Family Engagement and Collective Impact Initiatives: A Literature Brief
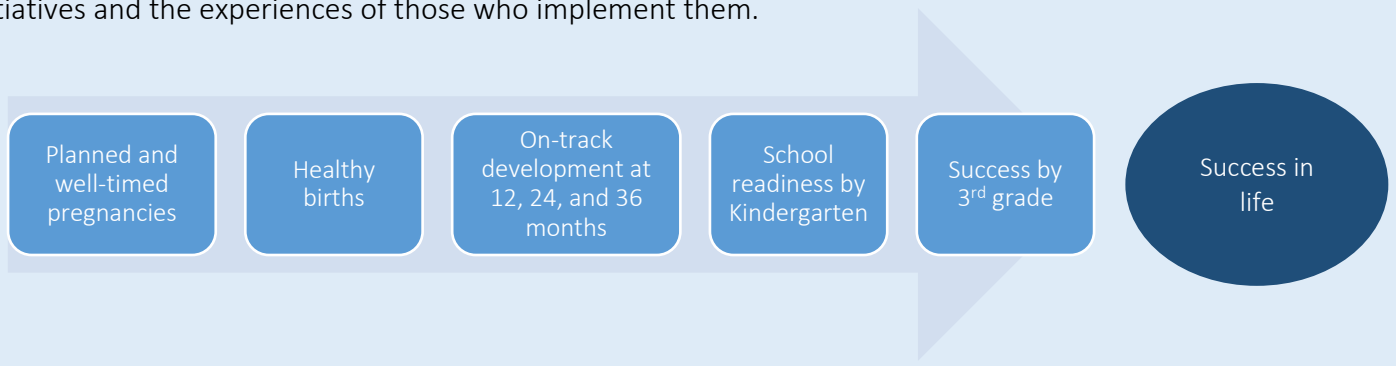
Todd M. Jensen, PhD, MSW and UNC Developmental Evaluation Team
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Background

As highlighted in a document submitted to Get Ready Guilford Initiative (GRGI) stakeholders in September 2019, bolstering family engagement and parent leadership may be critical for the successful attainment of initiative goals, namely *equitable population-level change in the form of children's healthy development and school readiness*. Connecting to the rich history of family engagement among service providers and organization leaders in Guilford County, this review is intended to briefly synthesize literature focused on family engagement, resulting in a general summary of (a) *its rationale* and (b) *best practices*. A core goal is to provide guidance for those who will oversee and execute efforts to engage families in the context of GRGI.

Importantly, the literature around family engagement is diverse in terms of setting, conceptualization, and purpose. For instance, rationale for and approaches to engaging families have been well documented across fields such as education, children's mental and behavioral health services, child welfare, and—most germane to GRGI—place-based collective impact initiatives (hereafter referred to as "collective impact initiatives"). Given the breadth of this literature, we frame this review as a brief and non-exhaustive overview of lessons learned about family engagement across relevant fields, placing emphasis on findings yielded from collective impact initiatives and the experiences of those who implement them.

| Planned and well-timed pregnancies | Healthy births | On-track development at 12, 24, and 36 months | School readiness by Kindergarten | Success by 3rd grade | Success in life |

Research Question

What are the rationale and best practices for family engagement in placed-based, collective impact initiatives?

Research Methods

- Approach: the literature review was informed by a *rapid review approach*, which is a time-efficient method for gathering and synthesizing literature on a specific topic.[1]
- Electronic Databases: PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, and Google Scholar
- Key Search Terms: family engagement, family voice, family involvement, family participation, family advocacy, family empowerment
- Inclusion Criteria: (a) articles focused on rationale and best practices for engaging families to promote positive outcomes in community change efforts, (b) relevant field of work (i.e., education, children's mental and behavioral health services, child welfare, collective impact initiatives); (c) published and unpublished or "grey" literature (e.g., doctoral dissertations, technical reports, white papers)

Defining Family Engagement

- For the purpose of this brief review, we define family engagement as a process of acknowledging community members as "context experts," whose knowledge and experiences meaningfully guide, prioritize, shape, and sustain community change efforts.[2-12]
- Types of family engagement fall along a continuum:[13]
  - *Inform:* to provide information
  - *Consult:* to obtain feedback
  - *Involve:* to work with to develop alternatives
  - *Collaborate:* to partner in each aspect of decision making
  - *Co-create:* to empower to make decisions.

Evidence for Family Engagement

- Family engagement has deep roots in the "community coalition building" tradition, which spans several decades and multiple scientific disciplines. In this context, scholars and professionals have argued compellingly that sustainable community change *requires* family engagement. Families are "context experts" who can (a) articulate the actual (versus perceived) challenges that contemporary life poses, (b) speak to the root causes of the very problems community programs and services aim to alleviate, and (c) generate innovative and transformative ideas about enacting lasting change in their communities.[10,14-31]
- Although research drawing direct links between family engagement and population level change in collective impact initiatives is relatively scarce due to research design challenges, research has linked family engagement to various intermediate outcomes, as well as a host of positive outcomes across various fields.
- Indeed, family engagement can result in collective impact initiatives that are optimally aligned with community needs and more likely to be embraced by community members.[14,30]
- Family engagement can also promote program and service retention, families' knowledge about health and well-being issues, public awareness of community growth opportunities, and families' self-efficacy.[5,33-35]

Implications for the Get Ready Guilford Initiative

Potential Return on Investment

The observed impacts of family engagement demonstrate alignment with GRGI outcome areas. Indeed, family engagement can yield levels of community buy-in and service or program retention needed to promote planned and well-timed pregnancies; healthy births; on-track development at 12, 24, and 36 months; school readiness at kindergarten; and success in third grade. In terms of GRGI phase 1 priorities, family engagement can serve to promote the expansion of access to proven programs, strengthen the backbone organization, and bolster evaluation for learning and impact by incorporating family voice.

Best Practices for Integrating Family Engagement

Organizational Approaches[i]
- A common first step in joining with community members to implement initiatives involves establishing goals, which inform optimal strategies for the ongoing engagement of community members, including

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[i] Organizational approaches refers to how an organization views family engagement, as well as the strategies for family engagement that an organization implements.

informational campaigns, regular community meetings, or formal community representation in governance, among others.[10] It is recommended that families be engaged at the level of "involved" or higher when establishing shared goals.[10,24,28]

- Once goals and intentions are established, initiative leaders can develop strategies focused on two specific dimensions: *amplifying the voice of community members* and *building capacity to integrate feedback from community members* (i.e., creating feedback loops).[10,28] The following approaches can be used to amplify the voice of community members: (a) determining which assets exist within a community and leveraging those assets; (b) facilitating leadership training for community members; (c) creating networks between grassroots community members; (d) investing broadly in community groups focused on a specific policy goal; and (e) identifying community issues rooted in people's shared aspirations and build public will for action.[10]
- Family engagement should be viewed as (a) a long-term commitment to relationship-building; (b) an effort warranting adequate resources to avoid treating engagement as a "one-off" event; (c) an often messy and unpredictable process; (d) requiring tenacity, persistence, and patience; and (e) more than board representation aiming to reflect community diversity, which alone is insufficient to capture the deep, rich, and wide-reaching experiences of community members.[14,19,35]
- Many have cautioned that collective impact initiatives will have limited impact when they are too "top-down" or "grasstops" in their approach—when those perceived as powerful organizational leaders in communities come together to create and implement a plan for change on behalf of the community.[14,31] Perhaps the most impactful approach is to bring together the grasstops and the grassroots, which is "what changes the conversation" productively in communities.[14] Leaders can feel pressured to fall back on old models of power, authority, and perceived expertise—turning inward, but efforts should be taken to resist these pressures and maintain an orientation of turning outward.[14]
- Practical barriers can obstruct family engagement and should be addressed. Common barriers include families' time restraints, limited access to affordable transportation, limited access to affordable childcare, uncertainty about who to contact with questions or concerns, and inflexible meeting schedules.[36]
- Initiative stakeholders may be able to capitalize on the use of technology to implement creative online, virtual, or technology-based methods to convene community members, establish feedback loops, and facilitate ongoing dialogue and collective decision-making.[14,37]

Interpersonal Dynamics[ii]
- Family engagement should prioritize building relationships marked by trust, empathy, respect, rapport, and a sense of belonging.[11,14,19,28, 35,38]
- Those who engage families should be skilled listeners and facilitate opportunities for families to share their stories, which may highlight a community's history, unique challenges, and strained relationships.[14]
- Interpersonal dynamics are bolstered when backbone organizations embody leadership voice and patterns of behavior that "live and breathe equity."[27]

Intrapersonal Dynamics[3]
- Families will determine quickly whether they are being engaged authentically; best practices for family engagement may have limited impact when implemented inauthentically. Thus, it is important for those who engage families to do so authentically.[14,27]

[ii] Interpersonal dynamics refer to the quality of relationships between individuals.
[3] Intrapersonal dynamics refer to an individual's way of being.

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