

Engage families for anywhere, anytime learning



R&D

As we reimagine learning to keep pace with more exacting demands for education and citizenship, we must look to how we engage families, schools, and community organizations, especially those in lower-income situations.

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By Heather B. Weiss and M. Elena Lopez

A common and mistakenly held view is that learning happens only in schools. Consider that U.S. students spend only 6.6 hours at school on each school day, leaving them with ample waking time to explore their interests and enhance their knowledge and skills in out-of-school settings (NCES, 2009). These out-of-school settings are growing and changing so rapidly that communities, including virtual ones, are morphing into the new classroom. As society expects children and youth today to explore content-area topics in depth and to develop critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills, out-of-school spaces are becoming increasingly important to individual learning.

Libraries and museums are reinventing themselves into inviting hubs of youth-generated creativity. After-school programs are expanding their offerings beyond homework assistance to develop resources that draw youth, especially those in middle and high school, to pursue a wide variety of science, technology, and arts interests, civic engagement activities, and college preparatory experiences. Digital media appeal to youth because of the almost unlimited possibilities they offer for producing new forms of creative expression, for acting on social issues, and for connecting and collaborating with others. To remain in touch with their

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children's activities, parents are engaging in a variety of previously unexplored pursuits, such as making digital books and joining family-friendly hacker spaces — online community spaces where people interested in computers, technology, digital art, etc. meet and create new works out of existing products.

These shifts mean that our views of family engagement to promote children's learning and development have to keep pace with a changing environment. It is no longer appropriate or fruitful to focus family engagement solely on what happens in school; we must reimagine this concept within the many opportunities available for anywhere, anytime learning (Lopez & Caspe, 2014; Patton & Caspe, 2014).

have spent 6,000 more hours in learning activities outside school than students born into poverty (TASC, 2013).

Organizations serving youth in poor neighborhoods can play a unique role in brokering educational resources for their residents, ranging from field trips to free museum passes. For example, a study of child care centers in New York City found that through collaborative partnerships with a wide range of educational, cultural, and health organizations, the centers afforded low-income families access to materials, information, and services that enhanced parent roles in children's learning and promoted family well-being (Small, 2009).

A large body of research confirms the positive relationship between family engagement and student outcomes. The Harvard Family Research Project compiles an annual bibliography of peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and reports about family engagement. Since this compilation launched in 1999, numerous entries describe the benefits of family involvement for children's academic, social and emotional, and character development (Harvard Family Research Project, n.d.). Among key contributions parents make are emphasizing a "growth mindset" among children by encouraging them to focus on effort and to learn from failure (Dweck, 2006). Parents also nurture character traits such as grit and self-control, attributes associated with strong academic performance (Duckworth et al., 2007).

All families want their children to succeed, but learning opportunities in the home, the school, and the community are not equitable among families. Families with high incomes spend nearly seven times more money on out-of-school enrichment activities — ranging from music lessons to summer camps and travel — than families from low-income homes (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). This can be explained by fewer financial resources to pay for these activities and a dearth of stable programs in the community that families can access. The stresses of poverty and long and unpredictable work hours also make it hard for many families to actively participate in their children's learning and development. From even the earliest stages of their children's lives, families that suffer from economic adversity spend less time with their children in places like zoos, museums, and libraries than families that are economically stable. By the time they reach 6th grade, middle-class students

Policy makers, philanthropic leaders, and educators acknowledge the need to reimagine family engagement. A White House symposium in July 2014 endorsed a more equitable approach to family engagement based on family strengths as well as the shared responsibility assumed by families, schools, and communities for children's positive academic and social development across time and the many settings where children learn.

Family engagement in anywhere, anytime learning involves three principles:

- **Shared responsibility.** Families support learners in pursuing interests and developing competencies, while schools and communities offer families the knowledge, skills, trust, and encouragement to do so.
- **Connection.** Families, schools, and communities connect children to learning opportunities across different community settings, such as libraries and after-school programs.
- **Continuity.** Families, schools, and communities cocreate learning pathways that begin in the early years and continue through young adulthood.

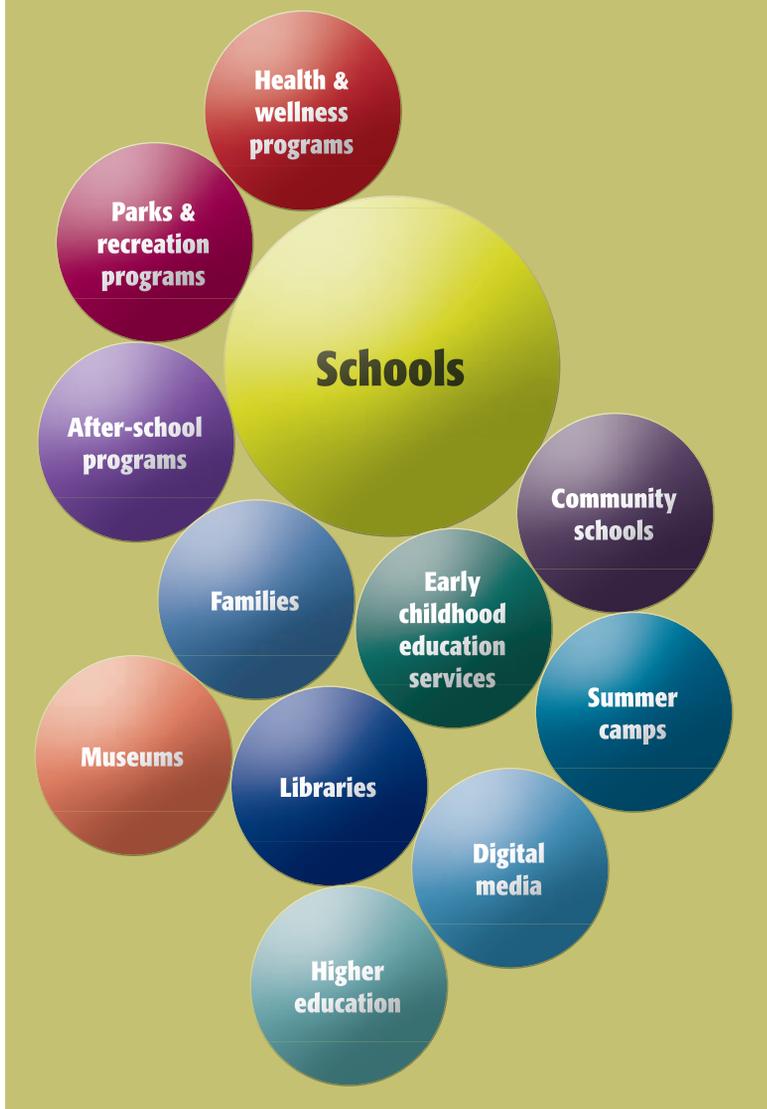
Shared responsibility

Children and youth thrive when they have opportunities to explore, learn, and cultivate their interests seamlessly in and out of school. These settings provide students support and flexibility to direct their interests and grow their competencies, often in experiential, hands-on ways through varied teaching and learning methods (Barron, 2006). And these settings often promote team-based learning approaches, giv-



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Learning happens in many spaces



ing learners opportunities to develop positive peer and adult relationships and to acquire lifelong character competencies.

Families and educators in schools and out-of-school settings share a responsibility for helping children uncover and expand their interests and for encouraging them to try new paths to learning. Shared responsibility means that families and educators form relationships and communicate information not only about program logistics but also about students' learning pursuits and about how each setting can build upon and support the other. For example, in museum environments, adult family members function as gatekeepers, providing the opportunities that enable museum educators to interact with children and introduce new learning goals. To establish a positive connection with families, museum educators have to recognize and build on families'

knowledge and interests in exhibits that are designed to facilitate family support of children's learning in respectful ways (Pattison & Dierking, 2012).

An example of this type of successful collaboration can be found at Makeshop® at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh. Makeshop is an exhibit designed for children between ages 8 and 12 to engage in hands-on learning with old and new technologies and cutting-edge media. The exhibit aims to provide innovative museum experiences that inspire joy, creativity, and curiosity. Children learn and discover how objects work, how they are created, and how they can be used and repurposed. The museum provides accessibility tools for children with developmental disabilities and discounts admission for low-income families.

Communities, including virtual ones, are morphing into the new classroom.

Makeshop encourages families and children to work side-by-side on projects — whether they're using electronic circuit boards, wooden toys, or other materials. When a family comes into Makeshop, they're greeted by a teaching artist who asks, "What do you want to make today?" The teaching artists then guide children and their families through the Makeshop space and help them navigate the tools and materials provided for their projects (Werner & Brahms, 2012). The co-learning at Makeshop builds parent-child relationships and helps families develop knowledge and skills that enable them to proactively support their children's learning and growth. To integrate the "making" experience in other learning spaces, the museum partners with schools, a library, and even a teacher preparation program at a local university.

Connections

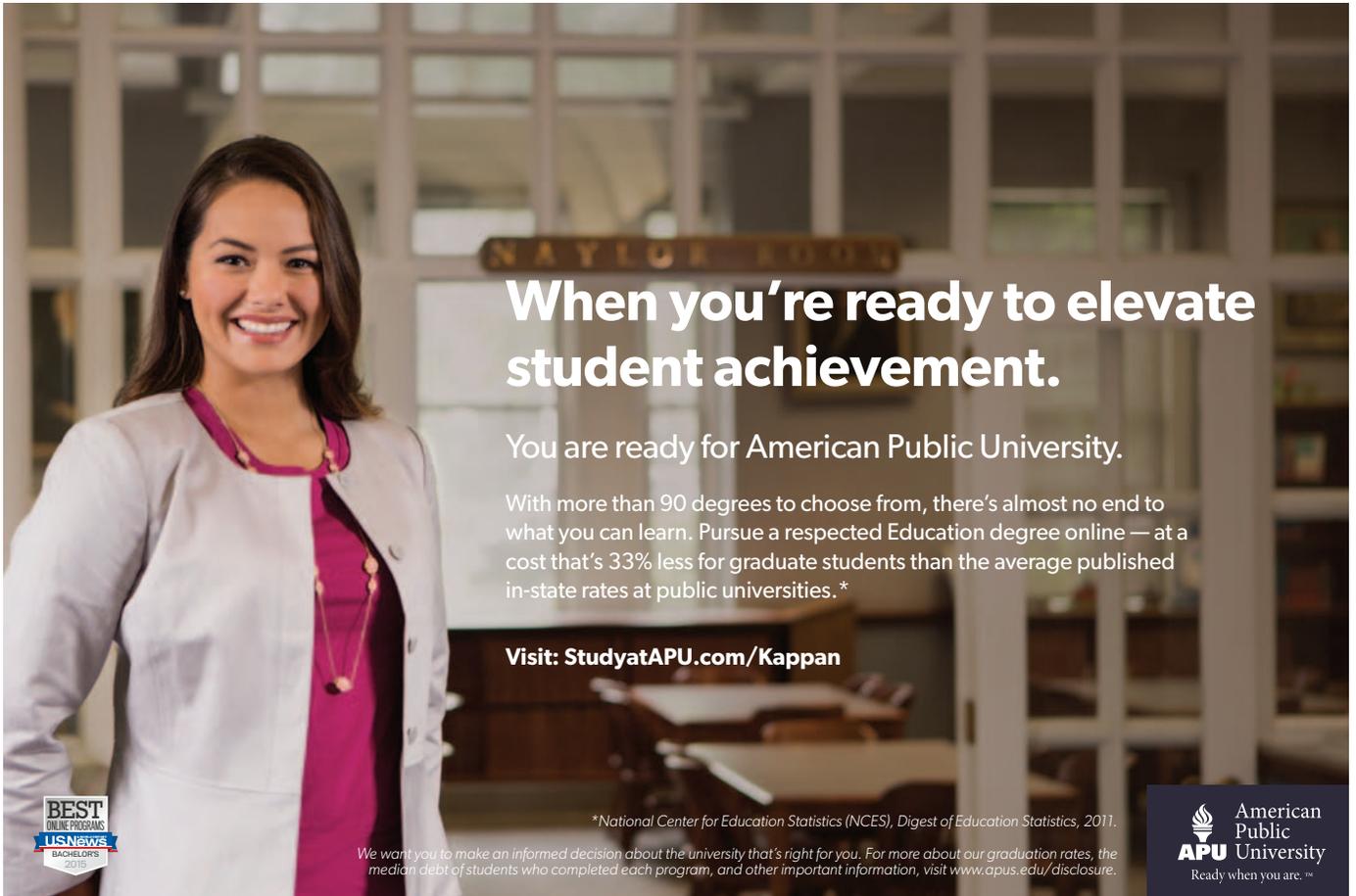
Children and youth thrive when they have choices and opportunities to participate in different learning settings and to test new ideas within them. Being able to relate to and apply ideas across school and various community spaces is valuable for learners, especially high school students, who become increasingly specialized in their talents and interests as they mature. This connection helps them broaden and deepen their learning. High-quality after-school and summer programs often organized as school-community collaborations, offer children and youth a space where they can discover, connect, and apply their interests. These programs also have proved to have a positive effect on student attendance, grades, work habits, and on reducing achievement gaps (Vandell 2013).

Parents play a key role in communicating to youth the value of participating in after-school programs and sustaining that participation. Youth are more likely to experience positive gains if they participate in after-school programs frequently during the week and over a number of years. Programs that are able to retain middle and high school students over time engage families in ways that communicate young people's accomplishments, encourage parents to support youth activities, and respect adolescent desire for autonomy (Deschenes et al., 2010). Supporting and retaining this participation within the community is an important mission of Greenwood Shalom, an after-school program in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. The program serves 43 students ages 5 to 16. During the 2012-13 school year, 40% of the students relied on child care vouchers, and 60% attended on full or partial scholarship. Although the program has the capacity to accept more students, it is a continuing struggle for parents and the program to find tuition support. Program participants benefit from individualized attention. The program recognizes the importance of a low staff-student ratio and provides one staff person for every five students. In addition to homework support, students at Greenwood Shalom are exposed to literacy and math les-

sons based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks, including the Common Core State Standards. The program enrolls students from various cultural backgrounds, including those of African-American, West Indian, Cape Verdean, and Latino descent. In order to enhance students' cultural sensitivity, the program offers a series of talks by community guest speakers from different cultural backgrounds on issues related to culture and immigration.

By the time they reach 6th grade, middle-class students have spent 6,000 more hours in learning activities outside school than students born into poverty.

The Greenwood Shalom after-school program approach is distinguished by its holistic approach to family engagement. It offers families opportunities to be involved in their children's development and well-being through parent empowerment seminars, which offer information about school district curriculum, support on how to advocate at school for



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*National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Digest of Education Statistics, 2011.

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children, and strategies on how to become more engaged in their children's education. For families who seek additional guidance, program staff is specially trained to attend school meetings if this assistance is desired. Staff members listen to and value parents' interests, and they conduct information sessions for family members who are exploring paths to college as well as learning how to register to vote.

Continued participation

Children and youth are more likely to maintain their interests over time and to expand into related pursuits when they're supported and guided by adults. Together, families, schools, and communities can create avenues for children and youth to explore their interests across grades and transition points. Depending on the student's age and interest, parents play different roles. Younger children need more support and structure, but as they mature, they begin to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Family engagement practices that are more direct, such as homework help, are common in the elementary years but decline over time; more effective practices for older youth come in the form of setting high expectations, talking about college and career, and encouraging participation in after-school and mentoring programs (Bouffard & Weiss, 2014).

Children and youth thrive when they have opportunities to explore, learn, and cultivate their interests seamlessly in and out of school.

Transition periods — such as between elementary and middle school — are an especially crucial time for sustaining family engagement. Family engagement drops off as early as the transition from preschool to kindergarten. Home academic support and exposure to learning opportunities outside the home — such as library visits and sports participation — from kindergarten through 1st grade are important because these activities are linked to children's academic outcomes (Powell et al., 2013). Schools, after-school programs, and community agencies can work together to welcome families, share relevant information, and promote two-way communication, all of which can motivate families to positively influence the trajectory of their children's education.

Taking on this important issue of successful transition is *Comienza en Casa* (It Starts at Home), a program in Milbridge, Maine, for migrant preschool and kindergarten children run by the nonprofit group *Mano y Mano* (Hand in Hand), with funding from the Maine Migrant Education Program. *Comienza*

en Casa was created in response to families' desire to see their children achieve educationally and their simultaneous struggles to better understand their own roles in U.S. schools. *Comienza en Casa* offers young children and their parents an assortment of learning activities that can take place in a variety of settings — indoors, outdoors, or in the digital world on an iPad in their home language. A school partnership facilitates a smooth transition from home-based learning to kindergarten. Similarly, a library partnership ensures that children have access to Spanish and bilingual books and that the library becomes a family gathering space.

At *Comienza en Casa*, families come together once a month, often at the elementary school, to discuss learning goals and activities for the proposed month-long curricular unit, to participate in hands-on learning experiences, and to share questions and stories. The program provides each participating family with an iPad at no cost that is preloaded with material related to the curricular unit. Materials include:

- E-books that families and children can read together;
- Educational game apps that facilitate play among children and families;
- Creativity apps that children can use to author their own stories;
- Ideas to inspire families to engage children in traditional off-line learning experiences; and
- Links to research-based information that parents can read to gain a stronger understanding of early literacy and learning.

Staff members support individualized learning goals through home visits, where they also gather valuable insights from parents that inform the next month's group session. The project also helps parents raise funds to buy Spanish-language books for the library's adult patrons, which also helps them become advocates for lifelong learning.

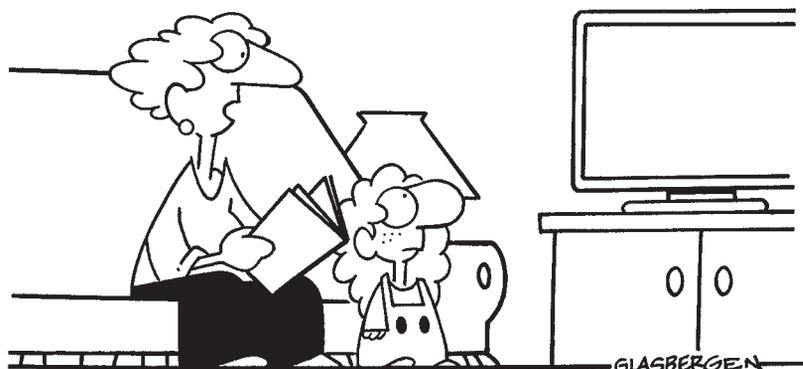
Reimagining family engagement

Schools are an important learning space, but they are connected with other settings that share the common goal of promoting student success — the home, early childhood and after-school programs, libraries and museums, faith-based institutions, and educational media. Through carefully planned partnerships across these settings, schools and community organizations can better engage families in an exchange of information and practices that will enable children, especially those living in distressed neighborhoods, to become successful learners from the earliest years. Through their connections with expanded learning opportunities, parents also broaden

their own networks of social support and gain access to a variety of resources that ultimately strengthen the home learning environment.

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