Excerpt from Making Change: Lessons from the Families Improving Education Initiative

Executive Summary

What are the key findings of the Families Improving Education Initiative?

Through the Families Improving Education (FIE) initiative, community-based organizations have strengthened their capacity to engage families and build collaborative relationships with school boards and educational leaders. These efforts are fostering more inclusive decision-making, improving school practices and policies, and building a multi-stakeholder movement to close the achievement gap.

The James Irvine Foundation launched the Families Improving Education (FIE) initiative in 2008 by funding eleven community-based organizations in California’s Central Valley and Inland Empire to support parent involvement in K-12 educational policymaking. Families In Schools, a Los Angeles-based advocacy organization was selected to serve as a technical assistance provider and grant-making intermediary. The FIE initiative is based on the premise that parent-engagement efforts can foster more responsive and appropriate school policies that enhance student success. This report, prepared by Harder+Company Community Research, highlights the insights and promising strategies of the FIE initiative, looking closely at three core components: increasing the involvement of parents in K-12 decision-making; influencing educational decisions, policies, and practices that lead to improved academic outcomes; and strengthening the capacity of community-based organizations to engage in educational advocacy. Key findings are below.

- Harnessing the Power of Parent-led Advocacy. FIE grantee organizations played a crucial role in engaging underrepresented communities in educational advocacy. Grantees were challenged to engage parents who had little or no previous civic engagement experience. This evaluation revealed that, despite a multitude of barriers, grantee organizations made significant strides engaging, training, and building the confidence of parents as partners and educational advocates. Most parents had no previous involvement in educational advocacy and often lacked the confidence to speak with classroom teachers, let alone decision makers. With a keen understanding of their local communities and a variety of engagement strategies, FIE grantees helped equip parents with the tools, knowledge and confidence to advocate and participate in decision-making. Furthermore, interviews with school board members revealed that parent-led advocacy was more likely to gain their attention and lead to change than advocacy efforts driven entirely by community-based organizations.
Cultivating Internal Champions. In 2011, grantees invited school board members and educational leaders to participate in the FIE quarterly learning institutes, resulting in some of the initiatives most ardent champions. Board members valued the opportunity to connect with their peers in other regions and discuss common challenges and best practices. They also benefitted from the training and capacity building activities, enhancing their ability to access the information, tools, and allies needed to advocate successfully for changes at the local level. As a result, FIE grantees and parents were able to gain increased access to local decision-makers, foster more inclusive decision-making practices, and promote improved policies at the local level.

Using Data to Strengthen Advocacy Efforts. Learning to interpret and use data proved to be a powerful way to build credibility, focus advocacy efforts, and inform decision-making at the school and district levels. Not only did grantees increase their ability to use data, they shared that knowledge with parents, community leaders, and internal champions. Armed with data and information about models and best practices, parents and grantee organizations gained respect among educational decision-makers as “informed and credible partners.”

Creating a Culture of Inquiry and Collaboration. FIE stakeholders overwhelmingly indicated that Families In Schools helped to facilitate and promote a culture of inquiry, continuous reflection, and collaboration within regions and across the initiative. Quarterly learning institutes became a critical venue to build skills and share best practices. Initially designed as a peer learning community for grantees, the institutes evolved to include local educational decision-makers and parent leaders, allowing for a more collaborative approach to permeate all levels of the FIE initiative. The institutes became a safe place for difficult conversations about inequities and to reflect on lessons learned. This is contributing to a shared understanding of the issues as well as greater credibility, transparency, and collaboration among parents, school board members, and district leaders.

Building Regional Networks. Building on the strength and momentum of its multicultural and multi-stakeholder approach, the FIE initiative has been cultivating regional collaboration to better focus and coordinate the advocacy efforts of multiple grantees in the same district. While grantees acknowledged the challenges of reconciling different approaches, styles, and agendas, the benefits of a regional approach are starting to bear fruit. In addition, events like Advocacy Day, which brought parents and organizations to speak with policymakers in Sacramento, have proved to be powerful opportunities to apply advocacy training and leadership skills. This coordinated and collaborative approach is gaining attention and contributing to more inclusive decision-making at both the regional and state level.

“School decision-makers need to understand that parent involvement leads to better student outcomes. Parent involvement is not something you can put off until you’ve addressed student outcomes. They go hand in hand.” - FIE Grantee
Building on What Works: Considerations for the Future

- **Engage high-level educational decision-makers:** FIE grantees made notable progress engaging school board members and administrators, but more work is needed to gain support from district Superintendents. FIE stakeholders recognize that without support from educational decision-makers, reforming the education system will be an uphill battle.

- **Expand and deepen parent engagement efforts:** While grantees made notable strides engaging “hard to reach” parents, they recognize the need to expand and deepen engagement strategies by thinking “outside the box” and trying new and innovative strategies to engage parents. In a recent learning institute, FIE stakeholders reflected on how to reach the other 90% of parents who remain disengaged and uninvolved in the educational system.

- **Continue to strengthen strategic capacity:** FIE stakeholders identified a number of capacity areas to strengthen as they move into the next phase of the initiative, including policy analysis, media advocacy, and strategies to ensure accountability and monitor policy implementation.

- **Leverage regional and state networks:** While the regional collaboratives are at various stages of development, stakeholders are building a solid foundation for a more coordinated approach at the district level. They are also looking for opportunities to leverage a growing state-level presence and link FIE advocacy efforts to other educational practices and initiatives, such as Linked Learning.

- **Continue to assess progress and promote continuous learning:** FIE stakeholders value opportunities to reflect on lessons and achievements, thus enhancing their capacity to respond to emerging opportunities and adapt their strategies. As the initiative matures, it should explore ways to systematically assess and discuss the initiative’s progress and use those findings to inform future strategy development and share lessons with the field.

About the Families Improving Education Initiative

The James Irvine Foundation launched the Families Improving Education (FIE) initiative in June 2008 by funding 11 community-based organizations in California’s Central Valley and Inland Empire to support parent involvement in K-12 educational policymaking. With Families In Schools, a Los Angeles-based advocacy organization, serving as a technical assistance and grant-making intermediary, the initiative seeks to:

- Strengthen the capacity of organizations in the Central Valley and Inland Empire to implement education advocacy initiatives;
- Engage and prepare parents to become involved in K-12 education decision-making; and
- Influence educational decisions, policies, and practices that ultimately translate into improved academic outcomes.

For additional information about this initiative, or to read a highlights piece or the full report, visit [irvine.org/FIE](http://irvine.org/FIE).