

A National and State View of Preparing Educators for Family and Community Engagement

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“The State Superintendent of Education shall...work collaboratively with the Commission on Higher Education to incorporate parental involvement training into teacher preparation and principal preparation programs.”

- Section 59-28-140 of the South Carolina Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education Act

As South Carolina's Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education Act makes clear, preparing educators for family and community engagement is an essential strategy to building family-centered schools. Family and community engagement, a shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities to support student growth and resilience, is related to a variety of positive outcomes for students, teachers, families, schools, and entire communities (Mapp et al., 2022). For this reason, educators play a critical role in reaching out to families and communities around children's learning and progress, partnering and collaborating with them, and designing learning experiences that bridge home and school practices.

However, research shows that educators have very few opportunities early on and throughout their careers to learn and practice these important skills (Shartrand et al., 1997; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Based on these findings states across the country, like South Carolina, have been working with educator preparation programs to incorporate family engagement into their ongoing work. The goal of this paper is to review the broader research on the importance of preparing educators for family and community engagement and highlight efforts of South Carolina to more deeply understand the ways educator preparation programs equip pre-service teacher candidates with the competencies to effectively work with families.

The National Landscape: Preparing Educators For Family and Community Engagement

Although family and community engagement is one of the strongest predictors of student success in school and life, it is often on the sidelines of efforts to improve student learning. Although there are a variety of explanations for its absence, one of the foremost reasons is that systems of educator preparation rarely focus on family and community engagement. For example, in a national study, only 31% of department heads of educator preparation programs believe that family engagement is an essential or high priority in their programs (Caspe & Hernandez, 2021). A landscape scan of educational licensure requirements across the United States revealed that only 17 of the 56 U.S. states and territories address training teachers in four essential components of effective family and community engagement: collaboration and partnership, communication, culture and diversity, and relationships and trust (Hernandez, 2020). Moreover, fewer than 40% of family-facing professionals believe that their pre-service or

professional training fully covered core competencies needed to engage families (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2022a).

These statistics are disheartening because educators are more likely to improve their attitudes and confidence in working with diverse families in culturally sustaining and equitable ways when they receive opportunities to learn and practice family and community engagement (Evans, 2013; Mancenido & Pello, 2020; Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Competencies in family and community engagement are particularly vital for educators to develop in the context of broader issues impacting the field of education today. Currently, there is a mismatch between the teaching workforce and students and families in schools; whereas people of color represent 40% of the national population, and 50% of our student body, 80% of the teaching workforce is white and disproportionately female (Gist & Britton, 2022). In addition, enrollment in teacher education programs is on the decline and many states are facing teacher shortages (Walker, 2022). A strong focus on preparation for family and community engagement, in combination with financially supported and guided pathways into the profession, holds the promise of attracting new candidates to the field by meeting their desire to contribute to their community meaningfully.

In 2022, The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSFCE) released two major reports to inform and guide preparation in this area. The first report, *The Family Engagement Core Competencies: A Body of Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Family-Facing Professionals* (Core Competencies) represents the nationally agreed-upon and unifying set of professional competencies for the family engagement field (NAFSCE, 2022b). Developed across six main phases over a three-year period, the Core Competencies were created in collaboration with parents, educators, state leaders, and faculty in the family engagement field to highlight what effective family-facing professionals know, do, and believe. Family-facing professionals refer to those who work with families both in and out of school and is a term inclusive of educators, family liaisons and coordinators, principals, as well as afterschool staff, librarians and others.

The competencies are divided into four main domains of what family-facing professionals know, do, and stand for. The first is reflection. Family-facing professionals actively reflect inwards to assess their own beliefs and biases and consider how history and social context impact systems that families engage in. They also reflect outwards to examine, respect, and value the cultural and linguistic diversity of families and communities. Second, family-facing professionals connect with families and communities through mutually respectful relationships and communication. Third, family-facing professionals collaborate with families around student learning and development. They leverage the connections and relationships they've fostered to co-construct and develop curriculum, programs, services, and policies with families. Finally, family-facing professionals lead alongside families to advocate for systems change to champion equity in partnership with families and communities (see both NAFSCE, 2022b & Caspe & Hernandez, in press).

The second report, *The Educator Preparation Framework for Family and Community Partnerships* (Ed Prep Framework; NAFSCE, 2022c) explores how to reimagine systems so that educators are prepared early on and throughout their careers to develop and learn the family engagement core competencies. This report was developed in partnership with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the National Education Association (NEA), MAEC, and the Family Engagement Consortium on Educator Preparation. The latter was a group of competitively chosen collaboratives of faculty from educator preparation programs and leaders from state education agencies across the seven states of California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, North Dakota, South Carolina¹ and Wisconsin. The Ed Prep Framework presents new processes and ideas for reimagining how educators are prepared for family and community engagement.

Overall, the Ed Prep Framework shows that rethinking educator preparation for family and community engagement is a collaborative process in which no single organization or sector can work alone. For example, educator preparation programs are responsible for supporting faculty and teaching, guiding, and mentoring students. Families and community institutions offer education candidates glimpses into a child's life outside of the school in the home and community. Schools and districts, as the hub of learning, offer candidates meaningful experiences with mentor teachers and help establish family engagement visions. State education agencies are responsible for setting requirements, monitoring educator preparation programs, and adopting professional standards that emphasize family and community engagement.

Secondly, the Ed Prep Framework highlights how preparing educators for family and community engagement must take place with families and communities. Doing so has the potential to deepen candidates' understanding of the children and families with whom they work while showing communities and families that their experiences are respected and valued. For example, in the Family as Faculty model, families are positioned as leaders and experts in the preparation of teachers as parents teach courses and lead workshops (Santamaria Graff, 2021). In a different example, the Schools Within the Context of Community Program is structured so that pre-service teachers have a chance to get out of the university and into the community context for a whole integrated 18-credit semester (Cipollone et al., 2022).

Finally, the Ed Prep Framework points to the need for a fundamental redesign of educator preparation programs in which families, schools, and communities become close collaborators. These collaborations can focus on the development of dedicated courses on family and community engagement or focus on the infusion of family and community engagement topics and competencies into foundational and domain-specific coursework such as literacy, mathematics, and classroom management. Collaborations might also focus on innovations in field experiences held not only in schools but in a variety of community settings such as

¹ The SC subgroup consists of the following members: Dr. Michele Myers, formerly Clinical Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina (UofSC) and currently Assistant Professor of Elementary Literacy Education at Wake Forest University; Dr. Anthony Pittman, Dean of the School of Education at Claflin University, Dr. James Ritter, Education Associate, Educator Preparation Office of Educator Services with the South Carolina Department of Education, and Regina Thurmond, Educator Associate with the Department of Education.

afterschool programs, museums, and libraries to help educators develop a fuller picture of families' lives both in and out of school. Finally, high quality credentialing and endorsements can be used to support and supplement the work of educator preparation programs and support career enhancement for those already in the field.

An In-Depth Look at Educator Preparation for Family and Community Engagement in South Carolina

As part of the Family Engagement Consortium described earlier, the South Carolina team of faculty and state staff not only worked towards the development of the national Ed Prep Framework but also conducted research to understand the context of educator preparation for family and community engagement throughout South Carolina. Specifically, the team looked to understand the ways that the preservice teacher candidates were being prepared to meet the South Carolina Family Engagement K12 Framework. The South Carolina Family Engagement K12 Framework provides a structure through which educators throughout the state can work with families to build relationships, promote communication, link families to learning, promote collaborative practices and grow community partnerships. Accordingly, the group created the SC Engage-Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Survey to explore the ways that interns, while in clinical field-based experiences, were being prepared to meet these important elements of practice.

The survey was administered to interns at the beginning of their clinical field experiences in 2020-2021. The survey asked the interns to reflect on themselves, their school placements, their educator preparation program, and their knowledge of families as well as what might be improved (for a full summary of results see Myers & Pittman, in press and NAFSCE, 2022c). All together 109 students from across the state responded to the survey. Table 1 shows the results for the four likert item questions asked related to educator preparation.

Table 1. SC Engage-Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Survey Educator Preparation Results in Percentages (N=109)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Very Often	Always
<i>My educator preparation program uses practices that are responsive to racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity.</i>	0	0	4%	23%	73%
<i>My educator preparation program supports students on ways to establish and maintain a supportive and engaging relationship for families and caregivers</i>	0	0	5%	32%	63%

<i>My educator preparation program is aware of school and community resources that strengthen families and can assist students to succeed.</i>	0	1%	8%	32%	59%
<i>My educator preparation program covers a diverse set of topics appropriate for fostering partnerships between families and educators that are being addressed by the school community.</i>	0	1%	8%	28%	63%

Overall, preservice teachers believed that educator preparation programs were using practices that were responsive to racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. They also believed that their educator preparation programs supported their development in establishing and maintaining supportive and engaging relationships with families and covered a diverse set of topics appropriate for fostering partnerships between families and schools. Candidates however, were less likely to believe that their educator preparation program was aware of school and community resources that strengthen families and can assist students to success. This finding is important because it points to a greater need for collaboration among educator preparation programs, schools and communities in the preparation of educators.

An analysis of open-ended responses also revealed ways that education candidates believed that educator preparation programs within South Carolina might better create opportunities for their learning of family and community engagement. First, in line with quantitative findings, the candidates desired to learn more about resources in and out of school to support families. Many candidates reflected on their field placements and believed that this might be achieved by having more opportunities at the beginning of the school year to interact and meet with students and their families. They also believed that they would benefit from learning more about a school’s background and demographics before even entering the school. Community walks and community orientations could be one way to achieve this. Candidates also desired more hands-on experiences watching how coaching teachers and more seasoned professionals correspond with and respond to families. This could be achieved through video modules or face-to-face simulations. Finally, candidates wanted to learn more strategies and ideas for how to reach out to families and communicate with them more effectively, whether through letters, emails, home-school communication tools, or parent conferences. Candidates were clear that they wanted more guidance on how to make these interactions more inclusive and culturally responsive and sensitive to the variations in family language and cultures.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to shine a light on the importance of preparing educators for family and community engagement. The findings indicate that although as a system there are limitations in the ways educators are prepared for their work with families and communities, there are also bright spots where family and community engagement is an integral part of preparation processes. Specifically, within South Carolina, pre-service teachers report that their programs are

supporting them to be culturally responsive and sustaining professionals that can maintain supportive and engaging relationships with families. However, a closer analysis reveals that there is more work to be done to support teaching candidates in fully understanding the resources and cultural wealth that families and communities hold. Teaching candidates themselves provide a variety of suggestions to improve this work that hinges primarily on stronger experiential learning opportunities with families and communities. This study suggests that using surveys of teacher candidates to understand their experiences and values is a powerful way to advance new directions for work with families and communities. It also suggests that educator preparation programs, family leaders, schools, and communities can continue to join together to reimagine how educators are prepared for one of the most important and valuable aspects of their work: the engagement of families and communities.

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