

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In *No More Islands: Family Involvement in 27 School and Youth Programs*, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) asserts that young people should not be treated as “islands” by school and youth programs, separate from the context of their families and neighborhoods. AYPF finds that too often youth are treated as separate entities by education and youth-serving practitioners, while program strategies devised to serve their clients often read like a litany of family-based solutions. In its compendia of summaries of evaluations of effective youth programs, AYPF identifies many of these effective, family-like, strategies: include caring adults, create small close-knit environments, articulate high expectations and provide long-term support.

*No More Islands* uses an established body of research, over 100 summaries of evaluations published by AYPF over a six-year period, to demonstrate the amount and type of family involvement used in school and youth programs across the nation. To be summarized in the AYPF compendia, each evaluation had to meet a set of criteria including showing positive youth outcomes on such measures as academic achievement, employment, earnings and reductions in risky behavior. While there is extensive research indicating the efficacy of family involvement and detailing family involvement strategies, the pool of school and youth programs in the compendia are not widely known for their family involvement approaches. It is precisely this lack of attention that convinced AYPF to examine further the family involvement approaches used by these research-proven programs:

- *ABACUS (Academic Bilingual and Career Upgrading System)*—New York, NY
  - *Abecedarian Program*—Chapel Hill, NC
  - *Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)*—nationwide
  - *Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE) & Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (ARKSI)*—AK
  - *Beacons*—nationwide
  - *Boys and Girls Clubs of America*—nationwide
  - *Calvert*—Baltimore, MD
  - *Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools*—NC
  - *Child-Parent Center*—Chicago, IL
  - *Community Schools*—nationwide
  - *Equity 2000*—CA, MD, RI, TN and TX
  - *¡Español Aumentativo!*—Houston, TX
  - *4-H*—nationwide
  - *Girls, Inc.*—nationwide
  - *Head Start*—nationwide
  - *High School Puente*—CA
  - *High Schools That Work*—in 36 states
  - *High Scope/Perry Preschool*—Ypsilanti, MI
  - *The Home Visitation by Nurses project*—Elmira, NY and Memphis, TN
  - *I Have a Dream*—nationwide
  - *KIPP Academies*—Houston, TX and Bronx, NY
  - *Multisystemic Therapy*—SC, TN and MO
  - *Project GRAD*—CA, GA, NJ, OH and TN
  - *Project PRISM (Pre-Engineering Instruction/ Science and Mathematics)*—New York, NY
  - *Sacramento START*—Sacramento, CA
  - *Success for All*—nationwide
  - *The Union City*—NJ—*School District*
- No More Islands* combed the evaluation summaries, original evaluations, and survey results related to each of these programs for information regarding the type and efficacy of parent involvement strategies used. This analysis yielded four broad categories of approaches used by the programs:
- **Communicating with Families and Reinforcing Program Goals**—includes methods programs use to express goals and objectives, recruit families to a common goal, ensure family member concurrence with program goals and objectives, establish expectations for levels of participation, and maintain close relationships. Mechanisms for communications often include special resources to help educate and expand knowledge about a particular program emphasis or strategy.
  - **Staffing and Professional Development**—refers to a range of individuals with exclusive responsibility for some aspect of family relations. They may be program staff, such as home-school

teachers/liaisons, home-visitors, caseworkers, and/or community school coordinators, who function as partners to school principals in running full-service community schools. Also includes professional development strategies, primarily approaches to establish relationships with diverse families.

- **Designing and Implementing Family Member-Related Services and Activities**—describes activities programs offer to support and improve the skills of families and strategies used to implement those activities, including home visits/home-based services provided away from the program site, and assessments used to determine the most effective ways to design and implement programs based on the resources and needs of students and families.
- **Family Member Roles and Relationships**—includes family roles in advisory capacities, program operations, and advocacy; also broader community roles (in which families play a part) in providing stable leadership for particular reforms and program sustainability, and helping to extend program capacity, visibility and resources.

Many of the programs in the AYPF compendia are known for their use of the increasingly popular “youth development” approach to youth services which focuses positive attention on youth—dwelling on their assets rather than deficits and viewing the whole young person as a resource to programs. It was thus surprising that more of these programs did not employ a similar approach regarding the family members of young people. Most of the 100 compendia programs reviewed did not discuss families at all (73%). Too often, a reluctance to truly embrace families and the resources they bring to the child’s formal and informal learning environment stems from a sense that families may represent “problems” either to the initiative or to the child. To the extent that family members may have limited education, different cultural and parenting styles, or lack knowledge of a program’s goals, families can be perceived as threatening entities, introducing further challenges to the program or institution.

The 27 programs discussed in *No More Islands* have overcome some of the hesitation to involving families.

Several of these programs conducted assessment of both needs and assets of family members to determine which services could be provided and how families could be involved as resources. Several of the programs also gave family members specific roles and responsibilities and invited family members to participate in determining the types of services to be received both by their children and by the families.

*No More Islands* describes some of the barriers to successful family involvement experienced by school and youth program staff. Additionally, the report identifies several myths that should be discarded to improve program quality by involving family members:

- ♦ **Myth #1: “Youth Should Be the Sole Focus of Intervention.”**

Many youth programs are described as working only with young people and not with their families or communities. This likely reflects both program philosophy and the training of teachers and youth workers that focuses almost exclusively on the young person, without a complementary focus on the home or adult family members.

- ♦ **Myth #2: “There is No Need to Involve the Families of Adolescents.”**

There is a perception by some teachers and program staff members that it is not worthwhile involving families of adolescents, because of conjectures that families are less important in the lives of adolescents and because adolescents do not want their families around them and their friends. Research, however, documents the enduring importance of families throughout the development of the young person.

- ♦ **Myth #3: “The Success of Family Involvement Can Only Be Gauged Through the Physical Presence of Family Members at Schools or Youth Programs.”**

There is a perception that to be involved with a school or a youth program, the family member must be physically present at the school, the youth center or at meetings. Many school and youth programs seem to determine their effectiveness with family involvement by the

number of individuals in attendance at school or program functions and not by the quality of the family participation. Teachers and program staff must understand that successful youth outcomes may be as contingent on the family member's involvement *with the young person* as the family member's involvement with the program. Rather than giving up on family involvement, teachers and program staff need to find out more about families, their availability and other duties and seek to develop flexible and creative approaches for capturing their involvement.

♦ **Myth #4: “Parent Tracking’ is Okay.”**

A perception too often exists that it is alright for schools and programs that serve large numbers of low-income children and youth and, by extension, their low-income parents, to adopt problem-based approaches because these children and families “likely have problems that need to be fixed.” Often, practitioners decide on family involvement activities and develop a family curriculum “track” without a needs assessment. Conversely, there is a myth that parents at higher socioeconomic levels do not need family-related activities because they “have it all figured out.”

♦ **Myth #5: “Families Have Nothing to Offer.”**

Some school and youth program staff feel that given the host of problems that some family members may experience, they do not have the time, energy or expertise to contribute to school functions. Many schools are more interested in teaching “parenting” skills than in learning the insights that parents can contribute about their children.

♦ **Myth #6: “Involving Families Means Involving Mothers.”**

The definition of family in this report is broader than just biological parents and can include guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, or others who play significant roles in the lives of children and youth in a particular program. Special efforts should also be made to involve fathers. Organizations like the National

Fatherhood Initiative can be helpful in providing information on why fathers are so important to children and how fathers can be included in family involvement activities.

Finally, citing both educational research on family collaboration and family collaboration mandated by federal law, *No More Islands* challenges all school and youth programs to more fully, meaningfully and collaboratively involve families. Policymakers are also asked to increase research on the extent, type and efficacy of family involvement. Several recommendations also derive from strategies used by the programs. Specifically, *No More Islands* recommends the following:

*To increase positive youth outcomes, policymakers should:*

- Advocate for family involvement in those programs that do not currently involve families.
- Enhance the collaborative and asset-acknowledging nature of family involvement where it already exists.
- Encourage schools and youth programs to conduct assessments of family assets and needs and work collaboratively with families to address those needs most related to the achievement of young people and most desired by families.
- Fund research on the relationship between family involvement and youth outcomes: in particular, study the effectiveness of (1) collaborative involvement and (2) initiatives such as Community Schools and Beacons with multiple means of engaging families and multiple potential outcomes.
- Encourage families to increase their advocacy for meaningful and collaborative involvement in schools and youth programs, particularly when their children are in their adolescent years.
- Encourage family and community member involvement in district-, city- or state-wide advocacy and in creating groundswells for broader reforms.

- Support the use of technology to improve communications between family members and teachers, school administrators, other parents.

*To increase positive youth outcomes, school and youth program practitioners should:*

- Establish clear and consistent messages for families that they are welcome in schools and youth programs and about their responsibilities regarding their child's education. Work with families to establish appropriate tools and curricula to enhance family involvement strategies.
- Maintain open, two-way communications between schools/youth programs designed to establish and maintain positive relations.
- Diversify communication strategies, including the time and place of meetings and the means of communication (meetings, e-mail, home visits), assessing the relative benefits of the various forms of communication.
- Involve families closely with important phases of their child's education, from daily updates, to monthly report cards, to one-on-one conferences at critical transition points, like entering high school.
- Make family-liaison work a dedicated staff responsibility, not an add-on, over and above other central responsibilities. Also, ensure all staff members are knowledgeable about ways of enhancing family and community involvement, and using their assets to enhance program goals.
- Collaboratively assess the variety of assets that family members can offer to their children and to schools and youth programs to benefit all children involved. Share power with family members by allowing them to participate in program assessment, design, implementation, and even leadership positions.
- Conduct a well-designed and carefully implemented needs assessment to tailor programs to family needs and eliminate the risk of diverting funds to unnecessary and duplicative services or basing services on assumptions or stereotypical views of what families may need.
- If warranted to reach program goals, e.g. academic achievement goals, and if the budget allows, provide a range of services to family members that may increase the supports available to children and youth, ensure healthier home and family environments, and increase opportunities for co-learning experiences among children and families.
- Assess the purpose and value of home visits. If undertaken, home visits should have the goal of developing a partnership with families and of seeking mutually beneficial outcomes for the child/youth and the family. Unless undertaken with respect and sensitivity, visits used for evaluative purposes can be seen by families as intrusive and demeaning, particularly if some families are visited and others are not.
- Be respectful of appropriate family roles and work with families to make family and staff roles complementary and reinforcing, rather than adversarial.
- Ensure that family involvement in decision making is genuine and meaningful, and that family assets are recognized and put to use to maximize benefits to the youth and the program. It is important that a true partnership exists and that family members not become "acculturated" to protecting the school or program's interest rather than the participants' interests when conflicts arise.