

Enhancing Educational Success for Children of Parents with Criminal Convictions

How well a child performs in school often depends on whether their parents are involved in their education.¹ Research demonstrates that parent involvement in a child's education leads to higher grades and test scores for the child, more challenging classes for the child, improved school attendance, increased chance of graduation, and increased chance the child will seek post-secondary education.² Federal policies require school districts to "involve parents in an organized, ongoing, and timely way."³ However, in Washington, parents with criminal convictions often face significant barriers to volunteering in their children's schools.

Many state education systems have recognized six (6) types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, learning at home, decision-making, collaborating with community, and volunteering.⁴ Parents, who are committed to their children's education, but who have criminal convictions, or who have been incarcerated or court-involved in their past, may be denied the opportunity to volunteer in their child's schools because of their prior criminal convictions, *even when* those prior convictions were not crimes against children or related to the care of children.⁵ This report focuses on certain highlighted barriers keeping parents with criminal convictions from *volunteering* in their children's schools.

Barriers to Parental Volunteering in Schools

Parents are treated the same as anyone else trying to volunteer at their child's school. Treating parent who volunteer in schools the same as other community members who volunteer does not prudently balance what is best for the children or account for the goal of increasing parental involvement in schools. While administrators will likely have the choice to deny volunteers under any policy, parent volunteering does not appear to be valued differently than other community volunteering.

Districts are currently free to add criminal history restrictions not endorsed by state law. Despite having a state law that outlines a narrow list of criminal offenses that disqualify a parent (or any other person) from volunteering in schools, the school districts are currently free to add to that list.⁶

Parents with criminal convictions for the same or similar offenses are treated differently depending on the school district. School districts vary in their treatment of a parent with criminal history when either approving or denying a parent.⁷

Not all districts make clear what crimes will disqualify a parent from volunteering, or whether there is a way to have that decision overturned. Some districts have no written policy about how they treat criminal history; while others have adopted a policy that disqualifies a parent with criminal history not listed in state law. Even when a school district provides its volunteer policy

in a format that is accessible to parents, not all school districts make clear the steps in the process to obtain approval to volunteer. For example, there is currently no requirement that every district consider evidence of a parent’s rehabilitation prior to approval/denial.

Not all parents know how to apply to volunteer at their children’s schools or know what criminal history will keep them from volunteering in their child’s schools. Not all school districts make their volunteering in school information available publicly. Those that do, most often post the policy and documents on-line. While some school districts do not even have a written policy or websites, even when the volunteering policy is available on-line, it requires the parent applicant to have access to a device with internet connection in order to complete the application.

Recommendations Supporting Student Success

WDA supports the removal of barriers to parental volunteering in schools as well as policies that affirm human dignity and respect for the all parents and families. If state legislators mandate a uniform standard or policy for all school districts to increase the involvement of parental volunteers with criminal convictions, such a mandate should take into account the special role and value of parents to their child’s educational success.

Recommendation #1. Create legislative mandate to remove any and all unnecessary barriers for parents with criminal convictions to support their child(ren)’s educational success.

Recommendation #2. Convene a forum with directly affected parents and families, educators, policy makers, and legislators to identify solutions for increasing parental volunteering in Washington’s public schools.

Recommendation #3. Create a public clearinghouse for public dissemination of all current policies governing parental volunteering in Washington’s public schools, including but not limited to, the old current parental volunteer application forms. The resource should be available on-line and available upon request via electronic and post mail.

¹ This report includes research contributions of Nick Ainslie, a former IPP law student volunteer.

² *Parent and Family Engagement (PFE) in Title I, Part A Programs*, OFFICE OF SUPERINTEND OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION (last visited July, 16 2018), <http://www.k12.wa.us/TitleI/ParentFamilyEngagement/default.aspx>; *Family Involvement, School Role*, WASHINGTON OSPI (July 17, 2018), <http://www.k12.wa.us/TitleI/FamilyInvolvement/pubdocs/PrintableSchoolRole.pdf>; *District Role, Develop & Support Family Involvement in Title I, Part A Programs*, Washington OSPI, <http://www.k12.wa.us/TitleI/FamilyInvolvement/pubdocs/DistrictRoleFamilyInvolvement.pdf>; Anne T. Henderson, A NEW WAVE OF EVIDENCE – THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT (Southwest Educational Development 2002); S. Wilder, *Effects of Parental Involvement on Academic Achievement: A Meta-Synthesis*, 66 EDUC. REV. 377 (2013).

³ Every Student Succeeds Act, Title 1, Part A §1114(b) (2015).

⁴Joyce L. Epstein and Karen Clark Salinas, “Partnering with Families and Communities,” *Schools as Learning Communities*, EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP (61:8), 12-18 (2004) (“Volunteering. Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school.” Found at: http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el200405_epstein.pdf).

⁵ RCW 28A.400.303 (3)(a) states:

School districts, educational service districts, the Washington state center for childhood deafness and hearing loss, the state school for the blind, federal bureau of Indian affairs-funded schools, charter schools established under chapter 28A.710 RCW, schools that are the subject of a state-tribal education compact under chapter 28A.715 RCW, and their contractors may use the process in subsection (1) of this section to perform record checks for any prospective volunteer who will have regularly scheduled unsupervised access to children under eighteen years of age or developmentally disabled persons, during the course of his or her involvement with the school or organization under circumstances where access will or may involve the following:

- (i) Groups of five or fewer children under twelve years of age;
 - (ii) Groups of three or fewer children between twelve and eighteen years of age; or
 - (iii) Developmentally disabled persons.
- (b) For purposes of (a) of this subsection, "unsupervised" means not in the presence of:
- (i) Another employee or volunteer from the same school or organization; or
 - (ii) Any relative or guardian of any of the children or developmentally disabled persons to which the prospective employee or volunteer has access during the course of his or her involvement with the school or organization.

⁶ See also [RCW 28A.400.303](#) (3)(a) ; [RCW 28A.320.155](#); [RCW 10.97.050](#); [RCW 28A.410.010](#); [RCW 43.43.830](#) through [RCW 43.43.845](#).

⁷ See WDA-IPP’s Policy Report, *The Impact of Varied Volunteering in Schools Policies in Washington State* (coming soon).