



EVENT BRIEF

ETS ADDRESSES ACHIEVEMENT GAPS AND THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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On Monday, October 18, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) held its 14th panel discussion in a series of symposia titled, “The Family: America’s Smallest School.” This event launched the release of a report that examines achievement gaps in education and assesses the current status and structure of U.S. families while exploring their educational role as the “smallest school.” Panelists discussed the federal programs, policies and efforts designed to strengthen families’ impact on early education and help close the achievement gap.

SPEAKERS

- Ida Lawrence (Moderator), Senior Vice President, Research and Development, ETS
- Jacqueline Jones, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning, U.S. Department of Education
- Anna Hinton, Director, Parental Options and Information, Office of Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education
- Shannon Rudisill, Associate Director, Child Care Bureau, Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Amanda Bryans, Director of the Educational Development and Partnership Division, Office of Head Start, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

SUMMARY

Ida Lawrence began the discussion by briefly summarizing the results of ETS’ report. She stated that “perhaps nowhere else do the public and private interact as intensely as they do in the K-12 classroom, for the classroom is where the most basic of public activities—public education—occurs.” In the report, ETS explores the role family plays to shape and influence a child’s education. Specific factors identified as affecting early learning include the parents’ own education; how much television children watch; and the amount of time parents spend reading to children.

Jaqueline Jones

Jacqueline Jones provided an overview of the Department of Education's (ED) positions on early childhood education. Jones discussed ED's Early Learning agenda and highlighted the accomplishments of the interagency collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Six interagency study groups have collaborated to research parent, family and community engagement. Jones described how "the study groups encourage family engagement in childhood development, and have collected data to discover what is effective for development and how to sustain those strategies." Jones further explained that ED's collaboration with HHS "stemmed from the ESEA Listening and Learning Tour." In her conclusion, she commended the work of Promise Neighborhoods as an innovative way to award collaborative efforts for family and community engagement, and said that "the Obama Administration remains very devoted to early education."

Anna Hinton

Anna Hinton provided concrete examples of where ED-developed programs aim to strengthen the role of families in education. The Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRC) Program is an example of dedicated funding supporting low-income families and providing early childhood education for parents. Hinton discussed the "Family Engagement Webinar" series that ED hosts, and explained how these webinars are widely disseminated and have "elevated family engagement." According to Hinton, however, the webinars "have not been used strategically to impact student achievement." The focus of ED's next webinar will be on teacher and family engagement and will also provide information about the Family, School, and Community Engagement Policy Forum, which is taking place on November 9 and will address questions from educational stakeholders and discuss the opportunities to engage low-performing schools.

Shannon Rudisill

Shannon Rudisill shared findings from her research on child care and family assistance, saying "the biggest impact on early education is where parents choose to send their child during child care years." Currently, child care practitioners are not provided with a standard training program that is founded in best practices, but HHS in collaboration with ED, is working with states to develop workforce systems for professional child caregivers, Rudisill explained. This concept was borne out of frequent observations of family child care providers counseling mothers on best practices. Part of Rudisill's role at HHS is to work with ED to develop a home visiting model that aims to "build out an assessment of child care practices." The goal of such action is to foster communication and disseminate information about what is most effective for caregivers.

Amanda Bryans

Amanda Bryans explained that Head Start "was founded on the idea of comprehensive services for children" and is not just about the individual child, but also about parental involvement. Parents are the decision makers for a child's development, she asserted. Presently, the 50,000 Head Start classrooms and over 20,000 Centers operate under extensive regulations. Parental involvement in the decision-making process is one of the

fine points regulated. Bryans emphasized the benefits of HHS's and ED's collaborative efforts in the sharing of research and data.

QUESTIONS

Responding to audience concerns about parent training in Head Start programs, Amanda Bryans explained the importance of parents' involvement in their child's time in Head Start because "the parents are directly involved in building and maintaining the programs."

CONCLUSION

Michael Nettles, Senior Vice President of ETS's Policy Evaluation and Research Center, concluded the discussion by stating that ETS "examines a lot of background information to learn from the various impacts on a child's achievement." Nettles recognized that, with a shared focus, ETS is a member of a larger body of similar interests and similar goals, but "there is a diversity of paths to close achievement gaps and produce developmentally sound children."

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