

COMPONENT 2:



**National  
Urban League**



**Parent/Guardian\*  
Engagement in  
Adolescent Literacy**

# Parent/Guardian\* Engagement in Adolescent Literacy

*Research on family influences, and on the lives of adolescents in particular, indicates that involving families can augment the efficacy of many other strategies for improving a variety of youth outcomes. Studies that examined parental attitudes toward school and academic achievement reveal that the family's attitudes toward school and the emphasis they place on education are better indicators of academic success than family structure, demographics, and income.*

– Excerpt from NUL *Mobilizing Communities to Support the Literacy Development of Urban Youth* (p. 22)

# Parent/Guardian\* E

Parents of children at the elementary level are far more involved in their children's education, both through communicating with the school and helping their child at home. However, as students move through the upper elementary and secondary grades, parents/guardians generally become less involved for many reasons. The reasons range from adolescents seeking more independence, to secondary school curricula becoming more difficult and complex for parents/guardians; from a lack of understanding about the structure of the school, to parent/guardian experiences with unwelcoming teachers and administrators over time. The reasons are numerous, yet the consequences of parents/guardians being disengaged from an adolescent's schooling and literacy development are even greater.

## **Challenging Assumptions about Parent/Guardian Engagement:**

In order for a lead organization to mobilize parents/guardians in a community effort to address the adolescent literacy crisis, it will take challenging some prevailing assumptions. There are two prevailing assumptions that must be challenged in mobilizing a community for adolescent literacy:

### **Assumption 1: Middle class parents/guardians care more about literacy than working class and poor parents.**

**Reality:** Parental/Guardian concern for the literacy of an adolescent cuts across socioeconomic status, race and gender. Some parents/guardians may have more material resources than other families, but the concern for developing literacy in youth is present in most families.

### **Assumption 2: Parents/Guardians from minority groups (particularly African Americans) are less involved in the schooling of their children than whites.**

**Reality:** There is no reliable data to indicate that parents/guardians are no more or no less "involved" in the schooling of their children based on race or ethnicity. In fact, parental engagement declines across the board for all groups as youth get older.

## **Strategies to Engaging Parents/Guardians in Adolescent Literacy**

Parents/Guardians are essential to any effort to enhance literacy among adolescents. First, parents/guardians must be made aware of students' multiple literacies. Multiple literacies are the various ways young people read, write and speak, as well as the myriad types of information to which they are exposed. Hence, parents/guardians should be empowered to support their young people in a number of ways. Below are suggestions for organizations serving/training parents in supporting youth/adolescent literacy. There are potentially four key areas of support:

# Engagement in Adolescent Literacy

## ***School Literacy***

Parents/Guardians should be aware of the school district efforts to support adolescent literacy. This includes informing and perhaps training parents on the academic standards, testing requirements and graduation expectations for middle and high school students.

Parents/Guardians should also have the opportunity to tour schools and meet school administrators. This effort helps to strengthen school-family relationships.

Parents/Guardians should be introduced to useful techniques for working with school personnel and teachers on adolescent literacy goals for their young person. They should be supported, through trainings, on how to set goals with the teachers of their young person and to create systems for monitoring their young person's academic performance and literacy development.

## ***Home Literacy***

Parents/Guardians must be supported on how best to integrate the literacy expectations from school into the home environment. Verbal communication also enhances literacy skills.

Parents/Guardians should talk to their young people as often as possible, asking questions about their school work, books or magazines they may be reading and current events.

Parents/Guardians should also provide a "text rich" home environment by placing books, periodicals, newspapers or displaying framed poetry or quotes on the walls. Research indicates that a "text rich" home increases a young person's inclination and motivation toward literacy.

Parents/Guardians should also model good literacy behavior by reading themselves. In fact, data indicates that reading has declined for the adult population as well. By modeling good reading habits, parents/guardians are reinforcing the importance of literacy in the home.

## ***Computer/Technological Literacy***

Research shows that adolescents are the quickest to adopt innovative technology, such as smart phones, sophisticated video game systems, are, on average, more skilled than their parents at navigating computers and the Internet and are, subsequently, developing their own lexicon using these devices. A parent/guardian only has to witness their young person "texting" to friends to learn that abbreviations, symbols and characters have now replaced traditional words and sentences. Interestingly, as technology and youth culture change rapidly, so does the lexicon being used. However, parents/guardians must be aware that a computer/technology "literacy" exists and is ever changing.

Parents/Guardians should be aware of the technology adolescents are using in school and out-of-school. Are computers used in the school and for what purpose? Is your young person using technology in his/her after-school program? If so, how is it supporting literacy?



Parents/Guardians should be trained on how to navigate the Internet (if they don't know already) and on how to monitor their young person's Internet use. They should also be aware of the various social networking sites and chat rooms that young people may be using on a daily basis. This is important for the safety of young people due to the rise in on-line predators of adolescents.

Parents/Guardians should set guidelines and limits for the use of all these technologies, ensuring that their young person has a balance between traditional literacy (i.e. sustained periods of reading, writing and conversation) and new media "literacies" (i.e. Internet, cell phones, computer gaming, texting, etc).

### ***Social Development Literacy***

A great deal of research has been conducted looking at how young people use literacy for their social and identity development. In fact, the books, magazines, songs/lyrics, computer images, and games allow young people to try on different identities. Even social networking websites have become a rites of passage for youth, where the number of virtual friends you acquire and the type of photos you post on your webpage can determine the level of your popularity and social acceptance.

Parents/Guardians need to be aware of the social groups their young person may be associated with in school, in the community and now, on-line. Parents/Guardians may be surprised to find that these social groups may vary, with the community social group being quite different from the on-line network of friends, and the sharing of material (such as on-line games, web video clips or texts, magazines and music) to be diverse as well. This type extra curricular literacy development is not uncommon. But this type of literacy development is also not welcomed within schools, other educational environments or in the home. It is important to know that youth can also use literacy to create social boundaries and group membership, so it is especially important for parents to be aware of how their young person is integrating literacy as part of his/her social development.

*Below is a check list of steps that a lead organization should take to support parent/guardian engagement with adolescent literacy.*

#### **Check List**

- *As the lead organization, there must be a mission and plan to engage parents/guardians in the community mobilization for adolescent literacy.*
- *Meetings and forums should be convened around adolescent literacy to educate parents/guardians on school district literacy goals, broader academic standards, testing and graduation requirements.*
- *Trainings for parents/guardians should be provided to understand the "multiple literacies" of youth and strategies to bridge literacy from school to home.*

Copyright© 2008 by the National Urban League. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in whole or in part without written permission from the National Urban League.

Please contact the **National Urban League** at **120 Wall Street, New York, New York, 10005 USA. T: + 1.212.558.5300, F: +1.212.344.5332, [www.nul.org](http://www.nul.org)**, for information about reprinting and general information about this publication.