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BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

School-Community Partnerships for Education (SCOPE) Project
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Building Effective School, Family, and Community Partnerships to Support Children’s Literacy Development

Introduction

Every child needs an enabling environment that supports his or her learning, especially in the early years. Schools, homes, and the wider community all play important roles in a child’s social, emotional, and physical development – each can also contribute to supporting a child’s literacy development. Research shows that children’s interest in and enthusiasm for reading is highly influenced by their home environment¹ and that schools are more successful when supported by families and communities.² This document makes the case that schools alone cannot meet a child’s educational needs. It explores the evidence in support of school, family, and community collaboration, and highlights best practices for effectively engaging families and communities in supporting children’s learning and literacy acquisition both in and out of school.

The Challenge

Despite the impressive progress that has been made toward achieving universal primary education, for many children in both developed and developing countries, acquiring basic skills once in school continues to be an enormous challenge. For a multitude of reasons, there are too many children sitting in classrooms across the world not learning the foundational skills they need to advance academically or thrive in today’s global economy. According to the 2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report:

Between 2007 and mid-2014, more than 60 countries carried out one or more early grade reading assessments (EGRAs). By mid-2014, more than 20 countries had conducted early grade mathematics assessments (EGMAs). The results paint an alarming picture: many children spend two or three years in school without learning to read a single word, and many schools do not teach students the basics of arithmetic in their early years. EGRA/EGMA results have prompted governments and donors to rethink policies so that students achieve minimum learning standards in reading and mathematics.

In Rwanda, though substantial educational gains have been achieved over the last 20 years, and significant government and donor investment has been poured into quality improvement initiatives, many primary school students are still struggling to master basic literacy and math skills. A 2015 FARS study found that over 18% of grade 3 students could not read one word of a grade-level Kinyarwanda

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, *Creating and Sustaining Literate Environments*, (Bangkok, Thailand, 2011), 31-32.; Snow & Tabors, 1996.

² Epstein, J. L., et al. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*, second edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

text, only 13% could read with grade-level fluency (33 words per minute), and over 50% could not answer even half of the comprehension questions relating to the passage they just read.³

This mismatch between expectations and actual learning achievement in over-crowded, under-resourced early grades across the world sheds light on the fact that *schools alone are not equipped to meet all of children's educational needs*, especially around early literacy development.

A 2008 cross-national examination of student learning opportunity found that globally, students in grades 1-3 benefit from an average of only 756 hours (or about 2 hours per day) per year of instructional time.⁴ In Rwanda, a 2016 study showed that primary school students spend only about 14% of their lives (an annual average of less than four hours per day) actually "learning" in school.⁵ Given the relatively nominal time that students spend in school, it is clear that *interventions focused only on improving formal, school-based factors are missing significant opportunities to infuse meaningful learning into children's lives outside of the classroom*. With scarce resources, governments and international agencies are increasingly interested in finding alternative approaches to ensuring children master foundational literacy skills on time, so that they can succeed in school and beyond.

It Takes a Village to Raise a Reader: The Case for Engaging Families and Communities in Learning and Literacy

International evidence makes a compelling case that schools alone cannot be responsible for the education of children – this is the shared responsibility of schools, families, and communities. After all, parents, family members, neighbors and friends are a child's first teachers, and will remain in a child's life long after formal schooling ends. And given the time that children actually spend in school, interactions with family and community members are likely to have more regular impact on a child's learning and development than school-based interactions. For years, research has shown that children who benefit from engaged parents and supportive community environments are much more likely to succeed academically than those who do not.⁶ Specifically, these students tend to have greater academic outcomes, higher completion rates, better attendance, and better attitudes towards school.⁷ In fact, parent engagement is one of only a handful of interventions shown to provide positive and long-term effects on language and literacy

Throughout the literature, family, school, and community partnerships are often called by different names. In general, however, these refer to collaborative working relationships between schools and their surrounding communities - including parents, families, community leaders, businesses and community organizations – to support the learning and development of children. Committed, healthy school-community partnerships leverage the strengths of individual stakeholders to collectively enhance the school environment and student outcomes.

³ USAID Literacy, Language, and Learning Initiative (L3). National fluency assessment of Rwandan Schools: Midline Report. 2016.

⁴ Gillies, John, and Jessica Jester Quijada. "Opportunity to Learn: A High Impact Strategy for Improving Educational Outcomes in Developing Countries. Working Paper." *Academy for Educational Development* (2008).

⁵ Friedlander, E. & Goldenberg, G. (eds.). (2016). *Literacy Boost in Rwanda: Impact Evaluation of a 2-year Randomized Control Trial*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University

⁶ Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

⁷ Jeynes, W.H. (2003). A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement. *Education & Urban Society*, 35(2), 202-218.

development.⁸ This evidence is consistently true for both primary and secondary school students, regardless of their parents' education level, their family's socio-economic status, or where they live.⁹

Even though the evidence is clear, effective collaboration takes understanding from all stakeholders, time, and creativity. While most would recognize that learning at home and within the community also contributes to school success, and that student success benefits all families and community members, parents are busy, resources are few, and community awareness of *how* to support schools and student learning is often limited.

Barriers to Effective Collaboration

While there is a large body of evidence around effective parent and community involvement in education, much of it comes from the West, as well as South Asia and South America; there is even more limited research on *how* parent and community collaboration with schools actually addresses major educational challenges, and with *what effectiveness*.¹⁰ The large extent of literature from the global South has focused mostly on school management and governance as it relates to decentralization, and in Africa specifically, the literature emphasizes "parental roles in financing education and participation in school-level decision-making as opposed to parental involvement with their own children's learning."¹¹

We do know, however, that many barriers to effective collaboration stem from lack of understanding around the impact parents and communities can have when they truly engage with children in ways that support their learning and development. Additionally, time to support school-based activities or attend community reading events, for instance, often have huge opportunity costs for parents who live in areas of high poverty. Historically, expectations around family and community support for learning have focused mainly on paying school fees, buying uniforms and materials, or participating in / contributing resources and labor to school building campaigns;¹² engagement has been relegated to token involvement that does little to build understanding, trust, or substantial two-way collaboration. A 2007 study of Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe found that "core education decisions are hardly ever decentralized in a way that encourages genuine local community participation in decision-making."¹³

Between 2012 and 2014, Concern Worldwide and Save the Children commissioned three studies to better understand family and community attitudes and barriers around literacy development in Rwanda. This research sheds light on the particular importance of family attitudes about reading, shared responsibility for student success, and opportunities for promoting learning and reading outside of school. Evidence from these three studies suggests that many parents still believe that a child's education is largely the responsibility of schools, and feel ill-equipped to support their child's literacy development at home.¹⁴ Rwandan teachers report that many parents do not have the time or resources

⁸ Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Kupzyk, K. A., Edwards, C. P., & Marvin, C. A., (2011). A randomized trial examining the effects of parent engagement on early language and literacy: The getting ready intervention. *Journal of School Psychology*, 49, 361-383

⁹ Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

¹⁰ Dunne, M., Akyeampong, K and S Humphreys (2007). *School Processes, Local Governance and Community Participation: Understanding Access*. CREATE, Research Monograph, No.6 London: University of London. <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/1836/1/PTA6.pdf>

¹¹ http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/ilops_parents_final.pdf

¹² *Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.* Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board. (2012).

¹³ Dunne, M., Akyeampong, K and S Humphreys (2007). *School Processes, Local Governance and Community Participation: Understanding Access*. CREATE, Research Monograph, No.6 London: University of London. <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/1836/1/PTA6.pdf>

¹⁴ *Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.* Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board. (2012).

to support their children’s efforts to learn to read,¹⁵ that they do not feel supported by parents in their efforts to teach reading,¹⁶ and that many parents do not regularly meet with teachers to discuss children’s progress.¹⁷ While these challenges are not surprising, they are sobering. There is clearly a need to develop and foster appropriate, effective linkages between students, their families, their schools, and their communities that support learning and literacy achievement of all students.

What is Working

This section outlines strategies for engaging families and communities in promoting and supporting learning and literacy development, based on international literature and best practices found throughout Rwanda. There is no silver-bullet approach for fostering impactful partnerships or creating a culture of reading within families and communities that have historically given this responsibility largely to schools. However, evidence suggests that it is possible - with concerted efforts - to create enabling environments in the home, school, and community that encourage and support a love of reading, while building awareness and understanding that opportunities for reading are valuable and more than just school-bound activities.

Joyce Epstein has been studying and writing about school-family-community partnerships for over thirty years. Over time, she has developed and refined a framework for successfully involving parents and community members in schools. Her model emphasizes six key methods that schools can use to increase and improve parental involvement. While this framework was developed in and around American schools, these principles, or some variation of them, can often be applied in most schools with a bit of contextualization.

Epstein’s Model for Parental Involvement

- **Parenting:** Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning. Assist schools in understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
- **Communicating:** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create effective, reliable two-way communication channels between school and home.
- **Volunteering:** Improve recruitment and training to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school. Provide meaningful work and flexible scheduling.
- **Learning at Home:** Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities.
- **Decision Making:** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and other organizations.
- **Collaborating with the Community:** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities.

Source: National Network of Partnership Schools

¹⁵ Literacy Boost: Baseline Study for the Community Component. Save the Children Rwanda. (2014).

¹⁶ Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.” Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board. (2012).

¹⁷ Literacy Boost: Baseline Study for the Community Component. Save the Children Rwanda. (2014).

Engaging Families and the Importance of the Home-literacy Environment

“Availability of literacy materials will not foster literacy if parents don’t encourage their children to read. I know a rich family that have sufficient reading materials but do not encourage children to read... it is not the availability of materials but rather, encouraging children to use them.” – School teacher in Gicumbi District, Rwanda. 2013.²⁴

The term home-literacy environment refers to not only the availability of books in a home, but more importantly, the attitudes and practices around reading that are present in the home and that a child is exposed to regularly from birth. Families that create rich home-literacy environments create and engage in opportunities that support the development of children’s reading skills, such as reading together, telling stories, creating space and time for reading and learning, singing, engaging children in conversation, helping with homework or discussing what is being learned in school. A review of the literature around family engagement found that “the strongest support for learning occurs at home through positive parenting styles, nightly reading, homework policies, and high expectations.”¹⁹ Children whose parents have high expectations around education, tend to perform better academically.²⁰ Parental attitudes towards education and reading are dominant influences of their children’s attitudes towards the same.²¹ Additionally, pre-school aged children with richer home-literacy environments tend to have better reading knowledge and skills by the time they reach kindergarten.²² A 2013 cross-national analysis of Save the Children’s Literacy Boost program found that a child’s home-literacy environment had more impact on reading skills than their gender or level of poverty.²³

Often however, parents and families are not aware of the influence they can have or the support that is required to foster strong reading skills in their children. Countless programs around the world seek to build this understanding, in an effort to alter attitudes and behaviors about the importance of reading. Recent studies from Rwanda suggest that while deficits do exist, there are many positive examples of parents and families who value reading, have high expectations for their children’s education, and create homes that stimulate reading and literacy skills development, despite their lack of resources and often their own literacy levels. Capitalizing on these opportunities, below are some promising practices for improving family support for literacy and creating a rich home literacy environment.

¹⁸ Friedlander, E. & Goldenberg, G. (eds.). (2016). *Literacy Boost in Rwanda: Impact Evaluation of a 2-year Randomized Control Trial*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University

¹⁹ Epstein, J. et al., 1997; Dornbusch, S. et al., 1987; Dauber, S., 1993; Comer, J. & Haynes, N.M., 1992; Zellman, G., 1998. – as cited in Davis, Deborah: *Supporting Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in your School*; Northwest Regional Education Library (2000).

²⁰ Froiland, J., Peterson, A., & Davison, M. (2013). The long-term effects of early parent involvement and parent expectation in the USA. *School Psychology International*, 34(1), 33-50

²¹ Timkey, Stacey, "The Influence of Parent Attitudes and Involvement on Children’s Literacy Achievement" (2015). Education and Human Development Master’s Theses.

²² Nord, C. W., Lennon, J., Liu, B., & Chandler, K. (2000). *Home literacy activities and signs of children’s emerging literacy, 1993 and 1999* [NCES Publication 2000-026]. Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

²³ Dowd, A. J., Friedlander, E., Guajardo, J., Mann, N., & Pisani, (2013). *Literacy boost: Cross country analysis results*. Washington, D.C.: Save the Children.

²⁴ Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.” Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board. (2012).

- **Build shared awareness and understanding around family support for reading:** By far, the most recurrent theme in the literature and among education stakeholders across Rwanda is that parents and families are not fully aware of their role in building the literacy skills of their children, or that home environments and parental practices do not promote a culture of reading out of school. Research shows, however, that if parents understand the importance of their support and are given the tools to provide it, they are more likely to initiate and participate in literacy development activities with their children.²⁶ We can build on the fact that Rwandan parents highly value reading skills by helping them to understand how children learn to read and how families can support these efforts at home both in the early years, and once children begin school.

“Positive attitudes and guidance of parents and the availability of reading materials at home are the most important factors for motivating lifelong reading habits in children and neo-literate youth and adults.”²⁵

Umuhuza, a community based organization that works in three districts in Rwanda, provides comprehensive family education to parents and caregivers with the goal of teaching techniques for supporting early literacy development in homes. Umuhuza begins every new parent-education cohort with three “Child I Care” sessions. These sessions focus on the responsibilities of parents to their children, the science behind brain development, and how to support healthy emotional development. These sessions often open parents’ eyes to the importance of their role in setting a strong foundation for their children’s learning development at home. These introductory sessions are then followed by focused training on how children learn to read and how parents can support early literacy when children are not at school. Umuhuza staff reports that there is often a significant difference in parents’ attitude around reading and motivation to support their children’s learning and literacy development after they understand their roles and responsibilities, and the impact they can have, even as illiterate parents, on their child’s future learning success.

- **Teach parents how to support their children’s reading at home:** Once parents are aware of the impact they can have on their child’s reading achievement, they are usually enthusiastic to learn how they can do more.

As a part of their Literacy Boost program, Save the Children holds Reading Awareness Workshops that help families understand the importance of a rich home literacy environment. Parents learn how to read with their children, how to create ‘reading corners’ in their homes, why it is important to give their children time to read, and how to create locally made books and other reading materials that can turn their homes and communities into print-rich environments that stimulate children, foster reading opportunities and promote parent-child conversations. In some communities, parents have even opened up their home reading corners to neighborhood children who might not otherwise have exposure to these resources. Parents and teachers are seeing improvement in student reading skills and enjoyment as a result of parents’ attendance at Reading Awareness Workshops.

- **Meet parents where they are.** Parents and families are busy - but that does not mean that they do not care about their child’s education or literacy development. Often, the decision to attend a parent meeting or school event is complex, and can mean substantial opportunity costs or loss of work

²⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, *Creating and Sustaining Literate Environments*, (Bangkok, Thailand, 2011).

²⁶ Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (eds.) (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press

opportunities. Schools across the world are finding creative ways to engage parents at times that are more convenient for them to ensure as many can participate in school activities as possible. As schools in Rwanda struggle for parent attendance at meetings and family involvement in school-related activities, it is helpful to step back and try to understand the constraints that parents are often facing.

In Gicumbi, many parents work full time and often cannot attend parent-education sessions during “normal” hours. While Umuhuza works with parenting groups to set the days, times, and frequency of meetings, sometimes participation is still poor. So Umuhuza decided to work through other, existing community structures to reach those parents who never seem to be able to participate. The community-based organization engaged local churches and tea plantation cooperatives. They trained representatives of these groups on the parenting education content and supported them to carry out training sessions during church events or over the course of the normal work day. Working parents now have the opportunity to benefit from parenting education sessions while they are still able to work and support their families. An added benefit to this approach is that it promotes sustainability by working through embedded community structures that will remain long after Umuhuza moves to new implementation areas.

- **Create opportunities for parents and families to read with children:** “Family literacy” or “integrational literacy” is the idea that children and parents or other adults learn together through reading together. Family literacy recognizes that parents and older family members are critical to a child’s academic success, and therefore promotes parent involvement in their children’s education. Evaluations of family literacy programs and approaches have shown not only improved literacy skills of both parents and children, but also other positive effects, including improved self-confidence of parents, enhanced reading culture within communities, and improvements in familial relationships.²⁷

In Bangladesh, Beyond Access is supporting the establishment and improvement of libraries in rural communities. These child-friendly spaces offer opportunities for parents and children to access books and read together outside of school. Parents often visit libraries in the evenings to read along with children or participate in library events.²⁸ And in Uganda, the Kitengesa Community Library Project was started by local mothers who wanted improve their own literacy skills and be able to support their children in school. The project brought parents and children together for reading activities throughout the year. At the beginning of the project, many adult participants were poor readers and did not spend much time reading for enjoyment; many of them were also not confident in helping their children with school work. However, at the project’s conclusion, families who participated reported that their perspectives had changed; they now saw that coming to the library with their children was very important, that regularly reading to them was a very beneficial activity, and that reading aloud to their children was very important.²⁹

Family-School Collaboration

For children in primary grades, having a positive school-home relationship that supports and provides continuity in reading development is critical. In fact, research has shown that the relationship between

²⁷ <http://literacy.kent.edu/familyliteracy/whatisit.html>

²⁸ <http://beyondaccess.net/2016/04/04/how-libraries-in-bangladesh-are-creating-a-culture-of-reading-beyond-the-classroom/>

²⁹ Parry, K. et al. ‘Working with parents to promote children’s literacy: a family literacy project in Uganda.’ *Multilingual Education*, 2014, V4, No 1.

school and home has more influence on a child's ability to read than the quality of his or her teacher.³⁰ Home-school collaboration involves families and schools developing relationships as collaborative partners, working together to support the educational needs of all students. In this model, families, teachers, and school staff actively working together to develop shared goals and plans that enhance the academic outcomes and development of children.

Families place huge amounts of trust, as well as ever-increasing expectations on schools and teachers to educate their children. But while teaching and learning is often thought of as the responsibility of the school – especially in many African contexts - it is essential that schools also recognize the crucial role that families play in building a child's knowledge once the school day ends. This is why *it is so critical for families and schools to work together in true partnership* - to create positive linkages across a child's life between home and at school. We must begin blurring the lines between school and family, and **rethinking traditional roles of each** so that students feel supported and encouraged in their learning in a more holistic way.³¹

Years of data reveal that effective schools have high levels of parental involvement. Parents can be a rich source of information and expertise for schools. In a national study of American schools with high populations of low-income students, those students whose teachers had frequent contact with their parents - including in-person meetings, home visits, and regular communication - had reading and math scores 40-50% higher than students whose parents and teachers did not have the same positive relationship.³² The influence of family and their relationship with the school (both positive and negative) can have a major impact on student learning. Family involvement in schools is therefore central to high quality education and should be a core commitment of every school.

But developing this type of family-school partnership is not easy in places like Rwanda. As mentioned above, "traditional" family involvement in school life such as volunteering in a classroom, attending school events, participating in fundraising efforts, and even reviewing homework often requires considerable time and opportunity cost on the part of many Rwandan parents. For teachers and school leadership, fostering family-school partnerships can involve a substantial amount of dedication, time, planning, and resources on top of already overburdened workloads. Ultimately, poverty (and its effects across schools and families) presents unique barriers to traditional forms of parental involvement in schools. However, research tells us that *the impact of efforts to increase family involvement in a child's educational life can be significant*. Families that know their child's teachers, understand the education system, and are in-tune with the difficulties that schools face can act as invaluable allies and sources of support in resource-stretched environments. Schools that engage families in their children's learning and families that support teachers and administrators are doing more than just building relationships – they nurturing successful students.

*"Experts agree that the success of any family engagement program is premised on a bond of teamwork and trust between schools and the families they serve. As educators and scholars become aware of the importance of out-of-class learning, they look to parents as partners in students' education."*³³

³⁰ Weigel, D. J., Martin, S. S., and Bennett, K. K. (2005). 'Contributions of the home literacy environment to preschool-aged children's emerging literacy and language skills'. *Early Child Development and Care*, 176, 357-378.

³¹ Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

³² Westmoreland, Helen. *Family Engagement that Drives Student Achievement*. Broad Academy, 2011.

³³ Effective Community Engagement Strategies. Hannover Research. 2014. <http://www.ctschoolchange.org/wp-content/uploads/Hanover-Effective-Family-and-Community-Engagement-Strategies-LEAD-Connecticut.pdf>

In Rwanda, studies show that there are a number of challenges³⁴that exist between families and schools that undoubtedly lead to less support in general and lower reading achievement of children, including:

- Teachers do not feel supported by parents in their efforts to teach reading.
- Most parents do not know how to support teachers in their efforts to teach reading.
- The role of parents in supporting reading is not clear.
- Many parents do not meet with teachers to discuss children’s progress.

But while challenges of time, understanding, and resources do exist, there is also evidence of great desire for improvement on the side of both schools and families.³⁵ Leveraging this willingness and drawing on experiences in Rwanda and abroad, below are some proven examples of how families and schools can effectively work together to support all children to learn.

- **Establish mechanisms for cultivating and fostering relationships between schools and families, and among families themselves.** Various research studies have found that lack of positive relationships among school staff and families can have negative effects on children’s learning outcomes. But the opposite is also true; when families and school staff know each other and have personal, respectful relationships, students tend to have more academic success.³⁶ These relationships and the regular participation of parents have been found to blur the lines of “responsibility” for learning, and reduce potential blaming of teachers for student failures.³⁷ When parents are asked by schools to support their students, they develop confidence in their ability to help their children succeed academically, have positive experiences with teachers and school leadership, increase their understanding of the school’s needs, and experience improved communication with their children.³⁸ Researchers also found that “educators experience greater job satisfaction, higher evaluation ratings from the parents and administrators and more positive associations with their families” when they collaborate with parents.³⁹ Finally, finding ways to facilitate relationships among parents may actually lead to increased participation of families and increased impact of a school’s family engagement strategy. By creating a social network and community feeling around school priorities, parents interest and enjoyment in attending school events may increase. This network also may help to increase collaboration and communication among families around student learning, as well as ownership and accountability for attendance and participation in school priorities.
- **Establish and support community libraries.**⁴⁰ Beyond Access Bangladesh is revamping the country’s existing libraries to create spaces where children, families, and community members can access reading materials in a safe space, and engage in opportunities and programs that promote reading for enjoyment. Each library receives a small set of materials and four tablets to create a children’s space in the library. Over one week, Beyond Access trains community librarians to use the materials and tablets and to provide complementary literacy services for children. Local children visit the library

³⁴ Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.” Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board. (2012).

³⁵ Ruterana, P. C. (2011). Exploring home literacy practices among Rwandan families. *International Journal of Research in Education*, 3 (1), 1-11.

³⁶ Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

³⁷ Florez, A. 2011. Active schools: Our convictions for improving the quality of education. Washington D.C.: FHI 360.

³⁸ Nyatuka, B. Assessment of the effectiveness of family-school-community partnerships in Kenya’s child friendly schools. University of South Africa (2015).

³⁹ Nyatuka, B. Assessment of the effectiveness of family-school-community partnerships in Kenya’s child friendly schools. University of South Africa (2015).

⁴⁰ <http://beyondaccess.net/2016/04/04/how-libraries-in-bangladesh-are-creating-a-culture-of-reading-beyond-the-classroom/>

and often gather in groups to read books, play games, or use the tablets. The community libraries project is not only increasing access to books and other digital educational materials, but it is also filling a “content gap” by providing age-appropriate, local language story books and reading games that children and families can enjoy together and experience a love of reading. These libraries offer regular reading activities and a chance to practice skills outside the classroom.

In the communities where Beyond Access is working, teachers have noticed that children who regularly visit the library have become more fluent readers, and are now more eager to learn in class. One head teacher noted, “Earlier, students didn’t have anything to do after school here. Now they come to the library to read and use the tablets. So they are spending quality time in reading, which has improved their knowledge and reading comprehension.”

- **Link family involvement to specific learning priorities.** Being able to engage families to support specific learning goals is essential for creating true fruitful partnerships between homes and schools. Experts agree that the most effective forms of parental engagement are those that directly relate to what students are learning in school.⁴¹ And research has found that asking parents to engage in practices at home that logically support and link to what their children are learning in the classroom and specific learning outcomes are more likely to have positive effects on achievement.⁴²

In Rwanda, schools could solicit parents to better understand their needs and interests. From this informal needs assessment, schools could then hold a series of mini-workshops or discussions at family-friendly times around aspects of the curriculum that families may be interested in learning more about. For instance, how children learn to read, building vocabulary and number awareness, positive discipline techniques, how to build and support math skills at home, or how the new competency-based curriculum will likely impact their child’s learning. At the beginning of each term, subject teachers or grade teachers could host a “back to school” day, in which families are invited to learn about learning aims and standards for the new terms, or to simply meet their child’s teacher. Schools could hold family meetings once a term to discuss students’ test results and the techniques the school and families can use to improve scores the following term. All of these activities acknowledge that both families and schools are dedicated to student success and can each play an active role in achieving it when they work together in meaningful partnership.

- **Celebrating children’s achievements with parents.**⁴³ In northern Ghana, one head teacher realized that the parents in his school community had little understanding of what their children were actually learning in their classrooms. To help them better understand, he organized one half-day each term to celebrate students’ achievements in the presence of their parents. During these celebration days, all students were given then opportunity to take part in demonstrating their achievement; young children recited the alphabet, sang songs, or used drama to convey key health and safety messages they had learned in school, while older students read stories and poems they had written. At these celebration events, the head teacher not only recognized student achievement, he also used the opportunity to highlight key messages about the school and inform parents about expectations and upcoming events. Celebration days were highly anticipated and well attended by parents, teachers,

⁴¹ Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

⁴² Simon, B. (2000). Predictors of high school and family partnerships and the influence of partnerships on student success. Doctoral dissertation, Johns Hopkins University.

⁴³ http://www.unicef.org/education/files/CFSManual_Ch04_052009.pdf

and community members. As a result of these events, discipline improved, the PTA grew, and parents - many of whom had never been to school themselves - discovered what their children were learning, the value of their education, and how they could support them to do better.

- **Effective, positive, two-way communication is critical.** Numerous research studies have shown that children are more successful in school when their parents and teachers communicate well and work together effectively.⁴⁴ Other studies have found that “teachers’ invitations to parents to become involved in education are particularly influential to the students’ educational success.”⁴⁵ Effective communication leads to understanding, which is the foundation for any successful partnership or relationship. Communication between families and schools must be viewed as a dynamic process—two-way and mutually beneficial. More often than not, however, this relationship is adversarial; families feel that they are only contacted by the school when there is a problem or when their child has misbehaved. And teachers only seem to hear from parents when they are upset about their child’s performance – often to blame the teacher or school.⁴⁶ If this is the only communication that passes between parents and teachers, there is little chance for mutual respect and true partnership to support learning. In Rwanda, the perception of school-family relationships is similar.⁴⁷

However, there are many examples of effective communication strategies that demonstrate mutual respect, and facilitate meaningful collaboration among schools and families:

- Teachers calling parents to communicate student success or progress, rather than just failures or challenges⁴⁸
 - Parents contacting teachers to give a word of thanks or encouragement or calling to check on their child’s progress in a non-threatening way
 - Teachers visiting students’ homes and parents visiting classrooms to learn and understand the challenges and opportunities facing each other
 - Schools soliciting family opinions regarding the best time to hold events and meetings, as well as topics of interest for parent-learning, to ensure optimal participation
 - Schools giving parents enough notice to ensure participation at important school events
 - Parents informing a teacher if their child sick or will be absent from school
 - Teachers invite parents to school to observe classes or to discuss student progress on an “open invitation” basis
 - Allow parents to contribute advice and initiate solutions to school and classroom challenges.
- **Initiate teacher-support activities to build trust between families and schools.** Because teachers often have thankless, overwhelming jobs - especially in contexts where children are many and resources are few, they can easily become discouraged. However, when parents reach out to teachers, it matters. When families value, prioritize, and try to meet the needs of teachers, teachers feel encouraged and supported, which can go a long way when pay is low and demands are high.

⁴⁴ Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships. 2007. Henderson, Anne. T. Mapp, K., Johnson, J. and Davies, D. New Press.

⁴⁵ Green, C. L. Walker, J. M. T., Hoover-Dempsey, K. V. & Sandler, M. H. 2007. Parents’ motivations for involvement in children’s education: An empirical test of a theoretical model of parental involvement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(3):532-544

⁴⁶ MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (2004-2005). <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED488837.pdf>

⁴⁷ Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.” *Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board.* (2012).

⁴⁸ Obeidat, O. M. & Al-Hassan, S. M. 2009. School-parent-community partnerships: The experience of teachers who received the Queen Rania Award for Excellence in Education in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. *The School Community Journal*, 19(1):119-136

The Wellspring Foundation for Education works with families, communities, and leaders in Gasabo District in Rwanda through its implementation of the School Development Program. This holistic program seeks to improve the quality of education by working to empower and support individual community stakeholders within their various roles to achieve impact. A key area of the School Development Program focuses on empowering parents to ensure that schools are supported by the communities around them. Through their intervention, Wellspring has witnessed various parent-led initiatives to support teachers and head teachers in their children's schools. These projects were introduced to demonstrate parent appreciation for teachers with the aim of strengthening parent-teacher relationships and understanding. Wellspring believes that if parents first reach out to school staff to better understand their support needs, encourage rather than criticize, and cater for their well-being, teachers and head teachers will be much more open to collaborating with parents to ensure student success. Through the School Development Program, Wellspring has supported parents to provide tea breaks for teachers, cultivate the school garden to ensure teacher lunches, and initiate income-generating activities that supplement teachers' salaries.

- **Involve parents in real decision-making, goal-setting, and monitoring of school activities.** Families and parents need to feel “wanted, informed, empowered, and recognized for their potential”⁴⁹ as critical pieces of the healthy school community. Often, however, parents (and teachers) in Rwanda feel that school affairs are the business of the school and may resist parent involvement.⁵⁰ A critical element to engaging the community in student attendance and success is to build meaningful school family partnerships so that families and parents feel that their ideas and perspectives are valued. This means going well beyond “parent tokenism” where family involvement may be limited to a few representatives who are needed to “sign off” on school decisions and give legitimacy to school policies. Rather, it means a sustained commitment to recognize the power of all parents and to create systems and structures that include them, involve them, and further empower them to be leaders in the school.⁵¹

It is essential to first ask parents and families how they would like to be involved in their child's learning, and then work with them to facilitate those connections.⁵² Schools can involve families in creating reading improvement action plans, setting learning goals for schools by grade (that they can tangibly work towards with their own children), and inviting parents to observe reading classes to better understand teaching techniques and the challenges facing their child's teacher. Through the work of PTAs or SGACs, parents and school staff can create school action plans or literacy action plans that take into account the learning needs of children, the support needs of the schools, and the resources (time, talent, capital) of parents and families. Creating a plan and assigning

“School heads provide school leadership and must initiate the support and involvement of family and community. The more willing they are to recruit parents and community members for school tasks, to listen to their views and share decision making, the more likely school family partnerships are to take hold.”⁵³

⁴⁹ ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education (1994). School-Family Partnerships. In Strong Families, Strong Schools at http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/15/bc/13.pdf

⁵⁰ Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda.” Concern Worldwide; Centre for Global Development through Education; Rwanda Education Board. (2012).

⁵¹ Flamboyant Foundation. (2012). Comprehensive Family Engagement Partnership Pilot 2011-2012 Early Highlights

⁵² Effective Community Engagement Strategies. Hannover Research. 2014. <http://www.ctschoolchange.org/wp-content/uploads/Hanover-Effective-Family-and-Community-Engagement-Strategies-LEAD-Connecticut.pdf>

⁵³ http://www.unicef.org/education/files/CFSManual_Ch04_052009.pdf

responsibility creates transparency and accountability among all stakeholder in the partnership and will make both parents and teachers feel as if they are working collaboratively towards the same goals for students.

Community Support for Literacy

“At each successive level of engagement, community members move closer to being change agents themselves rather than targets for change, and collaboration increases, as does community empowerment. At the final (collaborative) level, communities and stakeholders are represented equally in the partnership, and all parties are mutually accountable for all aspects of the project.”⁵⁴

Schools do not exist in isolation. They are a part of the communities they serve and therefore obliged to cultivate relationships with the surrounding stakeholders who are invested in their ability to educate future citizens. The idea that the school belongs to the community fosters a sense of belonging as decisions are made jointly by the students, the teachers, the parents and local, invested community actors. Successful schools benefit all aspects of communities and facilitate linkages and learning opportunities across each segment of a child’s life.

Societal values and attitudes to literacy have a major impact on the literacy activities and experiences of children. Children embody the beliefs, behaviors, attitudes and practices of their families, schools, and culture. They learn from each of these, facilitated by teachers, family members, neighbors and others.⁵⁵ Establishing regular dialogue between schools and communities gives everyone a sense of school ownership. In this way, the school is not seen as something outside of the community, but an integral part of it. Schools that establish community partnerships reach out to multiple stakeholders and community actors, seeking partnerships with people, organizations, and local officials who can contribute to the school’s learning and development goals. These school often become hubs for the wider community, providing space for community functions and other outreach opportunities. As parents and communities become more and more integrated into the life and learning of the school, positive messages are taken and given, creating relevant and meaningful learning and participation opportunities for all.

It is often said that there is no “culture of reading” in places like Rwanda that largely rely on oral tradition and communication.⁵⁶ Building a culture of reading takes time and commitment from all community stakeholders, but research shows that if schools and communities can bit by bit infuse reading and its importance into each corner of community life, a culture of reading can be built and fostered. Below are some examples from around the world of communities that have taken positive steps toward cultivating a literacy culture and a love of reading in their communities.

- **Create reading opportunities outside of school.** In Ghana, World Vision has had great success improving literacy-related outcomes using the Literacy Boost model. World Vision supported communities to select and train volunteers to run “reading camps,” which children attend at least three times a week after school hours. Reading camps are paired with parent awareness sessions

⁵⁴ USDHHS, *Principals of Community Engagement, 2nd Edition*, 23-24.

⁵⁵ http://www.unicef.org/devpro/files/CFManual_Ch04_052009.pdf

⁵⁶ Ruterana, P. Reflections on Societal Reading: The Case of Rwanda. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vo.6, no.8, March 2014. <http://www.ipanafrican.org/docs/vol6no8/6.8-Ruterana.pdf>

that give parents strategies for supporting their children at home. Based on the popularity of reading camps, teachers are working with reading camp volunteers to see what strategies can be implemented to link reading club attendance with school attendance. After only eight months of implementation, parents and teachers throughout this community have seen improvements in letter sound identification and general reading ability among children.⁵⁷

- **Put systems in place that hold the larger school community accountable for quality learning.**⁵⁸ In a small, isolated community in Madagascar, one primary school has become a model for community involvement that leads to improved learning outcomes. Over a period of five years, enrolment at the Ambohitnibe Primary School has increased, graduation rates have almost doubled, and dropout rates have dramatically declined. To achieve the school's quality education goals with accountability and transparency, parents, teachers, school administrators, local community members all signed a contract pledging to support the school's ambitious targets by fulfilling their various responsibilities. Since the contract was signed, parents have renovated school buildings and classrooms, established a small cafeteria, installed solar panels to provide the school with hot water, and funded teaching and learning materials to help students improve basic math skills. Future community-led projects include building a library and a football pitch.
- **Create opportunities for meaningful dialogue.** In Madagascar, schools have established community-based listening groups, where twice a week, community members gather together to listen to a radio program about how schools and communities can work together in partnership. Groups are facilitated by trained community members, and the radio show covers topics around the roles and responsibilities of parent teacher associations, effective administrative and financial management practices in schools, and what parents can do at the local level to insure that students receive a quality education. At the end of the program, community members discuss the issues highlighted in that episode, what relevance the topics have to their particular community challenges, and then they identify specific actions they take as a community to improve the quality of learning for their children, based on their discussions. Community-based listening groups have proven to be an effective means of engaging community members in a dialogue on school quality. They have also been found to increase school attendance in the program's catchment area schools.⁵⁹
- **Meet communities in the most common places.** Because families and community members can be too busy to attend "traditional" community engagement activities that promote literacy and learning, it can be useful to consider how bring the engagement to them in the midst of their busy days. Club PESCT, a community-based NGO in Rwanda that works to promote education through peace building, has dedicated the last few years to getting books and other local language reading materials into the hands of community members. Over the last few years, Club PESCT has been putting reading materials into cell offices with the aim of overcoming barriers to access. Cell officials report that books get used and "checked out" on a regular basis, and that community members often make special trips to the cell office to access books.

Club PESCT also implements a community mobile library project in coordination with EDC's Literacy, Language, and Learning initiative (L3). The organization identifies communities with few reading opportunities, brings books to readers where they live, and facilitates book exchanges with nearby

⁵⁷ <http://www.wvi.org/ghana/article/strengthening-literacy-through-community-engagement-experience-literacy-boost-ghana>

⁵⁸ http://www.unicef.org/education/files/CFManual_Ch04_052009.pdf

⁵⁹ <http://idd.edc.org/sites/idd.edc.org/files/casestudyfianarlisteninggroups.pdf>

communities. Book exchanges are now recorded in community's *Imihigo* by cell executives as a way of prioritizing and assessing improvements in community reading. Community mobile libraries are enabling remote communities access to Kinyarwanda and English books with the hope of fostering a rich culture of reading, even in the most remote villages.

- **Empower community members with data that drives change.**⁶⁰ As mentioned earlier, huge investments in early grade reading programs have not always resulted in huge gains in reading and writing skills. To shed light on these inconsistencies and to provoke action from parents and community members at the grassroots level, NGOs in several low-income countries have used citizen-led early grade reading assessments to inform communities about what the children in their community are learning (or not).

In 2005, responding to poor government outcome data and inaction to ensure basic quality education, Pratham, a large NGO based in India began implementing a large-scale, simplistic, rapid survey of reading and math skills to children (6-16 years old). Pratham was convinced that to achieve wider community awareness about reading and math skills, and learning in general, every type of person around India needed to participate in implementation and dissemination of the survey. The test, called ASER, is carried out at the by a network of over 30,0000 local community volunteers from partner organizations in each district (colleges, universities, NGOs, youth groups, women's organizations, self-help groups and others). Widespread involvement of local citizens in conducting the assessment in each district in India was a critical piece in the design of the ASER survey. Pratham trains volunteers in almost every rural district in India to conduct the survey at the household level, usually on weekends, so that all children (in school, out of school, in public and private institutions) can be included. ASER reaches almost three-quarters of a million children each year.⁶¹ This network of NGOs disseminates the results of the survey to communities, state, and national levels, and uses the evidence generated to advocate for education reforms. ASER has become an incredibly rich resource that is used to inform education policies at national and state levels. Since the launch and success of ASER in India, many other national citizen-led efforts to assess reading have begun, including Uwezo (which means "capability" in Kiswahili) in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.

- **Open schools beyond traditional school hours to become learning and resource centers for everyone in the community.**⁶² "Schools and the communities they serve are closely linked; seldom does one succeed without the success of the other." School building and outdoor spaces can be transformed into community learning centers by staying open during extended hours – in the evenings, on weekends, and through holiday breaks – and by providing students, parents, and the community opportunities for learning and access to community resources. "The goal of community learning centers is to support student achievement, revitalize neighborhoods and maximize the community's return on their financial investment." Serving both students and the larger community, schools can be converted into places where students get extra time and guidance for reading and learning in a safe environment, and where the community feels at home. The school becomes an asset for all – creating a more holistic sense of community ownership, and breaking down traditional barriers that often keep schools, communities, and parents artificially isolated.

"Schools and the communities they serve are closely linked; seldom does one succeed without the other."

⁶⁰ <https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/early-reading-report-revised.pdf>

⁶¹ <http://www.asercentre.org/Survey/Basic/Pack/Sampling/History/p/54.html>

⁶² <http://www.cps-k12.org/community/clc>

A concept popularized over the past few years in many different countries, schools that act as community hubs have found that investment in a school's academic success and supportive partnerships increase when the wider community sees the school itself as a community resource. These hubs provide additional academic support, health resources, social services, arts programming, and civic and cultural opportunities to students, their families and the community. Schools that serve as community learning centers work together with families, businesses, churches, civic groups, health organizations, social services and many others to provide services for those in and around the school. One key aspect that ensures success of these community learning centers are "resource coordinators" or community liaisons. These coordinators are paid by schools, funded through public/private partnerships, or act as volunteers to manage and align programs and partnerships.

- **Utilize existing community mechanisms to infuse a culture of reading into everyday life.** In Rwanda, numerous avenues exist to spread awareness, build in opportunities, and foster a culture of reading through existing community structures. Taking advantage of these community and government sanctioned priorities and events that occur across the country can enable a culture of reading to spread throughout. In Rwanda, Save the Children is implementing a number of approaches to help build a culture of reading using existing community structures.
 - Save the Children is currently piloting "Literacy Umuganda" to help spread the joy of reading to children and volunteers while adult community members are doing traditional community service. One Saturday a month, children get the opportunity to interact with books, share stories, and to hear books read aloud. Save the Children has developed a toolkit for use by communities, and provides books to those interested in conducting their own Literacy Umuganda in their village. So far, the pilot has been overwhelmingly successful. Children have a safe, engaging space to enjoy and become more familiar with books, and parents – many of whom rarely get the chance to see their children with books - get to glimpse their child's excitement for reading.
 - Taking advantage of the Rwandan system of national youth service, Save the Children is also training youth facilitators to host reading camps and working with teachers and parent-teacher associations to pair up and support older and younger students as reading buddies.
 - Utilizing "parents' evening," a monthly meeting of parents and community leaders at the village level, Save the Children educates parents throughout local villages about the importance of reading, how children learn to read, and how to support their child's reading at home.
 - The community action component of Literacy Boost involves assisting community members to create village-level book banks and training community members to oversee them. This program gets books into rural communities where children rarely have access to age-appropriated, local language reading materials.

While this paper explores the research behind various practices for engaging families, schools, and communities to ensure student success, it by no means is exhaustive. There are far more great programs and best practice examples around the world than those that are documented in the literature, especially in low-income countries. As new evidence is generated and new data-driven approaches spread, schools and communities will be transformed and rich cultures of reading and home-literate environments will be formed in places where they have never been. It is this aspiration that drives schools, governments, and civil societies forward to continue studying and refining the best ways to support literacy and learning for all children.