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Investing in families is one of the most powerful strategies we have to improve educational outcomes and strengthen our workforce. Helping parents to “realize their dreams for their future and their children’s future should be the essence of a great education system and community development strategy” (Jacobs, 2019, p. 170). The home is where learning begins, shaped by the habits, skills, and confidence of the parents and caregivers who create daily routines for their children. Yet education initiatives have overwhelmingly focused on classrooms and schools for their investments, often overlooking the family unit as the primary force of influence.

Learning occurs within a system of relationships that begin in the home and extend outwards to schools, communities, and broader systems of support (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). By the time children turn 18, they have only spent about 13% of their time in school; the remaining 87% of their time is spent outside of school, primarily at home. The adults in the home, then, are the most influential drivers of learning for children (Wherry, 2004). While a child’s in-school educators change, the adults in the home are often a more constant presence, framing the learning environment year after year in the place children spend the most time.

This brief outlines how a multigenerational approach to learning offers sustained impact by strengthening the capacity of adults alongside their children’s education, transforming the family learning environment, and supporting adults to improve the family’s economic trajectory by achieving their academic and career goals.

Stronger Families, Stronger Communities

In the United States, 58.9 million adults ages 16-65 have the lowest levels of literacy (Condon et al., 2025). These individuals don’t just struggle with reading and writing. Adults with low literacy are three times more likely to experience poverty, four times more likely to be in poor health,

and eight times more likely to be incarcerated (COABE, 2025).

At NCFL, we know that families are a vital part of the infrastructure of healthy communities. When families get stronger, communities get stronger. Connecting families with education means reducing poverty, improving health outcomes, and decreasing incarceration rates—all of which contributes to strengthening communities. Addressing the negative social and economic impacts of low literacy can generate \$2.2 trillion in the United States, equivalent to 10% of GDP (Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, 2020).

Family Learning programming seeks to strengthen families in a variety of ways:

Improving literacy across multiple domains.

Literacy is not just about reading and writing. Numeracy, digital literacy, health literacy, and civic literacy—among other domains—are all components that “individuals in a modern society need to learn how to construct knowledge from multiple sources and modes of representation” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 43). Family Learning programming is “specifically designed to address these needs and set the foundation for families who seek to improve their educational and economic opportunities” (NCFL, 2023b).

Strengthening home/school connections.

Family engagement has long been recognized as crucial to a child’s overall academic achievement (Hattie, 2009). The first step towards improving family engagement is strengthening connections between parents and educators. Improving these connections moves “the idea of family engagement from ad hoc communication and parental involvement to authentic, relevant, and substantive partnerships between families and practitioners” (NCFL, 2023). Family Learning programming recognizes parents as a child’s first and most important teacher and works to build the dual capacity of both parents and educators in support of a child’s education.

Activating parent voice. Family Learning programming recognizes the importance of ensuring that families have a voice within the systems that serve them. Moving beyond deficit perspectives, NCFL embraces an asset-based approach that recognizes families' inherent leadership capabilities and seeks to amplify those capabilities (NCFL, 2023). Through this process, families activate leadership skills that can be used to champion family needs and surface solutions to problems in their schools and communities, in ways that ultimately impact both child and adult learning outcomes.

Reinforcing relational bonds. By working to build (or rebuild) social and relational bonds, Family Learning programming creates the secure foundation on which healthier communities are built. In his book, *Fragile Neighborhoods*, Seth Kaplan notes that the strength of social support systems has an outsized influence on mental and community health (Kaplan, 2023). Family Learning programming recognizes this key connection and seeks to build the conditions that enable community belonging and connectedness.

Multiplying Impact

Data shows that a parent's learning has multigenerational implications. A large body of research has consistently demonstrated that a parent's—and especially a mother's—educational achievement is a strong predictor of a child's academic success (Awada, 2019; Dubow et al., 2009; Idris et al., 2020; Sastry & Pebley, 2010). Conversely, it has been estimated that 72% of children whose parents struggle with low literacy will go on to experience low literacy themselves (Condon et al., 2025). From this perspective, adult education should be viewed as an important lever for improving children's educational outcomes. In this way, an adult's academic success can serve as the foundation for the next generation, creating a legacy of learning that is transferable to the future.

Multigenerational learning also has the potential to ease strain on education budgets. School districts are facing a variety of budgetary headwinds: the expiration of COVID-19 funding, spending declines at the state level, and uncertainty around education funding at the federal level (Harding et al., 2025). At the same time, federal dollars

invested in adult basic education have decreased when adjusted for inflation (ALL IN, n.d.), even as the share of adults with the lowest literacy levels has grown from 18% of U.S. adults (ages 16-65) in 2012 to 28% in 2023 (NCES, 2023).

Family Learning provides a potential solution to these funding challenges. Money spent on Family Learning benefits both adults and children simultaneously. These “double duty dollars” enable strapped education budgets to achieve greater results, with single programs achieving impact across multiple generations.

NCFL's Family Learning Approach

For more than 30 years, the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) has been focused on eradicating poverty through education solutions for families. The organization accomplishes this mission through Family Learning programming, which includes three core elements: **family literacy**, which brings children and parents together to improve their literacy skills; **family engagement**, which helps parents and educators come together to support a child's learning; and **family leadership**, which supports parents in solving problems in their schools and communities.

Family Learning programming achieves greater impact when it is incorporated into a **Family Learning System**. Family Learning Systems bring together NCFL's three core elements to provide “aligned, coordinated, high-impact education practices...ensuring that families can easily gain access to learning experiences within their community” (NCFL, 2025). Moving beyond program-by-program implementation, Family Learning Systems work to transcend programs and impact systems, ensuring that all families—especially those furthest from opportunity—have access to the educational tools they need to thrive.

Meaningful Impact, Real Outcomes

As a learning organization, NCFL invests in consistently evaluating and researching the outcomes of family learning programs across the country. Working alongside external evaluators

and our Research Advisory Council, we study the impact of programs and examine the conditions associated with implementation, so we can provide strong support from start to finish with our national, state, and local partners.

Through evaluation, we are seeking to determine the ways in which Family Learning program implementation achieves real outcomes for meaningful social impact. This includes considering the following questions:

- How are outcomes for participating parents and children improved?
- Does the home learning environment change in ways that might also impact other non-participating adults and children in the home?
- What are the impacts on educators or practitioners who are participating in or implementing the programs?

Recent outcome data demonstrates the power of a systems approach that yields multigenerational impact. When parents and children learn alongside one another, we find improved adult and child outcomes, positive shifts in the home learning environment, and enhanced capacity-building for educators.

Adult Outcomes. Results from Family Learning programming show strong adult impacts across multiple areas. Overall, 95% of adults improved in their technology skills (Breece, 2025), 87% strengthened their literacy and language skills, and 67% reported growth in their leadership skills (Bellwether, 2025). Notably, 93% of adults either reached or made meaningful progress toward their education goals (May et al., 2025). Together, these results reflect the ways in which intentional community-based support can provide adults with the tools to become lifelong learners and opportunities to enhance their workforce skills.

Child Outcomes. Congruent with adult outcomes, significant gains can also be seen in children's outcomes. Through family literacy programming, 64% of children demonstrated an increase in academic-related behaviors (May, et al, 2025). In early childhood programming, statistically significant increases in children's expressive language skills were noted alongside improved

early learning readiness skills (Communication, Fine Motor, Gross Motor, Problem Solving and Person-Social skills). Through family service learning initiatives, we find that 85% of middle school students increased their confidence in learning and applying new technology skills to support their learning (Breece, 2025). These gains are a first step in ensuring that children have the tools they need to achieve academic success.

Home Learning Environment Outcomes. Beyond adult and child outcomes, the importance of learning routines within the home are central to sustained outcomes. The daily behaviors that shape a child and adult's learning—including shared reading, storytelling, and everyday conversations—can last beyond the life of an individual program when they are nurtured and supported. When parents and children were provided opportunities to learn about these routines, evaluations demonstrated that 63% of parents increased their confidence in supporting their child's learning and 73% of parents reported an increase in home literacy behaviors (May et al., 2025).

Additionally, 83% of parents reported improvements on the Parenting Skills Ladder, including increases in the time they spent playing with their children at home, increases in social connections, and decreases in parental stress (Breece, 2025a). The improvements have the potential to impact the entire family, not just the participating parent and child, creating a home environment in which the whole family becomes active participants in and creators of learning opportunities.

Partner Outcomes. Ensuring that educators and practitioners have the dual capacity to work alongside families as partners in the education process is vital to the success of Family Learning efforts. The dual capacity framework aims to build and enhance the capacity, confidence, cognition, and connections among educators and families. Results demonstrate that 89% of our partners improved capacity in supporting Family Learning and 100% increased in confidence in supporting families (Chang, 2025). These outcomes lead to stronger relationships between families and schools, creating a feedback loop that helps to bolster student success.

From Individual Programs to Systems Change

These outcomes do not happen by chance; they are the result of a comprehensive approach to Family Learning, from providing recruitment and retention support that removes barriers for families, to ensuring high-quality delivery of programs, to listening to and honoring the feedback from families and partners. The power of the Family Learning approach is not only in how it addresses the learning needs of families, but also in how it connects families with each other and their community, amplifying the impact through increased social capital and reduced social isolation.

The next chapter in NCFL's work is to assist communities in moving beyond individual programmatic efforts towards intentional, sustainable systems of support built with and for families. NCFL's vision is to establish coordinated and aligned Family Learning Systems in 60 communities, built with and for families, increasing education and economic outcomes and creating thriving communities.

This vision seeks to build a world in which systems work for families instead of families working to navigate systems. Parents are often left to navigate complex pathways to meet the education, transportation, healthcare, and childcare needs of their families. By building coordinated supports from a family-focused perspective, partners and communities can streamline and simplify these pathways, making them more accessible to all families, but especially those furthest from opportunity.

To achieve this vision, NCFL is partnering with cities across the country to build **Family Learning Communities™** (FLCs). FLCs bring together businesses, schools, community-based organizations, and elected officials to enact Family Learning programming while also enhancing cross-sector collaboration, building responsiveness to family voice, and enacting effective policies that support family wellbeing. This whole family approach seeks to capitalize on the strong outcomes we've seen in our programmatic work and create the community

conditions that will maximize these outcomes, whether or not individual programs are sustained. Public and private dollars spent on Family Learning programming represent an investment in education that will continue to pay dividends, helping children and families achieve their dreams and escape poverty together.

A Call to Action

Families and communities are more stressed than ever before. A recent survey found that half of parents reported feeling depressed or hopeless in the previous two weeks, and one quarter took on debt to cover basic needs (Anderson, 2026). This follows a 2024 report by the U.S. Surgeon General detailing the many ways parents are under pressure—from financial strain to time demands to concerns over their children's health and safety (Office of the Surgeon General, 2024).

Now is the time for funders across the country to support parents by supporting programming and initiatives with a demonstrated history of creating meaningful and lasting change. Now is also the time for lawmakers to “enable states to braid and blend federal funds across education, workforce, and human services programs and align resources for low-income learners” (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2026). Family Learning programming is uniquely positioned to integrate adult and child education, parenting support, and workforce readiness into a cohesive approach that maximizes impact without duplicating services.

Bringing relief and hope to families and communities starts with investing in people. We must act with urgency to reverse the epidemic of low literacy in the United States and ensure that all children and adults have access to the skills and education that can unlock job and career success.

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