 1:** The Early Childhood Center will review and compile the current literature into a simple, well-defined family engagement framework for adoption by state and local early childhood programs. The literature review will include multiple components, including research on practices to engage families in their young child’s education, research on practices related to outreach (e.g., how to engage families in the early childhood care/education system in the first place) and research around the implementation of frameworks (i.e., implementation science).

The current literature concerning effective family engagement practices provides clear examples of what early childhood programs should be doing. In addition, some national efforts have begun to compile these individual practices into a cohesive framework that more clearly spells out what individual programs should concentrate limited resources on implementing. Compiling disparate research and recommended practices into a simple, well-defined framework eases the understanding and possible adoption by state and local decision makers. This framework would include clear definitions, a summary of intended family and child outcomes (to foster an *outcomes-based* perspective among early childhood professionals), and a clear delineation of recommended practices that could be easily incorporated into existing structures for measuring and promoting program quality (e.g., aligning recommended practices along the four levels of PTQ). We can also translate this framework for different audiences, including families. For example, we can write elements of the framework in a format that enables family members to know what they should be looking for and expecting from their child’s early childhood program.

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<th>Activities</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hold a meeting with Early Learning Indiana to have a conversation about family engagement</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Herron</td>
<td>The information from this meeting will be used to inform the direction of the project</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Complete a literature review on relevant family engagement research</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Williamson</td>
<td>Written paper and bibliography of evidence-based family engagement practices, models, and frameworks</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Compile evidence-based practices and models into a simple, well-defined framework for state and local decision makers</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>Herron and Williamson</td>
<td>Draft written framework that includes definitions, intended outcomes, and essential family engagement practices</td>
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<td>4. Present draft family engagement framework to the ELAC Family Engagement Sub-Committee for review and possible adoption/</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>Conn-Powers and Herron</td>
<td>Written minutes and recommendations from committee members</td>
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### Activities

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<td>integration into their work and the work of ELAC</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Work with the Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning to draft a plan for integrating the recommended practices into the 4 PTQ levels</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>Herron and Williamson</td>
<td>Written recommended standards for family engagement practices for Levels 1 – 4 of PTQ</td>
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**Goal 2.** The ECC will assess the current implementation of recommended family engagement practices, including the capacity for implementing those practices, by a representative sample of Indiana’s early childhood programs.

Designing a strategic plan for promoting any change in practices must begin with a clear assessment of current practices along with existing strengths, gaps, and barriers that could affect adoption of the desired practices associated with the family engagement framework. This assessment can provide a clear baseline with which to measure change and impact, and it can provide clues for selecting programs that are more likely to adopt the family engagement framework and implement the recommended practices. Given that our current evidence suggests that adopting evidence-based family engagement practices will be a challenge for most Indiana early childhood programs, this assessment can provide insight as to the biggest challenges or obstacles in adopting recommended practices. The information we gather from the assessment will provide insights into the best investments the Partnerships for Early Learners initiative can make for affecting the largest change in programs.

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<tr>
<td>1. Compile and analyze data collected through ECC’s current evaluation of 29 EEMG-funded early childhood programs, including family and teacher reported assessments of the family’s engagement in their child’s early childhood program.</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Williamson And Herron</td>
<td>Written paper/charts summarizing family engagement practices at the beginning of the school year in EEMG programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. As part of ECC’s evaluation of the 29 EEMG programs, conduct a survey of teachers’ efforts to involve and engage families in their child’s learning and early childhood program.</td>
<td>February – March</td>
<td>Herron and Mecca</td>
<td>Written paper/charts summarizing current efforts concerning family engagement for 29 programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conduct additional interviews with a sample of at least 10 early childhood programs not participating in EEMG (e.g., Head Start, public schools) to assess current practices and program capacity.</td>
<td>February – March</td>
<td>Herron and Mecca</td>
<td>Included in the written paper/charts</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Conduct at least two additional interviews with select early childhood programs in Indiana who are reportedly implementing evidence-based family</td>
<td>February and March</td>
<td>Mecca</td>
<td>Included in the above written paper to highlight existing high quality programs and the</td>
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engagement models (e.g., *Raising a Reader* program in Crawfordsville, *Parent Teacher Home Visit Project* in Evansville).

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<tr>
<td>1. Interviews with at least seven key players who are in a position to affect change in early education at the system level (e.g., IAECY, IACCRR, Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning, Healthy Families, Nurse Family Partnership, non-profit organizations working on family engagement)</td>
<td>February - March</td>
<td>Herron and Mecca</td>
<td>Written paper summarizing current systems of program support, including goals, scope, strengths, and limitations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Draft a proposed system of program support, including guidance, ongoing assessment, professional development, and evaluation, that could enable execution of a statewide effort to improve family engagement practices among Indiana’s early childhood</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>Herron and Mecca</td>
<td>Written proposal of a recommended early childhood program support system</td>
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Goal 3. The ECC will conduct an environmental scan of existing state and regional support systems that guide and support early childhood program improvement, and define a coordinated system for guiding and improving early childhood program efforts to adopt the family engagement framework.

As Indiana evolves a coordinated system of early education that encompasses diverse partners, it is important that we conduct a critical examination of current resources and programs for assessing and supporting high quality programs. An independent assessment of current systems of support can help to accurately and honestly identify strengths, gaps, and redundancies. Much like the above assessment of individual early childhood programs will highlight their strengths and needed supports, this proposed environmental scan will help to determine the operational capabilities and resources that exist at a state levels, and recommend possible changes, partnerships, and investment opportunities that could be sustainable beyond the 5-year timeframe of the Partnerships for Early Learners initiative.
3. Present draft proposal of a statewide system for supporting high quality family engagement practices to the ELAC family engagement
   March
   Conn-Powers and Herron

4. Conduct meetings with existing state providers concerning the draft proposal to gain feedback and buy-in as well as support an iterative developmental process of the proposed state system.
   March – April
   Herron and Mecca

Goal 4. Using the information collected from the earlier proposed activities, the ECC will develop a strategic plan for facilitating statewide adoption of a framework for evidence-based family engagement practices.

The goals and activities outlined earlier serve to build common ground among important partners at the state and local levels. The proposed development of a family engagement framework serves to get everyone on the same page concerning our state’s definition of family engagement. These activities further articulate how we should integrate this framework into current structures (e.g., PTQ), and how we should promulgate it. The assessments of both local and state capacity help to provide an honest and accurate account of our state’s strengths, again at both the state and local levels. This will inform out actions concerning where investments from this initiative are most needed and most likely to yield immediate and long-term impact. We would design these assessments to identify mechanisms that could be sustainable after the conclusion of this five-year initiative.

What is needed is a systematic plan for pulling it all together that clarifies important roles and responsibilities, strengthens existing partnerships (or establishes new ones), and provides an incremental timeline for rolling out this particular initiative in a way that establishes success from the beginning and capitalizes on that success across the 3-5 years. The strategic plan will need to address critical prerequisites at the system level to insure that all actions are coordinated and emerge from a common framework. It must also use the assessment information from local programs to identify and prioritize local programs with which to begin. Selecting local programs based on their current strengths and resources, strategic importance (e.g., location, prominence), and willingness to serve as models for later programs will be important. We will construct a strategic plan targeting programs that are the innovators and early adopters of new practices, relying on the science that suggests that those programs are what a system needs to draw in the next wave of programs. The strategic plan will borrow heavily from the new research concerning implementation science funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

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<tr>
<td>1. Participate in all required meetings with</td>
<td>January, mid-April</td>
<td>Conn-Powers and Herron</td>
<td>Written paper outlining recommendations</td>
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entities funded to develop strategic plans for the other three areas.

2. Develop iterative drafts of a strategic plan and distribute to key partners for review and feedback.
   - March and April
   - Herron and Conn-Powers
   - Written drafts of a strategic three year plan for the partnerships initiative

3. Develop a final three-year strategic plan that delineates measurable outcomes, activities, responsibilities, and estimated costs. The strategic plan will focus on key initiatives associated with the development and implementation of a coordinated comprehensive statewide system of support, and the implementation of local capacity-building efforts to improve family engagement practices
   - April
   - Herron and Conn-Powers
   - Contracted editor
   - Written three year strategic plan

**Early Childhood Center (ECC)**

The Early Childhood Center is one of six centers at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Indiana University-Bloomington. Our center is committed to translating research to practice in enabling early childhood programs to adopt and carry out practices that lead to improved child and family outcomes for all children. The ECC’s past and current research efforts and program support activities include the following areas:

a. Assessing and improving the quality of Indiana’s First Steps early intervention programs serving infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families;
b. Evaluating the impact of First Steps programs on children and families
c. Assessing the quality of preschool programs in promoting positive school readiness outcomes for all young children.
d. Writing policy briefs aimed at Indiana’s prekindergarten efforts.
e. Evaluation of Indiana’s Early Education Matching Grant Program

Drafting this type of strategic plan is in alignment with the mission of the ECC: to transform early education research into evidence-based practice. The mission of the Early Childhood Center is to identify and advance empirically-supported early education practices that welcome, include, and bring about successful school readiness practices for all children. The ECC would be a strong collaborator for this
project because we have a long history of collaborating with Indiana on a system level on education-related projects. The ECC has a long-standing relationship with the leaders of the First Steps program, conducting outcome evaluations, data analyses, and quality review. First Steps is an excellent example of a state system that emphasizes family engagement. The ECC also currently has a data share agreement with DOE to conduct data analyses related to the impact of ISTAR-KR. In the past, the ECC has conducted research on and conducted trainings for early education programs across the state to add to the knowledge base on topics such as kindergarten readiness and the quality of early education instruction. In addition, ECC staff currently serve as members of the ELAC Family Engagement Subcommittee and the Executive Board of IAEYC.

The Indiana Institute on Disability and Community (IIDC) and Indiana University-Bloomington have extensive resources that will more than adequately support the proposed strategic planning activities. The IIDC is Indiana’s federally funded Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. As a Center for Excellence, the IIDC is responsible for conducting research that enhances services for individuals of all abilities across the lifespan and translating that research into training, outreach, and product development/dissemination actions to promote the implementation of evidence-based practices throughout Indiana. It has carried out this mission for over 35 years. In the previous year, staff at the IIDC conducted 23 different research and program evaluation studies focusing on early intervention, school readiness and prekindergarten education, inclusive education, transition and employment, community living and supports, and autism spectrum disorders.

**Key Project Staff**

**Michael Conn-Powers**

Michael Conn-Powers is currently Director of the Early Childhood Center at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, and faculty at Indiana University. He has worked in the field of early intervention and early education for over 30 years, including roles as classroom teacher, college teacher, state administrator, and researcher. Over the past 5 years, Michael and his team have been investigating and writing about school readiness and the quality of Indiana’s early education programs, particularly in the context of preparing children for school success. He also assists the state’s First Steps program in evaluating the impact of early intervention services on infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. Currently, the Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning awarded his team a state contract to evaluate Indiana’s initial efforts to sponsor public prekindergarten services. Michael has a Ph.D. in Early intervention.

**Katie Herron** has a PhD in Clinical Psychology with a minor in Developmental Psychology. She has conducted research on different types of families experiencing stress and violence. She has worked for First Steps, Indiana’s early intervention system, as well as Family to Family, a grant focused on providing training and support to families of children with disabilities. She currently works at the Early Childhood Center where her work includes evaluation research on First Steps and the Early Education Matching Grant (EEMG).
Annamaria Mecca is a Speech-Language Pathologist with extensive experience working with children and their families in educational and not-for-profit settings. She has extensive professional experience, including with low-income families. She has skills in program and curriculum development and has trained professional and educational staff, parents and childcare workers. She is experienced in home visits and most recently served as the Family Literacy Coordinator/Family Resource Director for a school system in southern Indiana. She will assist Dr. Herron in conducting the numerous interviews and observations.

Kelsey Williamson is a current graduate student working on her doctoral degree in Educational Psychology. She will assist in all literature review, administrative support, and data compilation activities.
References:


Voorhis, F., Maier, M., Epstein, J., Lloyd, C. (2013). The impact of family involvement on the education of children ages 3 to 8: A focus on literacy and math achievement outcomes and social-emotional skills. MDRC.