

Computers for Youth

The Importance of the Home Learning Environment

Recommendations for Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization

November 2009

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current educational policy and funding focuses overwhelmingly on classroom learning even though the window of instruction time is extremely narrow. In fact, children spend only 13% of their waking hours in the classroom.

Given this challenge, Computers for Youth (CFY) recommends that Congress and other policy leaders expand their view of education to include the Home Learning Environment (HLE). (In this paper, we define the HLE as both educational resources in the home and learning-related interactions between children and their family members at home.) HLE interventions can be low-cost and high-impact. Although they are often overlooked in discussions of student achievement, many HLE programs have been scientifically proven to increase students' scores on standardized tests and give students the resources and support they need to succeed in school and in life.

Specifically, CFY recommends that the following points be included in the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA):

- *Increase the percentage of Title I funds that schools must use for family involvement activities—currently only at 1%.*
- *Ensure that schools use a significant portion of the family involvement Title I funds to strengthen the HLE of their students.*
- *Collect data on HLE-related activities funded by Title I to understand the impact of different interventions and work toward a national standard of best practices.*

The HLE has proven positive educational outcomes, yet it is commonly misunderstood and neglected as a viable agent of change. In this paper, common misperceptions regarding the HLE are put to rest and examples of current interventions that target the HLE are also explored.

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II.A NEW LENS ON THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL CRISIS

The learning gap between low-income children and their more well-off peers is striking. In Philadelphia, a review of 2007 test scores shows that students who are defined as “economically disadvantaged” are significantly less likely to meet state test requirements, specifically in math and reading. In addition, a Presidential panel report showed that the national high school dropout rate for low-income students is almost ten times greater than that of high-income students.

As a nation, our response to this challenge has been to try to squeeze every last drop of impact out of classroom instructional time. The vast majority—more than 95%—of our public and philanthropic education dollars are focused on the classroom and other school-based interventions, such as professional development, school leadership training, curriculum development, improved assessment, and accountability.

While these efforts may be necessary, they are not sufficient. Today, children spend only 13% of their waking hours in the classroom. In one study of a California urban middle school, the Education Trust-West found that teachers and students were left with only about 18 eight-hour days per subject, per academic year after accounting for vacations, weekends, holidays, professional days, parent-teacher conferences, vacations, class trips, district testing, and other non-instructional time.

Given the remarkably narrow window of instruction time in the classroom, educators and policy-makers must identify and fund innovative solutions to extend learning time beyond the school day, particularly for low-income children.

One of the most powerful tools for extending learning time is reaching beyond the classroom is to focus on children’s Home Learning Environment.

Definition of the Home Learning Environment

The Home Learning Environment is the combination of educational resources in the home and learning-related interactions between children and their family members at home.

- **Educational resources** may include books, quality television programs, software, Web content, and home tutoring.
- **Learning-related interactions** can vary from helping with homework to fostering learning opportunities at home. These interactions may be shaped by the family’s educational resources, values regarding education, and academic expectations for children.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS ON STRENGTHENING THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Given the critical role that the Home Learning Environment can play in improving the education of young Americans, CFY calls on Congress to include the following points in the final version of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA):

- **Increase the percentage of Title I funds that schools must use for family involvement activities—currently at only 1%.**
- **Ensure that schools use a significant portion of the family involvement Title I funds to strengthen the HLE of their students.**
- **Collect data on HLE-related activities funded by Title I to understand the impact of different interventions and work toward a national standard of best practices.**

IV. WHY FOCUS ON THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

In contrast to the classroom, children spend the vast majority of their time at home. The home is also where children interact with the adults who are most concerned with their success—their parents or guardians. Learning in the home is essential to a child’s academic success, and each year more persuasive evidence sheds light on the importance of the HLE. Four recent examples of this evidence include:

1. A study by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) **found that family factors and the home environment account for two-thirds of the differences** across states in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) eighth-grade reading scores (Barton, Coley, and Educational Testing Service 2007).
2. A longitudinal study of 3,100 school children in the U.K. found that **the Home Learning Environment was one of the strongest predictors of achievement** in reading and math for 10 and 11-year olds (Sylva et al. 2008).
3. A study by leading poverty-researcher Jeanne Brooks-Gunn demonstrated that **access to reading materials and cognitively-stimulating experiences at home may explain up to one-third of the “poverty effect”** on children’s achievement (Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005).
4. An analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth showed that **cognitive stimulation at home was three time more powerful a mediator of the effect of poverty on children’s intellectual development than any of the others**, including physical setting, parenting style, and ill health in childhood (Guo and Harris, 2000).

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IV. CHALLENGES TO SHAPING THE EDUCATIONAL LENS TO INCLUDE THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The above findings beg the question: Why are we, as a nation, not responding to this evidence by expanding education policy to encompass a child's HLE? There are three common answers to this question:

1. The HLE is poorly defined in the academic literature and in public policy
2. Conventional wisdom states that a child's HLE is the result of factors beyond the control of schools and education policy
3. Educators and policy makers are unaware of the evidence about the impact of well-designed HLE interventions

All three of these issues must be addressed in order to drive lasting educational change and improve the way that Americans view the HLE.

First, the fact that the HLE is poorly defined is a challenge, although a surmountable one. The term "Home Learning Environment" is often conflated with terms such as "family involvement" that typically refer to participation in school-based activities, such as attendance at parent-teacher meetings or volunteering.

The confusion between the HLE and family involvement is not just a matter of semantics. Research has shown that the parental activities that have the greatest impact on a child's academic success are those directly tied to learning – such as helping with homework and learning activities at home (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). By using accurate definitions and language, it will be easier to move people to a new understanding of the importance of the HLE.

Second, most people assume that the level at which families engage in learning activities at home depends on the parents' educational attainment, the household income level, and other factors beyond the control of schools. Research has shown that this commonly-held assumption is false.

1. What parents *do* in support of their children's learning is far more important than income or educational attainment (Sylva et al., 2008)
2. Through strong family involvement programs, schools can have a powerful impact on the HLE (Bloom et al., 1984).

Correcting this widely-held assumption that schools cannot influence their students' HLE will be critical to shining a spotlight on the HLE as an agent of change. In many cases, the mindset around the HLE and parental-involvement in particular is the product of beliefs about race and class, which are pernicious and deep-seated. Convincing Americans that parents of all races and income levels can be powerful partners in their children's learning is vital.

Finally, many educators and policy-makers are still unaware that there are interventions for improving children's HLE which are scientifically proven and economically viable. Below are three of many:

1. The **Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork Program** of collaborative family homework run by the National Network of Partnership Schools at The Johns Hopkins University has been proven to boost middle school students' writing scores (Epstein, Simon, and Salinas 1997).
2. A study of the **Computers for Youth family learning program** found that the program had a statistically significant increase in standardized math test scores (Tsikalas, Lee, and Newkirk 2007). In addition, 90% of parents report that they are more comfortable helping their children with homework and 94% of principals agree that "As a result of the CFY program, the level of overall parental participation in students' learning and education has increased" (Yavner, 2010).
3. Educational research pioneer Benjamin Bloom cites a **home learning intervention** that resulted in the average fourth-grader performing better than 84% of the students in the control group, a one-sigma— or one standard-deviation—effect (Bloom et al., 1984).

These three educational interventions, among many others, have been scientifically proven to increase students' academic achievement and allow them to reach their potential—not just in school, but in life.



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V. CONCLUSIONS

Reforming the Title I Elementary and Secondary Education Act to increase funding for Home Learning Environment interventions will have a direct impact on the way that American children learn. By making education a holistic activity that transcends the four limiting walls of the classroom, policymakers have the opportunity to attack some of the fundamental roots of the nation's learning gap between low- and higher-income children and usher in a new era of educational equality.

Engaging the whole family in education activities will ensure that a new generation of children grows up knowing that learning is something that happens every day, in the kitchen, in the living room, and online. This will give them the tools they need to ensure that they continue to learn throughout their lives, well past their tenure in school.

Furthermore, by mandating that data is collected on programs and interventions that target the HLE, we will make certain that the best practices are identified and cultivated.

Finally, bringing learning into the home goes beyond funding HLE interventions in the ESEA reauthorization. CFY calls on policymakers to include programs and funding that target the HLE in any and all education-related initiatives. CFY is committed to educating federal, state, and local policymakers and forging long-term sustainable strategies to ensure that American children have what they need—at school and at home—to reach their academic potential. 🌱

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