THE ROLE OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ON YOUTH OUTCOMES: AN EXPLORATION ACROSS THREE ECOLOGICAL SETTINGS

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

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Project Overview

Ecological frameworks of youth development assert that multiple systems (e.g., family, school, neighborhood) interact and operate in complex patterns to influence youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Development (1979) presents a series of nested influences, ranging from proximal influences such as family and school, and distal influences, such as broad cultural values, laws, and customs, that interact with one another. Major components of this model and its iterations include: the *microsystem:* the innermost system containing people and settings that directly involve a young person, such as their home, family, peer group, work, or school; the *mesosystem*: the interaction or connection between two microsystems, such as parents visiting school; the *exosystem*: settings that do not directly involve the individual, but may still affect their life, such as parents' work; the *macrosystem:* the structures and systems that represent overarching attitudes and ideologies of a culture, including community norms and societal values; and the *chronosystem*: the passage of time, focusing on changes in the youth's environment, such as changes in family structure or socioeconomic status. Recognizing youth development as a function of and interaction between complex environments and systems can help us better respond to youth and to program effectively.

Over the past few decades, promoting positive youth outcomes has been a major focus of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Programs and organizations can have an enormous impact on youths' lives, but this impact is theorized to be amplified or dampened by the quality and congruence of what else is going on in other environmental settings. Thus, the integration of family, school, and community efforts has been identified as an essential feature for the promotion of positive child outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

This three-part dissertation explores the role of family in affecting youth outcomes when studied in combination with three ecological systems – youth mentoring (i.e., microsystem), neighborhood climate (i.e., exosystem), and state education guidance (i.e., mesosystem). In manuscript one, I examine the role of family relationships within the context of school-based mentoring programs, exploring the impact on academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes (i.e., microsystem/microsystem interaction). In manuscript two, I examine the role of family relationships on adolescent social-emotional outcomes in combination with neighborhood-level factors (i.e., microsystem/exosystem interaction). In manuscript three, I review state education agency (SEA) guidance on family engagement in schools (i.e., mesosystem) to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement to help address the gap between family engagement research, policy, and implementation.

The overarching goal across the three manuscripts was to gain a deeper understanding of the relative role of family while embedded within other systems of influence. Because youth development does not occur in a vacuum but rather in context, studying family in combination with the other environments that youth operate provides a more nuanced view of the relative contributions of families. This approach helps to inform specific programming, policy, and research efforts to more effectively work with families. Results highlight the importance of supporting families and recognizing their influence on youth outcomes and contribute to efforts to integrate more contextual research into youth development programming (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

Families and Youth Development

In Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Development (1979), families operate as a critical context for promoting youth development. Empirical studies of youth development have

consistently established that family relationships are essential in supporting youth success across various environments and programs, including education, child welfare, and other related disciplines (DiClemente et al., 2018; Mackova et al., 2019; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). The quality of family relationships can influence wellbeing through psychosocial, behavioral, and physiological pathways across the life course (Thomas et al., 2017). Moreover, having strong family relationships, such as having higher levels of shared beliefs, communication, and support, has been shown to increase youth resiliency (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2017). Further, socioecological researchers have found family relationships to be predictive of numerous social and health outcomes for youth (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). Considering that youth operate in a social world extending beyond their families, other social relationships have the ability to interact with family relationships (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). Given that families are widely regarded as influential for youth, I began my exploration by examining the role of families in a popular youth intervention that has traditionally overlooked families.

Brief Paper Description

Paper 1. Youth mentoring is a popular, widely used intervention that establishes a supportive relationship between a mentee and mentor to support broad academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes (Garringer et al., 2017). Within youth-mentoring programs, parents are often seen through a deficit-lens, and in some cases are viewed as a reason why an individual would need a mentor in the first place (Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). Accordingly, the role of families is often underemphasized in traditional mentoring programs. Despite a large body of literature indicating the influential role of family relationships on youth development, the vast majority of youth mentoring research continues to focus primarily on the dyadic, mentor-mentee model of mentoring (Suffrin et al., 2016).

This study answered two research questions. First, are different dimensions of family relationships (e.g., family support, family deviant beliefs) associated with changes in different youth outcomes? Using Tolan and colleagues' (1997) conceptual model of family dynamics, I hypothesized that youth with high ratings of family relationships (e.g., family support) would have higher social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes compared to youth with low ratings of family relationships. The second research question was: are youth perceptions of family relationships associated with differential outcomes for youth in mentoring programs (i.e., are effects of mentoring moderated by family relationships)? I expected that the strength of family relationships would have a differential impact on youth mentoring outcomes, hypothesizing that youth with stronger family relationships would have greater improvements in social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes after participating in a mentoring program.

This study used data from participants in a gender-specific, school-based mentoring program to empirically assess the role of family relationships in youth outcomes. Participants were adolescent girls who were randomized to participate in a year-long, gender-specific, school-based mentoring program (n = 69), or serve as controls (n = 59). Data on academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes were collected from pre- and post-intervention surveys. Results from a series of multiple regression analyses partially supported my hypotheses. Stronger levels of family relationships were associated with desirable youth outcomes (e.g., higher academic plans and fewer delinquent behaviors) while the mentoring intervention was not observed to have a direct effect on outcomes. Moreover, the interaction between family and mentoring was not significant. Findings support the notion that family relationship characteristics merit attention when seeking to promote youth outcomes and should not be overlooked.

Paper 2. Given that family relationships emerged as a significant predictor of youth developmental outcomes at the microsystem level in Paper 1, even when not a direct target of the intervention, I explored the role of family relationships in the context of neighborhood-level factors. Within ecological models, families are a proximal context of youth development (i.e., microsystem) that are situated within more distal contexts, including neighborhood and community structures and processes (i.e., exosystem; Rankin & Quane, 2002). Several studies have provided evidence supporting this; however, methodological limitations have hindered sufficient investigation of the relative importance of family and neighborhood-level factors while accounting for the inherent nested nature of the data (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020). This study sought to address these limitations by answering the following research question: how are family and neighborhood factors associated with adolescent social-emotional outcomes? I hypothesized that higher levels of family relationships and lower levels of neighborhood problems would be associated with favorable social-emotional outcomes (e.g., lower levels of depression, higher levels of self-esteem) for adolescents.

This study used data collected as part of a larger study conducted in Chicago neighborhoods (Henry et al., 2014). A total of 302 adolescents (n = 302) participated from 30 neighborhoods (10 adolescents per neighborhood) that met specific criteria. A total of 605 adults (n = 605) served as neighborhood informants (20 informants per neighborhood). Adolescent participants provided self-report data across a range of social-emotional measures, including depression, anxiety, and self-esteem measures. Neighborhood informant participants completed measures about the characteristics of their neighborhood as a whole (e.g., social cohesion, neighborhood norms, and neighborhood problems). Multilevel modeling was employed to separate within- and between- neighborhood effects across all outcomes. Results supported my

hypotheses about families and indicated that stronger family relationships were negatively associated with youth reports of depression and anxiety (i.e., reduction in anxiety and depression scores) and were positively associated with self-esteem (i.e., improvement in self-esteem scores). Results did not support my hypotheses about neighborhood effects. I found null effects for neighborhood factors notwithstanding neighborhood norms about adolescent behavior being negatively associated with self-esteem. Overall, this study built upon findings from Paper 1 that family relationships are influential on youth outcomes.

Paper 3. Findings from Paper 1 and Paper 2 both supported family relationships as an important, proximal ecological predictor of youth social-emotional outcomes, regardless of the presence of other contextual factors (mentoring and neighborhoods, respectively). In recognition of these findings, I explored the support for families being engaged in another influential ecological setting – schools. Family engagement is widely recognized as a critical ingredient to youth success in school (Weiss et al., 2010). Research has consistently supported the benefits of effective school-family partnerships, where higher family engagement is associated with a variety of favorable outcomes for youth, including improved grades, higher standardized test scores, fewer behavioral and disciplinary problems, higher graduation rates, and increased social-emotional skills (Smith et al., 2020). Therefore, promoting family engagement in school may be an approach to address the academic and mental health crisis that public schools in the United States are currently facing (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2022; Jones, 2022). Despite considerable research and legislative support for family engagement, there remain significant challenges with practice implementation (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Considering my previous findings that family factors are influential on youth outcomes across contextual settings, in combination with available research supporting family engagement

in schools, I examined the role of families at the mesosystem level by conducting a review of state education guidance on family engagement practices. State Education Agencies (SEA) play an important role in operationalizing state and federal educational law through regulatory and non-regulatory (i.e., guidance) powers. Therefore, SEAs serve as a critical intermediary between law and practice by translating *what* to do (i.e., legal requirements) into suggestions for *how t*o do it (i.e., implementation). In this study, I examined non-regulatory guidance to help identify ways states can reduce the gap between intent and application of policy to better support district and school staff in their family engagement efforts. The primary research questions for this review were: 1) To what extent do SEAs' guidance on family engagement align with National Standards for School-Family Partnerships?; and 2) In what ways do SEAs' guidance on family engagement reflect two of the emerging areas of emphasis in the family engagement research – developmental considerations and mental health? We used deductive coding to review guidance in relation to the National PTA's Standards for Family School Partnerships. The PTA's National Standards were chosen as the organizing framework for several reasons: it is the most recently updated family engagement framework available, it is relevant to a wide variety of stakeholders, and it has a strong emphasis on evidence-based practice and equity. Results indicated that SEA guidance was generally well-aligned with national standards for family engagement, however, there was variability in the ways in which they were described. Recommendations include making SEA family engagement guidance easier to access and identify, providing more practical recommendations and strategies to describe *how* to implement effective family engagement practices, more explicitly defining strategies to promote equity in family engagement, and integrating more guidance on family engagement in mental health.

Implications

This three-paper dissertation explores the relative role of families on youth outcomes across three different ecological settings. In doing so, results contribute to, and expand, upon the empirical literature on ecological predictors of youth development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). In addition, results also point to areas for continued research and building support for families to be viewed from a strengths-based perspective. For various reasons, families have been underutilized in youth interventions, with programs, researchers, and providers citing structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers to working with families (Murray et al., 2014; Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). Collectively, findings from this dissertation challenge these views and suggest that focusing more closely on the proximal influence that families have on youth development may provide programs with a useful intervention point to enhance youth developmental outcomes. This has the potential to inform youth programming, practices, and policies and encourages ongoing efforts to take a holistic, integrative, ecological approach to youth development work.

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Abstracts

Manuscript One: The Role of Family Relationships in Youth Mentoring: An Ecological Perspective

Mentoring programs have historically focused on the relationship between the mentor and mentee as the primary means for supporting academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes among youth participating in these programs. However, research also indicates that other significant relationships, like family relationships, are important in promoting positive youth outcomes. The current exploratory study takes an ecological approach by examining family relationships as a potential moderator of youth mentoring outcomes. Participants were adolescent girls who participated in a year-long, gender-specific, school-based mentoring program (n = 69), or served as controls (n = 59). Data were collected from pre- and post-intervention surveys. Multiple regression analyses tested for an interaction between participants' family relationship characteristics and their intervention status on various social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes. Results indicated that higher levels of family support significantly predicted higher youth academic plans, and lower family deviant beliefs significantly predicted fewer delinquent behaviors; however, the interactions between family and intervention status were not significant. Findings suggest that family relationship characteristics merit attention when seeking to promote youth outcomes. Implications include supporting ecological frameworks for mentoring by refining targets of mentoring interventions to consider the role of family factors.

Manuscript Two: A Multilevel Approach to Understanding the Role of Neighborhood and Family Relationships on Adolescent Social-Emotional Outcomes

This study explored the effects of neighborhood and family relationship characteristics on adolescent social-emotional outcomes. Although several studies have established the importance of both of these ecological contexts on youth development, methodological limitations have hindered sufficient investigation of the relative importance of family and neighborhood-level factors while accounting for the inherent nested nature of the data. This study used data collected as part of a larger study conducted in Chicago neighborhoods (Henry et al., 2014). A total of 302 adolescents participated from 30 low-income neighborhoods (10 adolescents per neighborhood) that met specific inclusion criteria. A total of 605 adults served as neighborhood informants (20 informants per neighborhood). Adolescent participants provided outcome data across a range of self-reported social-emotional measures (e.g., depression, anxiety, and self-esteem symptom measures). Neighborhood informants provided data about the characteristics of their neighborhood (i.e., social cohesion, neighborhood norms, and neighborhood problems measures). Multilevel modeling was employed to separate within- and between-neighborhood effects across all outcomes. Results indicated that family relationship variables were generally associated with social-emotional outcomes in expected directions when controlling for within- and between-neighborhood effects. Most neighborhood-level characteristics (as measured by neighborhood informants) were found to have null associations with outcomes. Results suggest

that intervention at the family-level may have the most impact in promoting youth mental health for adolescents in low-income, structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Manuscript Three: State of the States: A Review of Family Engagement Practices across State Education Agency Guidance

Family engagement is associated with a variety of favorable academic and social-emotional outcomes for youth (Smith et al., 2020). Given the unprecedented student achievement gaps and current mental health crisis, family engagement in schools serves as a potential means to address these problems and promote equitable student success. Despite considerable research and policy supporting family engagement, there remain many barriers to effective implementation. We reviewed State Education Agency (SEA) family engagement guidance to determine how aligned they were with national standards for effective family-school partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2022). Results indicated that SEA guidance was generally well-aligned with national standards, however, there was variability in the ways in which the standards were described. Recommendations include making SEA family engagement guidance easier to access and identify, providing more practical recommendations and strategies to describe *how* to implement effective family engagement practices, more explicitly defining strategies to promote equity in family engagement, and integrating more guidance on family engagement in mental health.

Manuscript One

The Role of Family Relationships in Youth Mentoring: An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

Mentoring programs have historically focused on the relationship between the mentor and mentee as the primary means for supporting academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes among youth participating in these programs. However, research also indicates that other significant relationships, like family relationships, are important in promoting positive youth outcomes. The current exploratory study takes an ecological approach by examining family relationships as a potential moderator of youth mentoring outcomes. Participants were adolescent girls who participated in a year-long, gender-specific, school-based mentoring program (n = 69), or served as controls (n = 59). Data were collected from pre- and post-intervention surveys. Multiple regression analyses tested for an interaction between participants' family relationship characteristics and their intervention status on various social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes. Results indicated that higher levels of family support significantly predicted higher youth academic plans, and lower family deviant beliefs significantly predicted fewer delinquent behaviors; however, the interactions between family and intervention status were not significant. Findings suggest that family relationship characteristics merit attention when seeking to promote youth outcomes. Implications include supporting ecological frameworks for mentoring by refining targets of mentoring interventions to consider the role of family factors.

Keywords: Mentoring, Ecological, Family Relationships, Youth Development, Youth Outcomes

The Role of Family Relationships in Youth Mentoring: An Ecological Perspective

Mentoring is a popular intervention designed to promote youth development through establishing non-familial youth-adult relationships. Studies of formal mentoring programs have demonstrated considerable empirical evidence for promoting youth development by influencing various emotional, behavioral, social, and health outcomes; therefore, mentoring is a popular intervention given the wide range of benefits it provides to youth (DuBois et al., 2002; Eby et al., 2008; Raposa et al., 2019). Despite demonstrating generally positive results for youth outcomes, the effect sizes of youth mentoring programs consistently fall in the small to moderate range (Raposa et al., 2019). Many researchers have made attempts to understand and explain the underlying reason for the small effect sizes, but much remains unknown about the mechanisms of mentoring, as well as the participants for whom mentoring programs are best suited (DuBois et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2013; Raposa et al., 2019). Expanding the current understanding of the factors that contribute to youth mentoring outcomes is critical to guiding programs in their pursuit to increase effectiveness (Albright et al., 2017; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

One factor that is seldom considered as a potential moderator of mentoring's effects on youth is the role of familial relationships, which are important for promoting psychosocial outcomes for youth (Kemp et al., 2009; McKay et al., 2004). Additionally, formal studies of mentoring programs tend to focus on the mentor-mentee relationship, without fully considering the existing influential relationships in the youth's life (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). Current understanding of mentoring outcomes may be limited by focusing primarily on the dyadic relationship, given that family relationships have been shown to be influential for youth outcomes in many related fields (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

In particular, the role of families is critical in both promoting and inhibiting youth developmental competencies, especially for children in historically minoritized racial and ethnic groups (García Coll et al., 1996). Because mentoring programs typically match mentors with disadvantaged, minoritized youth (Liang & West, 2007), they would be remiss not to consider the family processes that influence the youth they serve. The current study investigates the association between these mentoring and family relationships as contexts for youth development using an ecological framework.

Ecological Framework for Youth Development

Traditional ecological models assert that multiple systems (e.g., family, school, neighborhood) interact and operate in complex patterns to influence youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The relationships that youth develop with adults across various systems, such as with parents and non-familial adults (e.g., mentors), are important contexts for development and can influence social, academic, and behavior outcomes. Within ecological models designed specifically for racially and ethnically marginalized youth, family relationships are thought to have a unique and distinct role in child development, specifically through family communication, beliefs, values, and goals (García Coll et al., 1996). In this paper, we examine if and how existing family relationships moderate mentoring relationships in promoting youth developmental outcomes. Specific research on families and mentoring as related to youth development are reviewed below.

Families and Youth Development

Within ecological frameworks, families operate as a critical context for promoting youth development. Youth development research, in areas such as education, child welfare, and other related disciplines, has consistently established the importance of family relationships

(DiClemente et al., 2018; Mackova et al., 2019; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Socioecological researchers have found family relationships to be predictive of numerous social and health outcomes for youth (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). It has been theorized that various aspects of family relationships, including family beliefs and family behavior, drive these changes (Tolan et al., 1997). Family beliefs are the values shared by family, and include *developmental beliefs* (e.g., children should be obedient to their parents, no matter the circumstance), *deviant beliefs* (e.g., physical violence is acceptable), and *general beliefs* about the importance of family (e.g., families stick together no matter what). Family behavior is conceptualized as the patterns of interactions among family members that imply family rules. Behaviors include *family cohesion* (e.g., family members feel close to each other), *support* (e.g., family members help out others when they are upset), *communication* (e.g., family members understand each other), and *organization* (e.g., family members are clear on roles within the family).

These various aspects of families have been shown to be both protective factors and risk factors for minoritized populations (Tolan et al., 1997). For example, having a high level of family support is considered to be a protective factor for youth, while having a low level of family support is considered to be a risk factor (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008; Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). Family functioning has been found to be a strong predictor of self-esteem for adolescents (Mandara & Murray, 2000). Supportive family relationships and positive family communication have been shown to increase adolescents' social competencies and positive values (Hillaker et al., 2008). High levels of family cohesion and parental warmth have been shown to predict a variety of school-related outcomes for adolescents, including student achievement, perceived competence, sense of relatedness to peers, and academic effort (Annunziata et al., 2006). The

quality of family relationships can influence wellbeing through psychosocial, behavioral, and physiological pathways across the life course (Thomas et al., 2017). During adolescence a key developmental task is establishing independence; however, youth outcomes tend to be best if that independence develops within the context of supportive family environment (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). Considering that youth operate in a larger social world that extends beyond their families, other social relationships have the ability to counterbalance what is lacking at home or reinforce what is working at home (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). Moreover, having strong family relationships, such as having higher levels of shared beliefs, communication, and support, has been shown to increase resiliency (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2017).

Mentoring and Youth Development

Mentoring programs are a popular type of youth prevention programming, often comprised of non-targeted, heterogeneous practices that target broad developmental goals (Cavell et al., 2021). The formation of a close, supportive non-familial adult-youth relationship has historically been regarded as the primary mechanism of change, leading to improvements across various cognitive and social-emotional domains (Rhodes et al., 2006). While mentoring programs vary in their specific desired goals and outcomes, the objective of most programs falls under the broader conceptualization of positive youth development (Herrera et al., 2013). Programs often aim to reduce behavioral problems in school, improve grades, strengthen peer relationships, and reduce truancy and delinquency (Garringer et al. 2017).

Despite being widely popular, meta-analyses of the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs tend to show a modest range of effects on youth outcomes (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018). More recently, some researchers have argued that outcomes can be enhanced by providing more targeted mentoring practices designed to meet the specific needs of the mentee

(Christensen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, heterogeneity of activities is a core feature of youth mentoring programs given that it can improve access to and quality of prevention services (Lyons & McQuillin, 2021). At the same time, prevention programs tend to show stronger positive effects for youth that experience more acute behavioral, emotional, and academic given that there is more room for improvement (Tanner-Smith et al., 2018)

Families and Mentoring Programs

A critique of mentoring is that mentoring programs have traditionally viewed mentees' parents through a deficit lens, perceiving inadequate parenting as a reason why an adolescent may need a mentor (Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). The role of family in the youth's ecology is often stigmatized by mentoring programs, viewing parents as a hindrance to positive youth development (Lakind et al., 2015). This negative perception of parents may contribute to the lack of research and discussion about the role of parents and families within the context of mentoring (Taylor & Porcellini, 2013).

Only a few empirical studies have examined the influence of family on youth mentoring outcomes. In a large meta-analysis of youth mentoring efficacy studies, stronger positive outcomes for youth were present when there was an element of parental involvement in the mentoring program (DuBois et al., 2002). Another study found that improvements in parent-child relationships partially mediated the association between mentoring and a number of positive youth outcomes, including global self-worth, school value, and grades (Rhodes et al., 2000). Despite these encouraging findings, the vast majority of youth mentoring research continues to focus primarily on the dyadic, mentor-mentee model of mentoring (Suffrin et al., 2016).

Systemic Model of Mentoring

Other youth mentoring research has shifted away from exclusively studying the mentor-mentee dyad and has demonstrated a growing interest in examining the ecological contextual factors that may influence mentoring processes and outcomes (Hurd et al., 2012). The systemic model of mentoring, proposed by Keller (2005), and subsequently expanded upon by Keller & Blakeslee (2013), conceptually integrates family relationships and mentoring interventions. The systemic model of mentoring contends that understanding the broader ecological system in which the mentoring relationship is embedded is critical in fully understanding the mentoring relationship itself. This model emphasizes the role of family as a key component in achieving desirable youth outcomes, which aligns with general and specified ecological frameworks for youth development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; García Coll et al., 1996) and applies principles from these broader frameworks specifically to the mentoring context. Within the systemic model of mentoring, families are thought to influence mentoring outcomes through parents' ability to provide important information about mentees, communicate family values and goals, and promote motivation for both mentees and mentors (Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2013). Keller (2005) argues that mentors need to be fully aware of the factors and processes (e.g., family processes) affecting mentees in order to effectively engage with them and form successful relationships. Accordingly, coordination across settings is necessary for optimal outcomes to occur.

Using the systemic model of mentoring, qualitative researchers have taken an interest in studying family involvement in mentoring over the past decade and have found that family involvement is desired by mentors, program staff, and mentees' families. Collectively, this work has indicated a desire for increased family involvement in the mentoring process (Lakind, et al.,

2015; Spencer et al., 2011; Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Suffrin et al., 2016). These initial studies were conducted with samples from community-based mentoring programs, and thus it remains unclear if perceptions of family involvement are generalizable to school-based mentoring programs. A recent study compared parents of mentees in school-based and community-based mentoring programs and found that the two groups were more similar than distinct; notably, there were no differences between groups on ratings of family risk or social support (Sourk et al., 2019). This provides some preliminary evidence suggesting that the setting of a mentoring program may not be as important when studying the role of families in mentoring. Future work is needed to substantiate this, and to more broadly substantiate the role of family within the systemic model of mentoring.

Other research has focused specifically on youth relational histories as moderators of youth mentoring outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2011; Weiler et al., 2021) and as predictors of mentoring relationship quality (Williamson et al., 2020). Collectively, this work suggests that previous relationships have the potential to have a moderating effect on youth's outcomes and experiences in relationship-based interventions, such as mentoring. Despite this, many mentoring programs continue to focus solely on the mentor-mentee relationship.

Given that the positive youth development literature broadly supports the importance of family relationships for youth, it may be a problem that mentoring research and practice has often overlooked the role of families. Overemphasizing the mentoring relationship as the primary mechanism of change may contribute to the incomplete understanding of mentoring processes and outcomes. Some researchers have noted that this focus on the dyad and individual mentee outcomes may be contributing to the observed effect sizes (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Thus, there is a need for mentoring research that investigates the broader context that surrounds the

mentor-mentee dyad in order to provide information to programs about potential ways to enhance their effects and improve meaningful outcomes for youth. In addition, research that considers marginalized youths' broader context can help mentors in practice to increase their understanding of mentees' specific strengths and needs in order to serve them more effectively (Albright et al., 2017).

Current Study

The current exploratory study intends to bridge the gap between the mentoring outcome literature and family relationship literature. Youth mentoring programs have been shown to influence youth development, and family relationships similarly have been shown to influence youth development, however it remains unclear how, and the extent to which, these constructs are related. This study utilizes the systemic model of mentoring (Keller, 2005), taking an ecological approach to determine if family relationships are relevant in predicting salient social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for youth in mentoring programs. Although this study does not directly measure mentors' awareness or interaction with families as discussed in Keller's model of mentoring; clarifying the potential role of mentees' existing family relationships that they are entering the program with could provide useful insight to mentors and be a building block in guiding mentors' awareness and engagement with families.

The current study uses data from participants in a gender-specific, school-based mentoring program to empirically assess the role of family relationships in youth outcomes. This study seeks to answer two research questions. First, are different dimensions of family relationships (e.g., family support, family deviant beliefs) associated with changes in youth outcomes? Using Tolan and colleague's (1997) conceptual model of family dynamics, we hypothesize that youth with high ratings of family relationships (e.g., family support) will have

higher social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes compared to youth with low ratings of family relationships. The second research question is: are youth perceptions of family relationships associated with differential outcomes for youth in mentoring programs (i.e., are effects of mentoring moderated by family relationships)? We expect that the strength of family relationships will have a differential impact on youth mentoring outcomes, hypothesizing that youth with stronger family relationships will have greater improvements in social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes after participating in a mentoring program.

The mentoring literature has mixed findings about whether or not experiences in mentoring programs vary across racial/ethnic groups (Liang & West, 2007). Because racial and ethnic groups may vary in cultural expectations about relational closeness and other relational norms, race was included as a covariate in all analyses. In addition, youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be over-represented in mentoring groups given challenges associated with resource availability (Deutsch et al., 2013). Therefore, a measure of socio-economic status was included in analyses.

Methods

This study uses data collected as part of a larger, ongoing evaluation of the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), a school-based mentoring program focused on fostering adolescent girls' competence, connection, and autonomy (Henneberger et al., 2013). Participants were either in the treatment group or the control group; the treatment group participated in YWLP and experienced school-based mentoring over the course of an academic year, while the control group did not. Data were collected pre-mentoring intervention and post-mentoring intervention in the form of self-report surveys to examine the outcomes of the program. The control group responded to the same self-report surveys but did not receive the mentoring

intervention. Parental consent and participant assent were obtained for all study participants prior to data collection. All study procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Mentoring Intervention: The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP)

YWLP is a gender-specific, school-based mentoring program at four middle schools in the Southeast United States (Lawrence et al., 2009). The program structure consists of combined group and one-on-one weekly mentoring sessions that take place in the mentees' schools after school hours. Mentors are college women who apply to the program and participate in a corresponding course for college credit. Mentees are middle school girls who are referred to the program by school counselors due to academic, social, or behavioral performance. College women mentors are paired with middle school girls for a year of curriculum-driven mentoring focused on developing and promoting leadership skills, self-esteem, scholastic achievement, and healthy decision making.

The structure of the program consists of both an individual dyad component and a group component, where all mentor and mentee pairs from a particular school (about 6-10 dyads) meet together after school for two hours per week in a group led by a college woman or graduate student facilitator. The individual component consists of one-on-one time and the group component consists of activities that address salient issues facing adolescent girls (e.g., body image, relational aggression, and academics). Training and support for the mentors occurs through weekly peer supervision in addition to a required course for college credit that includes didactics on mentoring best practices, cultural competency, and adolescent development; training did not include specific guidance related to interacting with families.

Participants and Procedures

This sample included a total of 128 participants with 54% who participated in the program and 46% who served as controls. The participant group was comprised of 69 seventh grade girls who participated in the YWLP program during one of the three academic years: 2010-2011, 2011-2012, or 2012-2013; the control group was comprised of 59 seventh grade girls. School counselors from four local middle schools identified middle school girls at-risk for academic, behavioral, or social concerns who they believed would benefit from having a college student mentor. In 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, middle school counselors referred approximately twice the number of girls that YWLP could serve (i.e., about 100 girls referred for 50 program slots). From this referral pool, half of the girls were randomly selected for participation in YWLP and the other half were assigned to the control group; subsequently, all girls were invited to participate in the research study. The third cohort of girls was a non-randomized sample that included seventeen girls (n = 17) who participated in YWLP. The original study sample target was 200 participants, but this goal was not met; ultimately the baseline sample included a randomized sample of 114 participants plus the seventeen additional girls in cohort 3 (N = 128). The mentoring intervention was implemented as intended. Participants were asked to complete self-report surveys at baseline at the start of the academic year as well as at follow-up in the spring of the academic year. Of the 128 girls who completed a baseline interview, 87 also completed a follow-up interview (32% attrition). T-tests and chi-square tests were used to compare girls who dropped out of the study to those who remained enrolled; no significant differences were found between attrition and retention groups. In addition, baseline scores on all study variables were compared between treatment and control group using t-tests; which indicated that groups were largely similar across all baseline variables assessed in the original

outcome study (Williams et al., 2015).

Demographics

Participants self-reported sociodemographic information pre-mentoring intervention. The distribution of participants in the program and control groups was similar across a range of demographic factors. Participants' ages ranged from 11-13 (M = 12.02, SD = .46) when they entered the study. Approximately 34% of study participants reported their race/ethnicity as Black, 27% as White, 23% as Multiracial, 12% Hispanic/Latina, 1% Asian/Asian American, 1% American Indian, and 2% from another racial/ethnic group. The majority of participants (72%) qualified for free or reduced lunch at school, which serves as a proxy for socioeconomic status in this study. Approximately half of participants (48%) lived in a single-parent household. Additional demographic information for the sample can be found in Table 1.

Measures

Social-Emotional Outcomes

Peer Self-Esteem. Mentees' self-reported peer self-esteem was measured with the peer self-esteem subscale from the Self-Esteem Questionnaire (DuBois et al., 1996). Participants completed this questionnaire pre- and post- mentoring intervention. The peer self-esteem subscale was comprised of 8 items (e.g., *I am as well liked by others as I want to be*). Participants were asked to select the response that best described their feelings about themselves on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 4 (*strongly agree*). The subscale score was calculated by computing an average for each participant, such that a higher score corresponded with higher self-esteem. Cronbach's alpha was .83 at baseline and .85 at follow-up.

Positive Youth Development Character. Mentees' self-reported positive youth development character was measured with the character subscale of the Positive Youth

Development Scale (PYD; Theokas et al., 2005). The character subscale was comprised of 12 items (e.g., Helping to make sure all people are treated fairly). Participants completed this questionnaire pre- and post- mentoring intervention. Participants were asked to rate the importance of the items to them on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*not important*) to 4 (*extremely important*). Cronbach's alpha was .84 at baseline and .88 at follow-up.

Behavioral outcomes

Delinquency. Mentees' self-reported frequency of delinquent behaviors was measured with the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (PBFS; Farrell et al., 2000). The PBFS was completed pre- and post- mentoring intervention. The delinquency subscale of the PBFS was comprised of 8 questions regarding a variety of problem behaviors (e.g., *How many times have you been on suspension?*). Participants were asked to rate the frequency of these behaviors in the past 30 days on a six-point Likert scale with response options 1 (*never*), 2 (*1-2 times*), 3 (*3-5 times*), 4 (*6-9 times*), 5 (*10-19 times*), and 6 (*20 times or more*). The homogeneity of participants' responses on this subscale violated the assumptions of Cronbach's alpha; therefore, the internal consistency score is not reported for this measure (Yang & Green, 2011).

Academic outcomes

Academic Performance. Mentees' self-reported academic performance was measured pre- and post- mentoring intervention. Mentees were asked to answer four questions, about their performance in various subjects (e.g., *How well did you do in mathematics?)* on a five-point Likert scale with response options 1 (*not good at all*) to 5 (*excellent*). Cronbach's alpha was .59 at baseline and .54 at follow-up.

Academic Plans. Mentees' self-reported academic plans were measured pre- and post- mentoring intervention. Mentees were asked to answer 3 questions ($\alpha = .72$) about how sure they

were that they would complete high school, go to college, and complete college (e.g., *How sure are you that you will graduate college?*) on a four-point Likert scale with response options 1 (*not at all sure*) to 4 (*very sure*). Cronbach's alpha was .72 at baseline and .74 at follow-up.

Independent Variables

Family Relationships. The Family Relationship Characteristics Scale is a 35-item self-report questionnaire that assesses various dimensions of family functioning and characteristics (Tolan et al., 1997). The Family Relationships Characteristics Scale was completed pre-mentoring intervention. Mentees were asked to identify how true they considered a series of statements to be about the mentee's family specifically as well as beliefs about family more generally (e.g., *We get along well togethe*r and *People should do whatever it takes to help a family member in need*). This scale was comprised of 6 subscales: beliefs about family ($\alpha = .79$), deviant beliefs, family cohesion ($\alpha = .82$), organization ($\alpha = .56$), support ($\alpha = .70$), and communication ($\alpha = .71$). The homogeneity of participants' responses for the deviant beliefs subscale violated the assumptions of Cronbach's alpha; therefore, the internal consistency score is not reported for this measure (Yang & Green, 2011). Response options were on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*not true*) to 4 (*always/almost always true*). Subscale scores were calculated as mean scores, such that a higher score corresponded with stronger family relationships, with the exception of the deviant beliefs and organization subscales which were reverse-coded. Deviant beliefs were coded such that lower values of deviant beliefs suggested more problematic beliefs and higher scores suggested anti-deviant beliefs. Family organization was coded such that lower values of family organization suggested more problems with family structure and roles and higher scores suggested stronger family structure.

Covariates

A series of mentee characteristics that have been identified as predictors or influences of mentoring in the literature were included as covariates in all models.

Socio-Economic Status. Receiving free or reduced lunch was used as a proxy for socio-economic status (SES; Day et al., 2016). Study participants identified if they received *Free Lunch*, *Reduced Priced Lunch*, or *Neither Free or Reduced Lunch*. Participants self-reported this information pre-mentoring intervention. SES was included as a control variable in the regression model with *Neither Free or Reduced Lunch* coded as the reference category.

Race. Participants self-reported their race according to the following response options: *Black/African American, White/Caucasian, Asian/Asian American, Hispanic/Latina*, *Multiethnic/Multiracial, American Indian,* or *Other*. Participants self-reported this information pre-mentoring intervention. The largest group was *Black/African American*, thus it was coded as the reference category.

School. Because YWLP is structured as a group mentoring program plus a one-on-one component, it is important to take into account differences in treatment that may occur across mentoring groups (Deutsch et al., 2013). Mentoring groups take place at four different schools, so a dummy-coded variable was created with the largest of the four schools as the reference group.

Cohort. Data were collected from three cohorts of girls, so potential cohort effects were accounted for in the analyses. Dummy-coded variables were created for Cohorts 2 and 3, with Cohort 1 serving as the reference group.

Family Structure. Given the possibility that participants from single-parent homes may have had fewer adult-based relational resources and different bases for family relationships

relative to girls in two-parent homes, we controlled for single-parent family status using a dummy-coded variable, with 1 = "yes" and 0 = "no" (i.e., not a single-parent household).

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Plan and Assumptions

Data exploration and descriptive statistics were analyzed using Stata IC (version 15.1) statistical software; regression analyses were analyzed using R (3.6.3). Data exploration revealed that approximately 30% of data were missing at post-intervention data collection. Multiple imputation was used to address missingness using the Amelia package in R 3.6.3. The imputed datasets (n = 100) were analyzed using the Zelig package (Imai et al., 2009).

This study tested a series of ordinary least squares multiple linear regression models to evaluate the relationship of family relationship characteristics on various social-emotional, behavioral and academic outcomes. First, a regression model was run for each outcome that included all six dimensions of family relationship characteristics, baseline levels of the outcome, and covariates. For dimensions of family relationship characteristics that were significant, an additional regression model was run that included an interaction term to examine the association between participants' family relationship characteristics and their treatment effects. To test for the family relationship interaction term, the beta weight, as a measure of effect size, and the associated p-value were examined.

The assumptions of ordinary least squares regression were tested to ensure a linear relationship between predictors and outcomes, that the error variances were normally distributed and homoscedastic, and that there was no multicollinearity. Before conducting analyses, continuous variables were z-score standardized to facilitate interpretation of model parameters.

Regression Equation

This study explores the association between family relationships and specific youth outcomes for youth participating in a mentoring program and a randomized control group. The specific answers to the stated research questions were guided by results from the following regression equations:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (\text{InterventionStatus}_i) + \beta_2 (\text{FamilyBeliefs}_i) + \beta_3 (\text{FamilyDeviantBeliefs}_i) + \beta_4 (\text{FamilyCohesion}_i) + \beta_5 (\text{FamilyOrganization}_i) + \beta_6 (\text{FamilySupport}_i) + \beta_7 (\text{FamilyCommunication}_i + \beta_8 (\text{PreInterventionScores}_i) + \beta_9 (\text{Race}_i) + \beta_{10} (\text{SES}_i) + \beta_{11} (\text{FamilyStructure}_i) + \beta_{12} (\text{Cohort}_i) + \beta_{13} (\text{School}_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

This base regression equation was used to test specific social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes separately and included all six dimensions of family relationships in order to examine the subscales individually. The significance and value of the coefficient for the intervention status independent variable, represented in the model by β_1, indicates if and how participating in the mentoring intervention is associated with changes in outcome scores (e.g., self-esteem), relative to the control group. The significance and value of the coefficient for the family relationships independent variables, represented in the model by $\beta_2 - \beta_7$, indicates if and how family relationship scores are associated with changes in outcome scores, controlling for group assignment. For models with significant family relationship predictors, an additional model was run to test for an interaction between family characteristic and intervention status. Of the most consequence in addressing the secondary research question, the significance of the interaction term indicates if the strength of family relationships moderates the relationship between receiving a mentoring intervention and differences in outcomes.

Results

In general, the sample reported high levels of self-esteem and low frequencies of delinquency that remained generally stable over time for both the program and control

participants. Mean family relationship characteristic values were similar across the program and control group. Additional descriptive information about predictors and outcomes are available in Table 2.

Table 3 shows pairwise correlation analyses between the independent and dependent variables examined in this study. These results revealed statistically positive correlations between family organization, support, cohesion, and beliefs. In addition, dimensions of family relationships generally had a significant, positive association with baseline and follow-up levels of self-esteem, positive youth development character, and academic plans, but not academic performance (see Table 3). Results from regression analyses can be found in Table 4. As shown in the table, we did not find a significant intervention effect for mentoring (presented as the Group variable) across any of the outcomes.

Social-emotional Outcomes

The first set of analyses examined predictors of family relationship characteristics across social-emotional outcomes. Baseline self-esteem scores were the only significant predictor of self-esteem at the end of the year ($b = 0.52$, $p < .001$). This model indicated that family relationship characteristics were not significantly associated with the outcome; thus, additional moderation analyses were unnecessary. The only significant predictor of positive youth development was baseline scores of positive youth development ($b = 0.35$, $p = .02$).

Behavioral Outcomes

Analyses related to delinquency outcomes similarly revealed that baseline delinquency frequencies were significantly associated with follow-up delinquency scores ($b = 0.44$, $p < .001$). Family deviant beliefs was the only family relationship characteristic that emerged as a significant predictor of changes in delinquency, such that higher scores of deviant beliefs was

associated with a decrease in delinquency rate ($b = -0.23$, $p = .02$). Because deviant beliefs was reverse coded, this result is interpreted as youths whose families were less supportive of deviant behavior reported decreases in delinquent behavior. An additional model was run to test for an interaction term between family deviant beliefs and mentoring intervention status, however the interaction term was not significant ($b = 0.14$, $p = .17$).

Academic Outcomes

Baseline academic performance was a significant predictor of follow-up academic performance ($b = 0.57$, $p < .001$). In addition, SES emerged as a significant predictor of follow-up academic performance ($b = - 0.29$, $p < .001$). Baseline academic plans was a significant predictor of follow-up academic plans ($b = 0.36$, $p < .001$). Family support was also a significant predictor, such that high family support was associated with higher academic plans ($b = 0.30$, $p = .01$). An additional model was run to test for an interaction term between family support and mentoring intervention status, however the interaction term was not significant ($b = -0.05$, $p = .56$).

Discussion

This quasi-experimental study utilized an ecological framework of youth development to explore if family relationships were associated with changes in various academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes and if those relationships moderated changes for youth participating in a year-long, gender-specific, school-based mentoring program. While baseline family relationships were associated with a variety of youth outcomes, the results from this study primarily found no family effects for changes in outcomes over the course of the school year, with the exception of a few youth outcomes (i.e., delinquency, academic plans).

Although this study is exploratory, the regression results partially supported our prediction that ecological predictors would be significantly associated with youth outcomes; however, our prediction that family relationships would moderate the treatment effects was not observed. These findings suggest that there are likely more nuances to family processes that are not captured in this data set. Findings show that existing family relationships were associated with some desirable youth outcomes (i.e., delinquency, academic plans) regardless of intervention status. In other words, the family dynamics that a youth started with were associated with changes in youth competencies, while the mentoring intervention was not, however this study did not demonstrate a conclusive pattern of this relationship. These mixed findings about family relationships on youth outcomes are consistent with prior research from mentoring program evaluations (DuBois et al., 2002; DuBois et al., 2011) in addition to other various related fields (Thomas et al., 2017; Williams & Anthony, 2015).

The null effects observed for the mentoring intervention are consistent with other mixed evaluations of mentoring programs (Bernstein et al., 2009; Raposa et al., 2019) and may be related to reasons proposed by other scholars that help explain lack of desirable mentoring effect sizes. For example, youth mentoring programs are often non-specific preventative interventions, while targeted, problem-specific interventions tend to show greater effect sizes (Christensen et al., 2021) and prevention programs tend to show stronger positive effects for youth that experience more acute behavioral, emotional, and academic because there is more room for improvement (Tanner-Smith et al., 2018). Despite being referred for potential behavioral, social-emotional, or academic concerns by school counselors, the participants in this sample had favorable baseline scores indicating they were faring well already. In addition, it is possible that other aspects of the intervention and sample may have impacted the findings, given that YWLP

program is a non-specific, female-only, school-based mentoring program that is comprised of one-on-one and group sessions and the sample was predominantly comprised of mentees from historically marginalized racial groups and low socioeconomic status. Given that families are considered to be critical in both promoting and inhibiting youth developmental competencies for youth from historically minoritized racial and ethnic groups (García Coll et al., 1996), future to substantiate the role of families in mentoring with various populations warranted.

Results from moderation analyses did not find a significant interaction between family relationships and mentoring intervention status on youth outcomes. In other words, aspects of family relationships did not have a differential impact for youth in mentoring programs compared to controls. In general, participants had high baseline levels of desirable outcomes and there did not appear to be a treatment effect of the intervention for this study, therefore, there was not much variability in mentoring outcomes for the family variable to moderate. With this context, the null findings do not suggest that families do not have a role to play within mentoring programs, but rather support the notion that it remains unclear exactly what the role of family relationships is in relation to youth mentoring programs. Nevertheless, as interest in studying ecological factors contributing to mentoring outcomes continues to grow, these results are important to publish because the inclusion of null findings helps to protect against publication bias in meta-analyses (Franco et al., 2014) which is especially relevant since meta-analyses are commonly cited in mentoring literature (e.g., Eby et al., 2008; DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019).

This study evaluated outcomes from the YWLP program, which did not specifically focus on family involvement or engagement in their mentor training. Therefore, it is unclear how mentors may have interacted or engaged with the families, which is an important component of

Keller's systemic model of mentoring (2005). Qualitative research would provide more insight into how mentors and mentoring programs are currently conceptualizing families and specify targets for mentor training. The baseline levels of reported family relationships were generally strong and baseline levels of outcome variables were favorable in this sample; this knowledge may provide useful context and increase mentor awareness for mentors about the strengths that mentees are brining into a relationship. This may give the opportunity for mentoring relationships to reinforce what is going well at home or potentially counterbalance what is lacking at home (Crosnoe & Elder, 2014). Moreover, the findings from this study underscore the importance of clarifying the relationship between family and mentoring. Viewing family as an important context for youth development *in combination* with mentoring may be most useful when programs are interested in promoting youth outcomes; this is a shift from many mentoring program's views that the two contexts ought to remain separate (Suffrin et al., 2016) and supports a growing body of research focused on ecological factors (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014).

These findings have implications to mentoring programs who have an interest in involving families. First, the present study adds to the general understanding of how existing family relationships influence outcomes for mentees. This has the potential to help programs consider factors that could increase treatment effect sizes; for example, programs may choose to assess for family beliefs and values at the start of the mentoring relationship and incorporate that knowledge into the intervention. Second, this study may help to determine multiple points of intervention for family involvement taking a strengths-based approach to working with families. Programs could choose to build upon existing family strengths that promote favorable outcomes, as well as target areas of unfavorable family relationships, providing multiple ways to involve

families. Finally, programs can use this information to begin to address issues related to incorporating family involvement into their curricula and mentor trainings.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study has the potential to contribute to the literature on the impact of family relationships on youth mentoring outcomes, there are several limitations that must be considered when interpreting results. A number of methodological limitations may contribute to the lack of consistent findings. Namely, this study consisted of a small, homogeneous sample, therefore lacking statistical power to demonstrate differences by group. In addition, several statistical tests were conducted which may have contributed to an inflated study-wide Type I error rate. Next, the sample had high baseline scores of favorable youth outcomes and low baseline rates of problem behaviors that remained fairly stable across the study period. Relatedly, Cronbach alpha's for some scales was lower than desirable. Furthermore, there were relatively few differences between the participant and control youth outcomes; with few differences between groups, it was unsurprising that family relationships did not moderate the relationship between groups.

One of the primary limitations is the lack of variability and generalizability due to the sample size and sample characteristics. The mentees in the intervention group all participated in the same gender-specific, school-based mentoring program. This limits generalizability to other youth mentoring programs, especially because the structure of YWLP is unique in that it consists of both group and individual curriculum components. Therefore, inferences from this study may not be relevant or applicable to other types of mentoring programs and their mentees. Future research will be needed on other types of mentoring programs that serve varied populations (e.g., community-based programs, non-gender specific) to determine generalizability.

Further, all study data relied exclusively on middle school girls' self-report surveys. While the research questions focused on participants' perceptions of their family relationships and their social-emotional experiences, having more objective measures of these constructs or including additional reporters (e.g., parents) may have reduced shared method variance and social desirability bias. The inability to control for extraneous variables and to account for other potential moderators that may impact mentoring outcomes is another limitation of this study.

Finally, mentoring programs are seeking practical, concrete research-based recommendations for ways to incorporate family involvement into their programs. This study helps expand upon the limited research on ecological factors that impact youth in mentoring programs, however, it does not directly provide programs with actionable information on how to best involve families. Further research is necessary to better understand the role of families in improving outcomes for youth in mentoring programs and guide research to practice efforts.

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Table 1

Demographics

Characteristic	Program n (%)	Control n (%)	Total n (%)	Missing n	Mean	SD
Participants	69 (53.91)	59 (46.09)	128 (100.00)	0		
Cohort	69 (53.91)	59 (46.09)	128 (100.00)	0		
Cohort 1	33 (25.78)	32 (25.00)	65 (50.78)			
Cohort 2	19 (14.84)	27 (21.09)	46 (35.94)			
Cohort 3	17 (13.28)	0 (0.00)	17 (13.28)			
Age	68 (53.97)	58 (46.03)	126 (100.00)	2	12.02	.46
11	5 (3.97)	7 (5.56)	12 (9.52)			
12	54 (42.86)	46 (36.51)	100 (79.37)			
13	9 (7.14)	5 (3.97)	14 (11.11)			
Race	67 (54.03)	57 (45.97)	124 (100.00)	4		
Black/African American	15 (12.10)	27 (21.77)	42 (33.87)			
White/Caucasian	20 (16.13)	14 (11.29)	34 (27.42)			
Hispanic/Latina	12 (9.68)	3 (2.42)	15 (12.10)			
Asian/Asian American	0 (0.00)	1 (0.81)	1 (0.81)			
American Indian	1 (0.81)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.81)			
Multiethnic/Multiracial	17 (13.71)	11 (8.87)	28 (22.58)			
Other	2 (1.61)	1 (0.81)	3 (2.42)			
SES	68 (53.54)	59 (46.46)	127 (100.00)	1		
No free/reduced price lunch	18 (14.17)	18 (14.17)	36 (28.35)			
Free/reduced priced lunch	50 (39.37)	41 (32.28)	91 (71.65)			
Single Parent Household	67 (53.17)	59 (46.83)	126 (100.00)	2		
Yes	32 (25.40)	29 (23.02)	61 (48.41)			
No	35 (27.78)	30 (23.81)	65 (51.59)			
School	67 (53.60)	58 (46.40)	125 (100.00)	3		
School 1	25 (20.00)	13 (10.40)	38 (30.40)			
School 2	15 (12.00)	17 (13.60)	32 (25.60)			
School 3	9 (7.20)	11 (8.80)	20 (16.00)			
School 4	18 (14.40)	17 (13.60)	35 (28.0)			

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	n	Mean	SD	n Missing
Self Esteem (pre)	126	3.24	.49	2
Program	68	3.29	.43	
Control	58	3.19	.55	
Self-Esteem (post)	87	3.10	.50	41
Program	42	3.05	.43	
Control	45	3.15	.57	
Delinquency (pre)	126	1.08	.15	2
Program	68	1.06	.12	
Control	58	1.10	.18	
Delinquency (post)	87	1.12	.21	41
Program	42	1.10	.15	
Control	45	1.14	.25	
PYD (pre)	126	3.49	.44	2
Program	68	3.46	.49	
Control	58	3.53	.38	
PYD (post)	87	3.54	.41	41
Program	42	3.51	.43	
Control	45	3.57	.39	
Academic Performance (pre)	126	3.95	.66	2
Program	68	3.90	.64	
Control	58	4.00	.68	
Academic Performance (post)	86	3.84	.69	42
Program	41	3.88	.72	
Control	45	3.79	.66	
Academic Plans (pre)	126	3.69	.49	2
Program	68	3.72	.48	
Control	58	3.66	.50	
Academic Plans (post)	87	3.60	.52	41
Program	42	3.63	.52	
Control	45	3.58	.53	
Family Relationships (pre)				
Family Cohesion	126	3.37	.53	2
Program	68	3.38	.55	
Control	58	3.37	.50	
Communication	125	2.87	.78	3
Program	68	2.78	.73	
Control	57	2.98	.81	
Organization	126	3.45	.46	2
Program	68	3.44	.50	

Control	58	3.45	.42	
Support	126	3.16	.62	2
Program	68	3.13	.64	
Control	58	3.19	.59	
Family Beliefs	126	3.61	.35	2
Program	68	3.62	.36	
Control	58	3.60	.34	
Deviant Beliefs	126	3.80	.30	2
Program	68	3.74	.33	
Control	58	3.86	.25	

Table 3

Pairwise correlations for Intervention Status, Family Relationships, Social-Emotional, Behavioral, and Academic Outcomes

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)
(1) Group	1.000																
(2) Family Communication	-.130	1.000															
(3) Family Organization	-.012	.107	1.000														
(4) Family Support	-.053	-.007	.581***	1.000													
(5) Family Deviant Beliefs	-.190**	.121	.129	.153*	1.000												
(6) Family Cohesion	.005	.190**	.303***	.261***	.083	1.000											
(7) Family Beliefs	.034	.161*	.223**	.247***	.159*	.649***	1.000										
(8) Self-Esteem (pre)	.104	.093	.208**	.254***	.136	.355***	.292***	1.000									
(9) Self-Esteem (post)	-.095	.012	.173	.263**	.109	.214**	.158	.538***	1.000								
(10) PYD (pre)	-.078	.188**	.115	.102	.152*	.415***	.372***	.345***	.263**	1.000							
(11) PYD (post)	-.075	-.001	.085	.113	.066	.234**	.155	.214**	.205*	.359***	1.000						
(12)Delinquency (pre)	-.116	.056	-.095	-.097	-.300***	-.028	-.147*	-.166*	-.133	-.160*	-.172	1.000					
(13)Delinquency (post)	-.098	-.049	-.145	-.193*	-.420***	.000	-.089	-.090	-.197*	-.198*	-.070	.526***	1.000				
(14) Academic Performance (pre)	-.079	.115	-.019	.011	.112	.141	.069	.274***	.349***	.184**	.169	-.254***	-.239**	1.000			
(15) Academic Performance (post)	.062	-.065	-.143	-.045	.057	.058	.032	-.003	.096	-.020	.082	-.231**	-.310***	.596***	1.000		
(16) Academic Plans (pre)	-.064	.096	.123	.190**	.155*	.313***	.216**	.242***	.182*	.184**	.004	.006	-.083	.187**	.027	1.000	
(17) Academic Plans (post)	.047	-.033	.020	.307***	.041	.196*	.240**	.321***	.159	.184*	.200*	-.107	-.176*	.403***	.338***	.392***	1.000

* $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4

The Association of Family Relationships and Mentoring Intervention on Social-Emotional, Behavioral, and Academic Outcomes: Linear Regression Model Results

	Self-Esteem		PYD		Delinquency		Academic Performance		Academic Plans	
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Self-Esteem baseline	0.52***	0.10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PYD baseline	-	-	0.35*	0.15	-	-	-	-	-	-
Delinquency baseline	-	-	-	-	0.44***	0.11	-	-	-	-
Academic Performance baseline	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.57***	0.08	-	-
Academic Plans baseline	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.36***	0.11
Family Cohesion	0.03	0.12	0.18	0.14	0.06	0.12	-0.06	0.12	-0.06	0.13
Family Communication	-0.06	0.10	-0.07	0.12	-0.15	0.13	-0.11	0.10	-0.02	0.11
Family Organization	-0.10	0.18	-0.08	0.17	0.11	0.17	-0.15	0.15	-0.29	0.16
Family Support	0.10	0.14	0.10	0.14	-0.23	0.12	0.00	0.11	0.30*	0.12
Family Beliefs	0.04	0.12	-0.09	0.15	0.09	0.14	0.02	0.12	0.19	0.13
Family Deviant Beliefs	-0.03	0.11	0.03	0.12	-0.27*	0.12	-0.01	0.11	0.00	0.10
Group	-0.19	0.11	-0.10	0.12	-0.09	0.11	0.06	0.10	0.04	0.10
Cohort	0.00	0.11	0.11	0.13	-0.03	0.11	0.04	0.10	-0.01	0.12
Race	-0.07	0.11	0.06	0.12	0.01	0.11	-0.06	0.10	0.03	0.10
SES	0.12	0.10	0.04	0.12	0.00	0.10	-0.29**	0.09	0.04	0.10
Family Structure	0.05	0.10	0.02	0.12	-0.03	0.10	0.03	0.09	0.01	0.10
School	-0.02	0.10	-0.05	0.12	0.03	0.10	0.03	0.10	0.05	0.11
Intercept	-0.02	.10	-0.01	0.10	-0.00	0.09	0.01	0.08	0.04	0.09

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Manuscript Two

A Multilevel Approach to Understanding the Role of Neighborhood and Family Relationships on Adolescent Social-Emotional Outcomes

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Abstract

This study explored the effects of neighborhood and family relationship characteristics on adolescent social-emotional outcomes. Although several studies have established the importance of both of these ecological contexts on youth development, methodological limitations have hindered sufficient investigation of the relative importance of family and neighborhood-level factors while accounting for the inherent nested nature of the data. This study used data collected as part of a larger study conducted in Chicago neighborhoods (Henry et al., 2014). A total of 302 adolescents participated from 30 low-income neighborhoods (10 adolescents per neighborhood) that met specific inclusion criteria. A total of 605 adults served as neighborhood informants (20 informants per neighborhood). Adolescent participants provided outcome data across a range of self-reported social-emotional measures (e.g., depression, anxiety, and self-esteem symptom measures). Neighborhood informants provided data about the characteristics of their neighborhood (i.e., social cohesion, neighborhood norms, and neighborhood problems measures). Multilevel modeling was employed to separate within- and between-neighborhood effects across all outcomes. Results indicated that family relationship variables were generally associated with social-emotional outcomes in expected directions when controlling for within- and between-neighborhood effects. Most neighborhood-level characteristics (as measured by neighborhood informants) were found to have null associations with outcomes. Results suggest that intervention at the family-level may have the most impact in promoting youth mental health for adolescents in low-income, structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Keywords: Ecological, Family Relationships, Neighborhood, Adolescence, Depression, Anxiety, Self-Esteem

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical time of development that has been linked to the emergence of social-emotional issues (Daneel et al., 2019). Though broadly defined, social-emotional issues commonly refer to anxiety, depression, and challenges with self-esteem (Rapee et al., 2019). Social-emotional problems such as these can be prevalent, distressing, and impairing during adolescence (Graber & Sontag, 2009). Accordingly, considerable research has been dedicated towards understanding the risk factors for developing social-emotional issues as well as factors to promote adolescent wellbeing to guide prevention and early intervention efforts (Jamnik & DiLalla, 2019). This study explores the relative roles of families and neighborhood on adolescent social-emotional outcomes to investigate how (or if) neighborhood characteristics influence youth development to inform efforts to promote psychological wellbeing and buffer against pathology.

Effects of Adolescent Social-Emotional Functioning

Social-emotional problems experienced during adolescence can have cascading effects in a variety of domains (e.g., health, academic, social, financial problems; Graber & Sontag, 2013). For example, adolescent internalizing problems have been linked to lower educational attainment, poor work history, and substance use in adulthood (Weersing et al., 2012). High levels of depression and anxiety have been shown to increase the risk for low school attendance, delinquency, substance abuse, and suicide (Clayborne et al., 2019; Essau et al., 2013; Ivarsson et al., 2002). Low self-esteem has been associated with a number of psychological, physical, and social consequences that may interfere with adolescent development and the transition to adulthood, including eating disorders, violent behavior, and earlier initiation of sexual activity

and substance use (McClure et al., 2010). Taken together, research suggests that social-emotional problems in adolescence may be a harbinger for poorer long-term outcomes.

Conversely, adolescent wellbeing and high levels of self-esteem have been established as predictors of later successes, including academic success in higher education, better occupational attainment, and higher life satisfaction (Beal & Crocket, 2010). Thus, understanding and clarifying the factors that influence internalizing behaviors for adolescents is critical in promoting desirable outcomes and preventing costly outcomes. Individual and environmental risk and protective factors help to identify possible supports for sustaining mental wellbeing and buffering against adverse mental health outcomes (Wille et al., 2008).

Ecological Study of Youth Social-Emotional Outcomes

Ecological theories of adolescent development describe how multiple contexts influence youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Among the many factors that ecological frameworks encompass, families and neighborhoods serve as two important contextual settings for youth development (Boardman & Saint Onge, 2005). Family is a more proximal context of youth development that is situated within more distal contexts, such as neighborhood and community structures and processes (Rankin & Quane, 2002). A brief review of family and neighborhood-level factors on adolescent social-emotional outcomes is provided below.

Family Influence on Social-Emotional Outcomes

A robust literature base has established that families play a major role in the development of their children across a variety of social-emotional outcomes (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). Researchers Morris et al. (2007) present a tripartite model of the impact of family on children's emotion regulation and adjustment, which includes observation (e.g., modeling, social referencing, and emotion contagion), parenting practices (e.g., reactions to emotions), and

emotional climate of the family (e.g., attachment/parenting style, family structure and organization). Within this model, family factors can both directly and indirectly impact internalizing behaviors. Given the strong association between families and social-emotional development, several psychological interventions to address youth social-emotional problems include a family component (Smith et al., 2020).

Neighborhood Influence on Adolescent Outcomes

Decades of research have also considered the influence of neighborhoods on adolescent outcomes, given that during this developmental time period youth tend to spend an increasing amount of time in social contexts outside of their home (Leventhal et al., 2009). Structural characteristics (e.g., economic disadvantage) and social processes (e.g., social connection) of neighborhoods have been shown to influence youth engagement in risk-related behaviors, educational outcomes, and physical and mental health outcomes; although findings are often mixed (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). Neighborhood structural disadvantage has been identified as a risk factor, suggesting that neighborhoods characterized by disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions may lead to youth behavior problems (Kim et al., 2019) and delinquency (Damm & Dustmann, 2014). Conversely, neighborhood social capital and collective efficacy serve as protective factors to strengthen resilience and provide a positive impact on children's social-emotional development (Choi et al., 2018).

Examining Families and Neighborhoods Together: Findings and Limitations

To date, several studies have taken an ecological approach to studying a variety of outcomes at both the family and neighborhood level (e.g., Garthe et al., 2018; Orihuela et al., 2020). Theories of neighborhood effects on development propose that neighborhood-level influences likely operate indirectly through various proximal social contexts, such as families,

peers, child care, and schools (e.g., Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Despite a breadth of research supporting Bronfenbrenner's theory on the influence of ecological factors on youth development, several methodological limitations have left important gaps in this literature. Specifically, given the nested nature of adolescents within families, within schools, and within neighborhoods, it can be difficult to disentangle the within- and between- effects of each ecological factor (Henry et al., 2014; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020). In addition, data collection to account for the variation of the levels is difficult because it can be both costly and time consuming, and needs to be sufficiently powered to demonstrate within- and between-group differences (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013).

The Current Study

The present study examines the role of family relationships and neighborhood characteristics as ecological predictors of adolescent social-emotional outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, depression). Due to previously cited methodological challenges in parsing out effects at both the family and neighborhood level, few studies have been able to empirically test the specific influence of each ecological setting while accounting for the inherent nested nature of ecological systems. The main objective of the current study is to determine the relative importance of family relationships and neighborhood on adolescent social-emotional outcomes.

Given the high costs associated with social-emotional issues during adolescence and the positive benefits of healthy social-emotional functioning, investigating ecological predictors of social-emotional functioning may be one rudimentary, yet important, approach to identify risk and protective factors that exist within the environments that youth are involved. Clarifying the relative importance and role of these systemic factors can advance prior research that has suffered from methodological challenges and limitations. A clearer understanding of risk and

protective factors has the potential to provide pertinent information to youth programming and inform policy considerations. Literature suggests that neighborhood and family factors are both influential systems of an adolescent's ecosystem, but lacks specificity on the relative importance and/or interaction of these systems. Therefore, the primary research question is: In what ways are family and neighborhood factors associated with adolescent social-emotional outcomes? We hypothesize that stronger, positive family relationships and lower levels of neighborhood problems will be associated with better social-emotional outcomes (e.g., lower levels of depression, higher levels of self-esteem) for adolescents based on prior research demonstrating the protective role of positive family and neighborhood influences.

Methods

This study used data collected as part of a larger study designed to measure and evaluate the relation of social neighborhood processes to violence (see Henry et al., 2014).

Sample

Neighborhood Selection

Using 2009 census and crime data, eligible census tracts within Chicago, Illinois were identified based on the following criteria: (1) the population within the tract was predominantly (>50%) Hispanic/Latino or Black/African American; (2) the population within the tract was >1,000 individuals; (3) between 20 to 45% of households were below the poverty line; and (4) the crime rate within the tract was <150 aggravated assaults per 10,000 residents per year.[1] Neighborhoods were then selected via stratified random sampling from the 155 (63 Hispanic/Latino and 92 Black/African American) of 866 total tracts that met the eligibility

[1] The researchers wanted to ensure that there were similar rates of crime between the primarily Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American tracts. Because only one tract had >150 aggravated assaults per 10,000 residents, they made the decision to decrease the maximum aggravated assault rate to 150/10,000.

criteria. These 155 tracts were categorized by poverty level (i.e., 20-25, 25-30, 30-35, 35-40, and 40-45% below the poverty line) and six tracts (three Hispanic/Latino and three Black/African American) were selected within each level. Once selected, tracts were replaced by random selection if they (a) directly bordered another tract that was already selected for the sample, or (b) contained one or more significant geographic barriers, such as an expressway that bisected the tract. See Henry et al. (2014) for details on the full sampling procedures.

Participant Selection

There were two phases of participant selection. First, neighborhood informants were selected to report on neighborhood level factors. Second, adolescents were selected to report on individual, family, and peer level factors.

Neighborhood Informant Selection. Twenty participants within each of the 30 selected census tracts were recruited to participate in this study as neighborhood informants. An equal number of male and female participants, as well as younger (between 18 and 24 years old) and older (30 + years old) adults, participated within each of the tracts as a result of stratified random sampling.

The researchers selected these participants by sending letters to 20 random USPS addresses within each census tract. Following the mail contact, recruiters called and visited each household. If someone in the household was interested and met the aforementioned criteria (i.e., sex and age group) for the study, he or she became a study participant following informed consent. If possible, the interview was conducted at the same time of this initial visit.

Once the recruiter had exhausted the addresses from the initial list, a new list of random addresses was selected, and the process began all over again. Of the households that had an eligible resident, approximately 86% of those residents completed the survey (606/703).

Adolescent Selection. The researchers took a "snowball" sampling approach to recruit adolescents. They first asked respondents from the neighborhood informant sample to identify households that had children in the target age range (i.e., 13-17). Recruiters then attempted to contact the nominated families. Families who met criteria and agreed to participate were also asked to nominate additional families until 10 adolescent-parent pairs consented in each neighborhood.

Interview Procedure

All data were collected through participant interviews. In the case of the neighborhood informants, interviewers spent approximately 40 minutes administering the questions to each informant and recorded their responses. These participants were each paid $25 for their time. In terms of the adolescent-parent pairs, adolescents and parents were interviewed separately and each interview took approximately two hours. Again, the interviewers administered and recorded the responses; that said, for the more sensitive questions, participants had the option to use a laptop to complete the questions privately. Adolescents were paid $30 for their time.

Participants

Neighborhood Informants

The final sample of neighborhood informants from the larger study included 605 adults, with approximately 20 adults per neighborhood. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 84 (M = 34.92, SD = 16.84) and the sample was approximately 50% female and 50% male. The neighborhood informants self-reported on race, with approximately 55% identifying as African American/Black, 30% Latino/Hispanic, 16% White, and 1% Other. Approximately 72% of the sample had completed high school. Respondents had lived in their neighborhood for an average of 12.3 years (SD = 11.25).

Adolescents

The final sample of adolescents from the larger study included 302 adolescents, with approximately 10 adolescents per neighborhood (two neighborhoods had 11 adolescents). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 17 (M = 15.42, SD = 1.21) with 50.34% self-identifying as female and 49.66% self-identifying as male. The adolescents' parents provided information on the participants' race, with 51% identifying as African American/Black, 48% Latino/Hispanic, and 2% "Other". The majority of youth were born in the United States (90%). With regards to current living arrangements, approximately 35% of the adolescents participants were living in a single-parent household, 44% in a two-parent or adult household, 13% living with relatives or grandparents, and 8% living in another type of primary living arrangement (e.g., foster home, "other"). According to their yearly family earnings, most of the adolescents would be considered low-income. See Table 1 in the Results Section for the sample's sociodemographic characteristics.

Measures

Social-Emotional Outcomes

The Behavioral Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2) is a widely used assessment tool that measures a variety of behavioral and personality characteristics. The BASC-2 measure has been extensively used in clinical practice and in research and has demonstrated good construct validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). The adolescent participants were administered 16 out of 17 scales (144 out of 176 items) from the BASC-2 adolescent version of the Self-Report of Personality (SRP-A), with the following social-emotional scales of substantive interest to this study:

Self-Esteem. The Self-Esteem subscale of the BASC-2 is comprised of 8 items that assess an adolescent's feelings of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-acceptance (α = .76). Sample true or false items include: *I like myself*, *I am good at things*, and *I wish I were someone else*. Results from this subscale were converted to standardized T-scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Approximately 2% of the adolescents in this study were considered "at-risk" (T = 31-40) and 2% of the adolescents reported clinically significant challenges with self-esteem ($T \leq 30$).

Depression. The Depression subscale of the BASC-2, is comprised of 12 items that measure an adolescent's feelings of depression, unhappiness, and sadness (α = .85). Sample true or false items include: *Nothing goes my way,* and *Nothing is fun*. Sample Likert-scale items included: *I feel sad*, and *I feel like life is getting worse and worse* (0 = *Never* to 3 = *Almost Always*). Results from this subscale were converted to standardized T-scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Higher T-scores are indicative of greater levels, or more severe, depression symptoms. Approximately 7% of the adolescents in this study were considered "at-risk" (T = 60-69) and 4% of the adolescents reported clinically significant depressive symptoms ($T \geq 70$).

Anxiety. The Anxiety subscale of the BASC-2 is comprised of 13 items that measure an adolescent's feelings of anxiety, worry and stress (α = .85). Sample true or false items include: *I worry a lot,* and *I can never relax*. Sample Likert-scale items included: and *I worry about the future* and *I get nervous* (0 = *Never* to 3 = *Almost Always*). Results from this subscale were converted to standardized T-scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Higher T-scores are indicative of greater levels, or more severe anxiety symptoms. Approximately 13% of

the adolescents in this study were considered “at-risk” (T = 60-69) and 4% of the adolescents reported clinically significant anxiety symptoms (T ≥ 70).

Independent Variables

Family Relationship Characteristics. The Family Relationships Scale is a 27-item self-report questionnaire that assesses various dimensions of family functioning and beliefs. Adolescent participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about their family (e.g., *We get along well together)* as well as beliefs about family more generally (e.g., *People should do whatever it takes to help a family member in need*). Response options were on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*).

The measure was developed by Tolan et al. (1997) for families participating in the Chicago Youth Development Study (CYDS) – a study comprised of families in low-income and urban settings. The original scale consisted of 35 items and was scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Tolan et al., 1997). Based upon further psychometric scaling, the number of items was reduced to 27 and consisted of 3 subscales, along with a general factor. The three subscales are: (1) beliefs about family (e.g., *People should value their family above everything else*; α = .71); (2) cohesion (e.g., *Family members feel connected*; α = .85); and (3) organization (*This family has a rule for most important situations;* α = .78). All of the items within the cohesion and organization subscales also load on a general factor (α = .91); in addition, four items load on the general factor only and do not load on a subscale (i.e., *We trust each other*, *We take care of each other, Family members like to spend time together,* and *Our family is organized)*. The general factor was used as the primary measure of family relationships in the analyses; a mean score was calculated such that higher scores indicated stronger levels, or closer, family relationships.

Neighborhood Problems. Neighborhood Problems scale (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1993) was comprised of 7 questions that measured the extent to which neighborhood informants perceived problems and crime in the neighborhood (e.g., *Vacant lots are a problem in this neighborhood*; *Drugs are a problem in this neighborhood;* and *Homelessness is a problem in this neighborhood;* α = .74). Response options were on a 5-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree* to *5 = strongly agree*). Results from this scale were calculated for each neighborhood, such that higher scores indicated a greater degree of neighborhood problems. The ICC2 for Neighborhood Problems was .59 ($p < .001$; Henry et al., 2014).

Neighborhood Social Cohesion. Neighborhood social cohesion refers to support, communication, trust, adult-child interaction, familiarity within neighborhoods. Neighborhood informants were asked about levels of social cohesion and connection in their neighborhood as a whole (e.g., *In general, people in this neighborhood look out for one another)*. The Social Cohesion scale (Henry et al., 2014) was comprised of 32 items (α = .91) on a 5-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree* to *5 = strongly agree*). A mean score of social cohesion was calculated for each neighborhood; higher scores indicated higher levels of social cohesion.

Neighborhood Norms. Neighborhood informants were asked to report on their perceptions of shared neighborhood norms indicating their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree* to *5 = strongly agree*). The Neighborhood Norms questionnaire (Henry et al., 2014) was comprised of 45 items that assessed norms across the following five subscales: norms about child welfare (e.g., *In general, people in this neighborhood should know who the neighborhood children and teenagers are;* α = .66); norms about child management (e.g., *In general, people in this neighborhood believe adults should do something if a child is doing something dangerous, even if it is not their child;* α = .84); norms about crime (e.g., *In*

general, people in this neighborhood believe people should do something if a neighbor's house is being vandalized; α = .89); norms about adolescent behavior (e.g., *In general, people in this neighborhood believe it is always wrong for teenagers to get into fist fights*, α = .91); and norms about neighborhood management (e.g., *In general, people in this neighborhood believe people should keep their neighborhood looking nice*, α = .82). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale by neighborhood; higher scores indicated stronger levels of neighborhood norms.

Covariates

Adolescent participants were asked the following sociodemographic questions about themselves: *How old are you?* (continuous item) and *What is your sex?* (1 = *female*, 2 = *male*).

Data Analysis

To address the primary research question, a multilinear models (MLM) random intercepts model was conducted. Level 1, or individual level, variables included the family relationship general factor score and covariates (i.e., sex, age, income); Level 2, or neighborhood level, variables include neighborhood problems, neighborhood social cohesion, and neighborhood norm subscales (i.e., norms about crime, child welfare, child management, adolescent behavior, and neighborhood management). To best understand the effect of the individual level predictors and to separate within/between effects, variables were centered by calculating means for each neighborhood and calculating each participant's deviation from their neighborhood mean (centering within cluster). The equation for the random intercepts model is represented below:

Level 1: $\textit{Social-Emotional Outcome}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1}\,(\textit{FamilyRelationships})_{ij} + \beta_{2}\,(\textit{Age})_{ij} + \beta_{3}\,(\textit{Sex})_{ij} + e_{ij}$

Level 2: $\beta_{0j} = g_{00} + g_{01}\,(\textit{Neighborhood Problems})_{j} + g_{02}\,(\textit{Neighborhood Social Cohesion})_{j} + g_{03}\,(\textit{Neighborhood Norms})_{j} + u_{0j}$

All variables had complete data (n = 302). All analyses were conducted in Stata/IC 15.1.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Sample demographic data and descriptive statistics for the primary study variables are presented in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. Histograms of the outcome variables revealed an approximate normal distribution for anxiety, while depression was negatively skewed, indicating on average, adolescents had low to mild levels of depression. Self-esteem was positively skewed, indicating that adolescents in the sample had moderate- to high-levels of self-esteem on average. The correlations of the main predictors (see Table 4) show that family relationships were correlated with social-emotional outcomes in predicted directions. Neighborhood problems do not appear to be strongly correlated with family relationships or social-emotional outcomes. The ICC of the variance components model for anxiety was <.01, this indicates that less than 1.0.% of the variance in anxiety can be attributed to the neighborhood level. Interpreted another way, the expected correlation for anxiety between two adolescents in the same neighborhood would be <.01. The ICC of the variance components model for depression was similarly <.01 while the ICC for self-esteem was .04, indicating that 4% of the variance in the outcome could be attributed to the neighborhood level.

Inferential Analyses

A multilevel random intercepts model including the individual-level predictor (i.e., family relationships) and neighborhood-level predictors in addition to relevant study covariates was conducted for each social-emotional outcome variable (see Table 5 for results).

Self-Esteem

Results revealed a significant association between family relationships and self-esteem both within and between neighborhoods. The pure within-neighborhood effect of family relationships was 3.28 indicating that a one unit increase in family relationship mean score was associated with a 3.28 increase in an adolescent's self-esteem t-score ($\beta = 3.28, p < 0.001$) for adolescents in the same neighborhood, holding all other variables constant. The between-neighborhood effect followed the same direction, such that a one unit increase in mean family relationship scores between neighborhoods was associated with, on average, an increase of 4.82 in the mean self-esteem t-score for adolescents in that neighborhood ($\beta = 4.82, p = .01$). In addition, the between-neighborhood effect was significant for neighborhood norms about adolescent behavior, such that a one unit increase in mean neighborhood norms score between neighborhoods was associated with, on average, a decrease of 5.90 in mean self-esteem t-score for adolescents in that neighborhood ($\beta = -5.90, p = .03$).

Anxiety

Results revealed a significant association between family relationships and anxiety. The pure within-neighborhood effect of family relationships was -3.87 indicating that a one unit increase in family relationship mean score was associated with a 3.87 decrease in an adolescent's anxiety t-score ($\beta = -3.87, p < 0.001$) for adolescents in the same neighborhood, holding all other variables constant. The between-neighborhood effect was not statistically significant ($\beta = -2.48, p = .43$)

Depression

Results similarly revealed a significant association between family relationships and depression. The pure within-neighborhood effect of family relationships was -5.05 indicating

that a one unit increase in family relationship mean score was associated with a 5.05 decrease in an adolescent's depression t-score ($\beta = -5.05, p < 0.001$) for adolescents in the same neighborhood, holding all other variables constant. The between-neighborhood effect was also statistically significant, such that a one unit increase in mean family relationship scores between neighborhoods was associated with, on average, a reduction of 5.48 in the mean depression t-score for adolescents in that neighborhood ($\beta = -5.48, p = .03$).

Moderation Analyses

Subsequent mixed effects models were run to test for an interaction between family relationships and neighborhood-level predictors on youth outcomes. There was no evidence to support the presence of an interaction, as the interaction terms were insignificant across all outcomes.

Discussion

The current study investigated the relationship between family relationships and neighborhood-level characteristics (i.e., social processes, neighborhood norms, neighborhood problems) on adolescent social-emotional outcomes among an adolescent sample from specific neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois. The current findings indicated that both between- and within-neighborhood family relationships were significantly associated with adolescent social-emotional outcomes on the three outcome measures examined. These findings were in the direction predicted (i.e., higher levels of family relationships were associated with higher self-esteem scores and lower anxiety and depression scores). Further, the strength of the beta-weights suggest that changes in family relationships within neighborhoods can result in a clinically-meaningful difference in reducing depression (e.g., moving from clinically-elevated to mildly-elevated symptoms). Between-neighborhood effects were significant for family relationships on

adolescent depression and self-esteem, indicating that neighborhoods that typically have stronger family relationships tend to have improvements in their social-emotional functioning.

In general, we found null effects for neighborhood-level predictors on adolescent social-emotional outcomes, with the exception of one of the five neighborhood norms subscales. Neighborhood norms of youth behavior were negatively associated with an adolescent's self-esteem at the neighborhood-level. This can be interpreted as a one-unit difference in mean neighborhood norms between two neighborhoods resulted in a decrease in self-esteem scores. This finding was somewhat surprising, given that it implies that in neighborhoods that, on average, have stronger beliefs that adolescents should follow neighborhood norms (e.g., not smoke, not hit one another), adolescents tended to have lower self-esteem. We cannot identify a clear reason for this pattern, and it stands in contrast to self-esteem and neighborhood disadvantage research (Fagg et al., 2013). One possibility is that having high neighborhood norms of adolescent behavior could potentially reflect negative views of adolescents, which could result in adolescents feeling unsupported or unwelcome in their environment. In other words, if adolescents are viewed from deficit lens in their neighborhood they may have more negative perceptions of themselves and accordingly, lower self-esteem. There are also many possible methodological reasons that could help explain this finding, such as type II error, that may have arisen and these might be pursued if this finding is replicated in other studies.

Although specific neighborhood-level predictors which encompass informal social control, like neighborhood problems and neighborhood norms, were largely not associated with youth social-emotional outcomes, results do suggest that neighborhood has a contextual influence on these outcomes. The between-neighborhood family effect observed suggests that youth from neighborhoods who have stronger family relationships, on average, tend to have been

social-emotional outcomes. This result supported the presence of a contextual neighborhood effect, implying family relationship could matter more in one neighborhood than another because of some kind of feature or mechanism not explained by out study. It is possible that families of similar characteristics group in neighborhoods, and these characteristics may be reflected in this family relationships variable, in which case the between-neighborhood family relationships variable could better be described as a proxy for community resources. It is worth exploring the neighborhood conditions and processes that create stronger family relationships in future work, as this could help identify in what neighborhoods family relationships matter most and why, which could inform practical considerations, such as where to focus resources.

These findings contribute to the literature assessing ecological factors associated with youth social-emotional outcomes and provide some clarification about the relative impact of family and neighborhood-level influences. More specifically, these findings suggest that the proximal context of family relationships may matter more than the more distal context of neighborhoods characteristics and social processes in influencing internalizing symptoms. Thus, leveraging family relationships to protect against these problems has the potential to promote a variety of short- and long-term benefits given the well-documented health, educational, and financial problems associated with the presence of internalizing problems (Nivard et al., 2017). These findings having relevant programming and policy implications, such as focusing efforts on interventions and conditions that support families and youth in developing strong family relationships. While we found strong effects supporting the prominent role in family relationships with youth social-emotional outcomes, we generally found null effects of neighborhood norms about child-adolescent development as influencing social-emotional outcomes of youth. This stands in contrast to some other neighborhood research that found

strong neighborhood effects for adolescent mental health (Donnelly et al., 2016) and in line with other research stating that family effects are significantly larger than neighborhood effects on child outcomes (Pebley & Sastry, 2003). More generally, the strong support for family influences and the limited, or null, effects on neighborhood influences fit the broader ecological theory. Families critically influence individual outcomes, given that family is a proximal setting and typically an early and foundational context. Situated within neighborhoods, families are important to understanding neighborhood effects given that they often make decisions about neighborhoods and absorb neighborhood effects (Noah, 2015). Thus, this study emphasizes the importance for accounting for family effects within the broader neighborhood literature.

Although this study has many strengths, including the unique sampling procedure and ability to test for multiple contextual factors while accounting for the nested nature of the data, there are several limitations to consider when interpreting the results. First, the dataset only included 30 level-2 units and variables were found to have low ICCs; the relatively small sample size may have contributed to null neighborhood effects due to being underpowered to detect neighborhood-level differences. However, having a sample of 30 groups is consistent with best practices in study design when clusters represent large or expensive units (e.g., neighborhoods, schools; Hox et al., 2017). It is possible that the neighborhood-level variables used in this study did not capture the true variation in neighborhoods. For example, while the possible range of subscale scores for the Neighborhood Problems this measure ranged from 1 – 6, the observed subscale scores in the present sample only ranged from 2.58 – 3.89. Future research should consider other neighborhood-level measures that capture more of the nuanced differences between neighborhoods. Concerning generalizability, the adolescents in this study were primarily Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American residents of very specific neighborhoods

in Chicago. It is possible that the relationship between the various factors of an adolescent's ecology and his or her social-emotional outcomes may vary for peers with different racial/ethnic backgrounds and/or neighborhood contexts.

When taking an ecological approach to studying any youth outcome, it is likely that there are omitted variables that may impact the results and better explain the outcome. In addition, this study used census tract to define neighborhoods. One critique of neighborhood effects research is that traditional approaches to defining neighborhoods (e.g., zip codes, census tracts) may be overly simplistic or reductionistic and may not accurately represent the complexities of the social interactions and bounds of neighborhoods perceived by the individuals that inhabit them (Decker et al., 2018). In addition, another factor that is seldom included is the amount of time or exposure that the adolescent has with their neighborhood, which could be an interesting confound to include in future evaluations (Wodtke, 2013). Understanding the specific processes by which family relationships influence youth, whether that be parenting practices or emotion regulation skills, would be another interesting path for future youth development work.

Conclusion

Taking a multilevel approach may help to inform current understanding of the relative influence on ecological factors on adolescent social-emotional outcomes. The findings from the present study reinforce the importance of adolescents having strong, positive family relationships. Specifically, analyses suggest that the proximal context of family is important, regardless of neighborhood characteristics, in impacting adolescent internalizing problems, including anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. This information can help to support interventions and efforts to bolster family relationships as a way to promote positive social-emotional outcomes and protect against internalizing problems. Future work is needed to address

both variable-level and statistical limitations, as well as to clarify the specific processes by which family and neighborhood factors do or do not influence social-emotional outcomes.

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Table 1

Demographic Statistics of the Adolescent Sample

Characteristic	N	%	Mean (SD)	Range
Age	302		15.42 (1.21)	13-17
Sex	302			
Female	153	50.66		
Male	149	49.34		
Race	302			
Hispanic/Latino	145	48.01		
Black/African American	155	51.32		
White	0	0.00		
Other	2	0.66		
Family Income	294			
<10,000	74	25.17		
10,000-14,999	58	19.73		
15,000-19,999	34	11.56		
20,000-24,999	30	10.20		
25,000-29,999	20	6.80		
30,000-39,999	27	9.18		
40,000-49,999	18	6.12		
50,000-74,999	22	7.48		
75,000-100,000	7	2.38		
>100,000	4	1.36		

Table 2

Demographic Data for Neighborhood Informants

Characteristic	N	%	Mean (SD)	Range
Age	598		34.92 (16.84)	18-84
Sex	596			
Female	296	50.34		
Male	300	49.66		
Race	605			
Hispanic/Latino	222	36.69		
Black/ African American	333	55.04		
White	98	16.20		
Asian	9	1.49		
Native American	12	1.98		
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	0.33		
Other	2	0.33		
Years Lived in Neighborhood	605		12.30 (11.25)	0-70
Primary Language				
English	493	82.72		
Spanish	103	17.28		
Education	603			
< 7 years	24	3.98		
7-9 years	45	7.46		
Some high school	101	16.75		
High school grad	151	25.04		
Some college	162	26.87		
Associate degree	38	6.30		
Bachelor degree	60	9.95		
Graduate degree	22	3.65		

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Primary Predictors and Outcomes

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	ICC2	α
Anxiety	302	.82	.55	0	2.38	-	.85
Depression	302	.34	.43	0	2.17	-	.85
Self-esteem	302	2.19	.37	.25	2.5	-	.76
Family Relationships	302	4.99	.64	2.33	6	-	.91
Neighborhood Norms							
Child Welfare	302	4.14	.17	3.85	4.45	.52	.66
Child Management	302	3.74	.17	3.33	4.05	.38	.84
Crime	302	3.87	.21	3.32	4.19	.65	.89
Adolescent Behavior	302	3.56	.18	3.21	3.93	1.04	.91
Neighborhood Management	302	3.66	.22	3.06	4.14	.66	.82
Neighborhood Social Cohesion	302	3.27	.13	3	3.48	.33	.91
Neighborhood Problems	302	3.31	.34	2.58	3.89	.59	.74

Table 4

Pairwise correlations of Primary Study Variables

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
(1) Age	1.00												
(2) Sex	-0.08	1.00											
(3) Anxiety	-0.02	-0.24***	1.00										
(4) Depression	0.02	-0.19***	0.66***	1.00									
(5) Self-esteem	0.02	0.25***	-0.53***	-0.61***	1.00								
(6) Family Relationships	-0.03	0.04	-0.22***	-0.35***	0.32***	1.00							
(7) Neighborhood Norms: Child Welfare	-0.01	-0.00	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	-0.09	1.00						
(8) Neighborhood Norms: Child Management	0.00	-0.02	-0.03	0.00	-0.02	0.01	0.45***	1.00					
(9) Neighborhood Norms: Crime	0.03	-0.00	-0.01	-0.03	-0.07	0.08	0.28***	0.56***	1.00				
(10) Neighborhood Norms: Behavior	0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.00	-0.15***	-0.05	0.15***	0.52***	0.41***	1.00			
(11) Neighborhood Norms: Child Management	0.02	0.00	-0.02	-0.01	-0.06	0.06	0.36***	0.63***	0.88***	0.35***	1.00		
(12) Neighborhood Social Cohesion	0.04	-0.01	0.09*	0.09	-0.12**	-0.03	0.23***	0.30***	0.52***	0.40***	0.44***	1.00	
(13) Neighborhood Problems	-0.12**	0.00	-0.08	-0.05	0.08	-0.05	-0.17***	-0.06	-0.53***	-0.06	-0.51***	-0.59***	1.00

* $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5

Multilevel Random Intercept Regression Results

Variable	Model 1: **Self-Esteem** *b*	*SE*	Model 2: **Anxiety** *b*	*SE*	Model 3: **Depression** *b*	*SE*
Age						
Within Neighborhood	.28	.34	-.50	.55	.29	.45
Between Neighborhood	1.68	.95	-1.62	1.57	-1.19	1.28
Sex						
Within Neighborhood	.35	.75	-.37	1.25	-1.60	1.01
Between Neighborhood	-2.83	11.38	-.25	18.73	9.29	15.26
Family Relationships						
Within Neighborhood	3.28***	.62	-3.87***	1.04	-5.05***	.84
Between Neighborhood	4.82*	1.91	-2.48	3.16	-5.48*	2.58
Neighborhood Norms						
Child Welfare	2.48	2.78	-1.64	4.59	-.12	3.74
Child Management	2.25	3.96	1.56	6.53	4.11	5.32
Crime	-.85	4.18	-1.26	6.90	-4.00	5.62
Adolescent Behavior	-5.90*	2.71	-.55	4.46	-2.32	3.64
Neighborhood Management	-.29	4.30	-4.08	7.10	-.90	5.78
Neighborhood Social Cohesion	-.65	4.38	6.81	7.22	4.89	5.88
Neighborhood Problems	2.48	1.91	-3.83	3.14	-3.24	2.56
Constant	10.93	31.27	99.88	51.58	85.85	42.01
Variance (Constant)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Variance (Residual)	42.51	3.46	115.65	9.25	76.73	6.24
ICC	0.00		0.00		0.00	

* $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

Manuscript Three

State of the States: A Review of Family Engagement Practices across State Education Agency Guidance

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Abstract

Family engagement is associated with a variety of favorable academic and social-emotional outcomes for youth (Smith et al., 2020). Given the unprecedented student achievement gaps and current mental health crisis, family engagement in schools serves as a potential means to address these problems and promote equitable student success. Despite considerable research and policy supporting family engagement, there remain many barriers to effective implementation. We reviewed State Education Agency (SEA) family engagement guidance to determine how aligned they were with national standards for effective family-school partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association [PTA], 2022). Results indicated that SEA guidance was generally well-aligned with national standards; however, there was variability in the ways in which the standards were described. Recommendations include making SEA family engagement guidance easier to access and identify, providing more practical recommendations and strategies to describe *how* to implement effective family engagement practices, more explicitly defining strategies to promote equity in family engagement, and integrating more guidance on family engagement in mental health.

Keywords: family engagement, schools, family-school partnerships, school mental health

State of the States: A Review of Family Engagement Practices across State Education Agency Guidance

Family engagement is widely recognized as a critical ingredient to youth success in school (Weiss et al., 2010). Research has consistently supported the benefits of effective school-family partnerships. Greater family engagement is associated with a variety of favorable outcomes for youth, including improved grades, higher standardized test scores, fewer behavioral and disciplinary problems, higher graduation rates, and increased social-emotional skills (Smith et al., 2020). Therefore, promoting family engagement in school may be an approach to address the academic and mental health challenges that public schools in the United States are currently facing (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2022; Jones, 2022). Federal education law (e.g., Every Student Success Act) mandates family engagement activities (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016); yet there remain several challenges to implementation of effective family engagement practice (Epstein & Sheldon, 2022). First, there is variability in how schools and districts interpret and carry out federal law (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2008). Second, educators and school staff who are responsible for carrying out the majority of day-to-day family engagement activities consistently identify family engagement to be one of the most challenging aspects of their work (Markow et al., 2012). They often report feeling unprepared or unsupported in family engagement efforts and struggle with translating research findings, resulting in low-impact and disjointed practices (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Third, families also report disengagement due to a variety of personal, structural, and cultural barriers to engaging with schools (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010). Collectively, these challenges highlight gaps between family engagement policy, research on family engagement, and the implementation of these practices and initiatives.

In the United States, state (as opposed to federal) agencies often set educational policies; accordingly, State Education Agencies (SEA), often also known as State Departments of Education, play a significant role in how educational services are administered (National Association for School, Family, and Community Engagement, n.d.). This study reviews non-regulatory SEA family engagement guidance compared to national standards for family-school partnerships. Mapping SEA family engagement guidance across national standards can provide insight into how aligned states are with best practices and can help identify recommendations for stronger family engagement guidance. In doing so, this study emphasizes the role that SEAs have in bridging the gap between family engagement research, policy, and implementation.

Overview of family engagement in school literature

Researchers have used a variety of terms throughout the extant literature to describe how families and schools interact to influence student outcomes (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016); this study uses the term family engagement in accordance with recent policies and research (Glueck & Reschly, 2014). The term *family* is inclusive and reflects a broad definition of people who contribute to a child's development (e.g., grandparents, foster parents, mentors, etc.); the term *engagement* reflects the shared responsibility and partnership between families and schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). As the family engagement definition has broadened to be more inclusive to recognize diversity of families, there has also been a greater emphasis on equitable family engagement in the literature. Equitable family engagement refers to meaningful activities and systems between schools and families that do not characterize or treat specific family groups as deficient in their level of engagement or approach to education (Ishimura et al., 2016; Day, 2013).

Theoretical underpinnings

Family engagement practices are based on the premise that students are influenced by their overlapping home and school environments, and that both environments are connected to their success (Garbacz et al. 2016). Ecological systems theory provides a foundation for understanding the bidirectional influences of family and school that interact in complex ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although family-school partnerships often occur at the mesosystem level (i.e., interaction between microsystems), they are impacted by cultural values, laws, and customs surrounding them. Expanding upon this, Epstein (2011) proposed the *theory of overlapping spheres of influence* which asserts that children learn and grow at school, at home, and in the community, and that they benefit when parents, teachers, and community collaborate in ways that encourage learning and development. These theories support the underlying belief that family members are experts on their children, and they must be engaged to participate actively in decision-making that affects their children (Turnbull et al. 2015). Thus, these theories imply that student success can be impacted by engaging families in culturally-informed, equitable ways, which is timely given the historic declines in students' achievement and widening gaps between the highest- and lowest-scoring students which have disproportionately affected low-income, Black and Hispanic students (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2022). Considering an ecological approach, effective family engagement strategies may be one important approach to help address current educational inequities.

Family engagement practices

Across the family engagement literature, numerous best practices have been identified that are rooted in research and theory. Some commonly discussed practices include engaging parents in meaningful leadership and decision-making, sharing data with families about student

skill levels, modeling high-impact teaching practices so families can use them at home, listening to families' ideas about their children's interests and challenges and using this input to differentiate instruction, and incorporating content from families' home cultures and histories into classroom lessons (Garbacz et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2012; Stormshak et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2010). Specific practices are also recommended to address inequities, such as building trusting family-school relationships, providing flexibility with communication, meeting outside of the school building, understanding the needs and values of the community, and empowering families to engage in decision-making, among others (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). Within a multitiered systems of support (MTSS) model, these family engagement activities would fall under tier 1 supports because they are intended to be universal and proactive to support all students and families as opposed to specific groups or students with identified needs (e.g., special education, English language learners [ELL]; Weist et al., 2017).

Despite these universal strategies, research indicates that there is no "one size fits all" approach to family engagement; the developmental stage of students is an important consideration and emerging area of interest in planning family engagement activities (Posey-Maddox, 2016). For example, parent teacher conferences may be a great approach for younger students who have a primary teacher who knows them well, but that may not be as meaningful for high school students. Best practice includes accounting for developmental considerations, such as tailoring the communication and collaboration methods to the student's grade level and developmental stage (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). Research supports a shift from focusing on low-impact, discrete family engagement activities (e.g., back-to-school nights) to empirically supported, systematic, sustainable practices and partnerships based on research to meet student and families' needs (Weiss et al., 2010).

Family engagement outcomes

Historically, most of the family engagement research has focused on improving youth academic outcomes with less attention given to mental health or social-emotional learning. For example, attendance rates, graduation rates, and standardized testing in foundational academic subjects (e.g., reading and math) have been the benchmark for family engagement outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009). There is emerging interest in leveraging family engagement strategies to improve student social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health outcomes, aligned with a shift in viewing child development and student success holistically (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2023). A recent meta-analysis showed that family engagement in school mental health is associated with improved social-emotional and mental health outcomes as well as traditional academic achievement outcomes (Smith et al., 2020). This is especially timely given the current child mental health crisis and the increased attention on schools being well-positioned to meet this need (Jones, 2022). Although the research on family engagement in school mental health is relatively more nascent, there is a substantial amount of research on family engagement in schools as well as family engagement in community mental health (Becker et al., 2015; Becker et al., 2018; Garbacz et al., 2021).

Legal and regulatory considerations for family engagement

The support for family engagement demonstrated throughout fifty years of research is also reflected in federal and state policies that emphasize family-school partnerships. At the federal level, the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 laid the groundwork for family engagement being recognized as a critical element for student success. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed which amended and strengthened requirements initially set forth by ESEA. Title I of ESSA specifically calls for

implementing effective parent and family involvement activities and engagement strategies (ESSA, Section 1010). Specific family engagement requirements also exist for other federal education programs (e.g., Headstart, IDEA; United States Department of Health and Human Services & United States Department of Education, 2016). While the Federal Department of Education requires specific family engagement actions for Title I schools (e.g., school-family compacts, developing district and school family policies; ESSA, Section 116), it is ultimately up to state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs, respectively) to develop and implement specific frameworks and practices as long as they are consistent with applicable federal statutes (USDOE, 2022). In sum, federal policy "tells educators to engage families, but does not specify how to meet these requirements or how to improve the quality of their partnership programs. There is, then, a critical gap between the intent and enactment of the law" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016, p. 203).

Challenges promoting family engagement

Despite the widespread consensus that family engagement is important for student success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2022), educators continue to struggle translating research and policies about family engagement into effective practices that reach all families in meaningful ways (Robinson & Harris, 2014). Challenges include family engagement activities being isolated from other district initiatives in addition to the staff that focus on family engagement being siloed and not working collaboratively across departments (Baker et al., 2016). Other challenges are related to knowledge and capacity of school staff, such that principals and teachers often receive minimal training for engaging families and report feeling underprepared, despite valuing relationships with families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2022; Caspe et al., 2011). Conversely, some educators hold deficit-views of parents or perceptions that families are uninterested in being

involved (Murray et al., 2014; Sanders-Smith et al., 2020). School staff also report difficulty in evaluating family engagement programs and activities which contributes to an overreliance on attendance or face validity opposed to data-informed decision making (Weiss & Lopez, 2011).

In addition, structural and attitudinal barriers may impede families from engaging with school staff or in school functions. Structural issues include work schedules interfering with school hours, lack of transportation, or the need for childcare that may make attending school events prohibitive (Baker et al., 2016; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020, Öztürk, 2013). Cultural barriers can cause families to view schools as unsafe and unwelcoming, especially for historically marginalized and non-English speaking families who have experienced racism or other forms of discrimination (Griner & Smith, 2006). Furthermore, many of these families may not have had equal opportunity to learn how to navigate the school system, which can result in limited understanding of how to take effective action on behalf of their children, even when they want to (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010; De Luigi & Martelli, 2015). Overcoming these barriers is essential to establishing effective school-family partnerships and fostering equitable family engagement.

National Standards for Family Engagement

Given the challenges the schools face in effectively engaging families despite evolving research and statutory expectations, several nonprofits, quasi-governmental organizations, and academic research groups (e.g., Harvard Family Research Project, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, Brookings Institution, National PTA) have developed standards, frameworks, and toolkits to support effective family engagement implementation. These materials are intended to synthesize research evidence in usable ways for schools, policy makers, and other stakeholders to efficiently engage families.

One prominent framework, the National PTA's Standards for Family School-Partnerships (2022), provides guidance on effective strategies for equitable and intentional family engagement by schools. This framework is intended to provide practical information, rooted in theory and research, to guide decisions, policies, and practices that pertain to family engagement. Initially developed over twenty years ago, the National Standards recently underwent revisions to reflect current evidence-based practices and incorporate updated family engagement research since their last revision in 2008. The revision process consisted of a variety of activities, including a national survey sent to families, students, and educators; multiple listening sessions and informant interviews from relevant stakeholders; and expert advisory group meetings comprised of family engagement researchers and thought leaders (see National PTA, 2022 for overview of development and revisions). This iterative revision process ensured that the standards integrate family engagement research and best practices along with multiple voices and perspectives, especially families from historically marginalized communities.

The framework is comprised of six standards for schools to consider for establishing and maintaining family engagement in schools (see National PTA, 2022 for a complete list of definitions and practice indicators). The first (1) standard, *Welcome all families*, refers to treating families as valued partners and facilitating a sense of belonging in the school community. This standard is based on research that suggests that creating inclusive and affirming school environments and promoting trust between families and schools helps students succeed (Hernández & Darling-Hammond, 2022) and includes goals related to encouraging engagement with diverse families and using culturally responsive engagement practices. The second (2) standard, *Communicate effectively*, refers to ensuring all families can easily understand and contribute to their child's educational experience by engaging in proactive, timely, two-way

communication. This standard is based on research that suggests that communication is the foundation for school-home relationship building and that varied modes of communication are necessary to meet families' needs, especially in the context of remote learning in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Carrión-Martínez, et al., 2021; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Standard 2 includes goals related to promoting communication between families and teachers and exchanging information in culturally and linguistically sustaining ways. The third (3) standard, *Support student success*, refers to building capacity for families and educators to collaborate to support students' academic, social, and emotional learning. This standard is based on research that suggests that student outcomes are improved when there is collaboration and consistency between families and schools (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Mahoney et al., 2021) and includes goals related to engaging families in their child's in-school and at-home learning. The fourth (4) standard, *Speaking up for every child*, refers to affirming student and family expertise and promoting advocacy efforts to ensure that all students are treated fairly and have access to opportunities that will support their success. This standard is based on research that suggests that equitable family engagement strategies can help reduce educational disparities (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jacques & Villegas, 2018) and includes goals related to addressing inequitable outcomes and access. The fifth (5) standard, *Sharing power*, refers to partnering with families in decisions that affect children and co-creating policies, practices and programs. This standard is based on research that suggests that family leadership in decision-making leads to empowerment and systemic change (Geller et al., 2019) and includes goals related to strengthening families' voices in decision making processes. The sixth (6) standard, *Collaborating with community*, refers to working with community partners to connect students and families to services and opportunities in the community. This standard is based on research that suggests that community institutions

play a key role in promoting child development (The Aspen Institute, 2018) and includes goals related to creating community-school partnerships and connecting students and families with the appropriate community resources.

The National PTA Standards provide overarching goals as well as actionable steps to ensure effective family engagement efforts from a variety of stakeholders. First, these standards were designed to help state, district, and school leaders "ensure that their family-school partnership efforts are adequately implemented, funded and monitored" (National PTA, 2022). The standards also provide relevant information for families, students, and educators on what questions to ask and what things to look for in effective school-family partnerships by detailing specific practices and activities (i.e., National PTA practice indicators). In addition, the standards were developed for researchers interested in using an updated framework to examine implementation of family-school partnerships. Last, the standards provide information relevant to policymakers and funding sources who are interested in investing in family-school partnerships to promote student success. For these reasons, the National Standards are an important tool available to stakeholders interested in improving effective family engagement practice implementation.

Role of States in Practice Implementation

To examine the gap between policy and practice, the current study reviewed non-regulatory guidance at the state level as aligned with the National PTA standards. We chose to focus on the state level for several reasons. First, SEAs play a significant role in how educational services are administered and in shaping the attitudes of schools and districts when making policies (Belway et al., 2010; National Association for School, Family, and Community Engagement, 2020). Second, SEA websites are a place where district leaders, school

administrators, teachers, families, and students alike can refer to for information, and thus are a good channel to distribute information and expectations surrounding family engagement. Finally, given that many state statutes are directly derived from federal legislation (i.e., ESSA), state regulations primarily describe *what* districts and schools are required to do to engage families; non-regulatory guidance, on the other hand, provides information on *how* districts and schools can fulfill family engagement requirements. Guidance often describes actionable practices and strategies that are aligned with regulations, which offers more direction to school and district staff who are tasked with carrying out the bulk of day-to-day family engagement responsibilities. Therefore, guidance serves as a crucial intermediary step between policy and implementation. For these reasons, SEA guidance is a natural place to examine the extent to which the PTA's National Standards are being discussed, given that the standards were developed to help address the research and policy to practice gap and are an available tool to SEAs to support effective implementation.

Current study

The current study describes the landscape of family engagement practices across SEAs in the United States. Despite research and federal policy supporting family engagement, educators continue to struggle to engage families in meaningful ways. This is disappointing because family engagement has been identified as a promising approach to addressing achievement gaps and promoting student wellbeing. Given the role that SEAs play in how legal requirements are translated into practice, examining non-regulatory guidance could help identify ways states can reduce the gap between intent and application of policy to better support district and school staff in their family engagement efforts. Our research questions guiding this review were:

1) To what extent do SEAs' guidance on family engagement align with National Standards for School-Family Partnerships?; and

2) In what ways do SEAs' guidance on family engagement reflect two of the emerging areas of emphasis in the family engagement research – developmental considerations and mental health?

To examine these questions, we used deductive coding to review SEAs' guidance in relation to the National PTA's Standards for Family School Partnerships. The PTA's National Standards were chosen as the organizing framework for several reasons, including being the most recently updated family engagement framework available, being relevant to a wide variety of stakeholders, and having a strong emphasis on evidence-based practice and equity. This review of SEA guidance on family engagement will highlight commonalities and variability in how family engagement is discussed to help guide future research, implementation, and policy efforts.

Methods

Procedure

The research team comprised of a graduate research student with school mental health experience and an undergraduate research student with teaching experience. The team obtained non-regulatory state family engagement guidance by reviewing state department of education websites, using relevant search terms within the websites (e.g., "family engagement", "parent involvement", "family school partnership"). Guidance documents were accessed between December 2022-April 2023. Although these were publicly available websites, there was variability in the ability to identify guidance documents. To capture this, researchers assigned a value from a 5-point Likert-scale (1) Very easy to access and identify guidance; 2) Somewhat easy to access or identify guidance; 3) Neither easy or difficult to access or identify guidance 4)

Somewhat difficult to access or identify guidance; 5) Very difficult to access and/or no clear guidance available). In instances where a clear guidance could not be obtained, we contacted the state education liaison via email. We tracked and noted difficulty in obtaining these documents.

We successfully identified guidance for 38 SEAs (n = 38) to be coded. The remaining 12 states did not have a specific state family engagement available on their website, which prompted us to reach out to a SEA liaison. We received a response from 7 of these 12 states, all of which confirmed they did not have a current state-specific family engagement guidance. Five of these states (Idaho, New Jersey, South Dakota, Texas, and West Virginia) indicated that while they do not have an official family engagement framework or guidance, they have family engagement policies and/or include resources from other organizations. One state (Wyoming) indicated that they are a local-control state and defer to schools and districts. Another state (Nebraska) informed us they were in the process of developing a state framework but it would not be available for several months. We did not hear back from the remaining five states at the time of review despite several attempts to reach them (Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Missouri, and Montana). In total, 12 states were excluded from the study (n = 12).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

State education agencies' guidance was included or excluded for this review based on the following criteria. Non-regulatory guidance on family engagement was included if it was publicly available by the state department of education for US public schools. The following definition of non-regulatory guidance was used to guide inclusion criteria: "Non-regulatory guidance is not binding and does not impose any new requirements beyond those in the law and regulations; rather, it is intended to help the public understand how [the agency] is interpreting the law and to provide clarification and examples of best practices" (National Down Syndrome

Congress, 2016). Direct policy including state statutes was excluded from this review. Sample policy templates were excluded if they exclusively included ESSA requirements, however, they were included if they contained suggestions or additional information for implementation. Additional resources (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, checklists) or links to federal or other organization's frameworks (e.g., dual capacity framework) were excluded. Guidance that was codeveloped with a partner organization was included if it was publicly available on the SEA website and reflected the SEA's views (i.e., SEA listed as a coauthor).

Guidance was included if it reflected K-12, universal family engagement practices (i.e., Tier 1). Guidance for early education and targeted supports for specific groups (e.g., ELL, special education) was excluded from this review. Because we were interested in how mental health was or was not discussed *within* family engagement frameworks, specific SEL or mental health frameworks were not included as it was not the direct focus of this review.

Codebook development

The researchers developed a codebook (Appendix A) based on the National Standards for Family School Partnerships (National PTA, 2022) and extant family engagement literature. The codebook contained definitions for each of the six domains and 12 subdomains as presented by the National PTA in addition to operational codes for other best practices identified in the research and relevant to research questions (i.e., developmental considerations and mental health). A researcher with expertise in school mental health reviewed the codebook and provided feedback on face validity, content validity, and instrument structure. The coding team familiarized themselves by reading and discussing the standards with one another and attending PTA webinars about their development and application.

Interrater reliability

We conducted a pilot test of the codebook using a random sample of 10 states (20% of original sample) following procedures from similar studies (e.g., Ball et al., 2016). Two researchers independently coded the 10 state guidance documents. An interrater reliability rate was calculated by dividing the number of times the independent coders agreed that a state did or did not meet criteria for a code by the total number of coding possibilities. The agreement rate was 0.90, which falls within a satisfactory range (Miles & Huberman, 1992). We met and discussed areas of disagreement to remedy differences in coding. Then, the remaining states were coded by one of the researchers and the codes were entered into Microsoft Excel.

Data Analysis

A deductive coding approach was utilized, such that a code of 0 was given for each standard item that was not included in the guidance and a code of 1 was given to each standard item that was included in the guidance. Descriptive statistics then calculated to summarize the data.

Results

Accessibility

The mean accessibility score was 3.24 (M = 3.24, SD = 1.44), indicating variability in the researchers' ability to identify and access SEA family engagement guidance. On average, researchers rated it was more difficult than not to access guidance from SEA websites. Qualitatively, researchers observed variability in the accessibility of state guidance. For example, some guidance documents were easy to find on their respective SEA website, clearly denoted on their webpage with a single, well-labeled PDF document (e.g. "IBSE Family Engagement Framework", Illinois). Conversely, some states required clicking on multiple documents across their webpage on various components of family engagement (e.g., Vermont). Some states did not

have a family engagement webpage at all, and the search feature had to be used to sort through years of SEA document archives before identifying one related to family engagement (e.g., Virginia). Many SEA websites linked numerous resources to external organizations which made it time-consuming and challenging to determine if any resource reflected the official views of the SEA. This was complicated by many state websites having inactive links. Other features of accessibility that were noted were inclusivity of language (e.g., California included documents in both English and Spanish). Researchers also observed variability in time it took to identify a SEA guidance, some took under 5 minutes to locate while others took over an hour, or longer if it required correspondence with the state liaison.

SEA Guidance Alignment with National Standards

Table 1 illustrates SEA family engagement guidance across the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. The average number of standards referenced by state guidance was 5.21 (M = 5.21, SD = 2.47). Broken down by standard, 94.7% of SEA guidance included recommendations consistent with Standard 1 (*Welcoming All Families*), 94.7% with Standard 2 (*Communicate Effectively*), 81.6% with Standard 3 (*Support Student Success*), 84.2% with Standard 4 (*Speak Up for Every Child*), 86.8% with Standard 5 (*Share Power*), and 78.9% with Standard 6 (*Collaborate with Community*). In total, 57.9% of SEA guidance included recommendations consistent with all six national standards. Figure 1 geographically depicts the total number of standards each SEA included in their guidance. Qualitative data for each standard is reviewed below.

Standard 1: Welcome All Families. Most states discussed the importance of relationship-building with families and viewing families as an integral part of students' lives in ways that were consistent with the National PTA's definition of Standard 1. States varied,

however, in the extent to which they discussed how this could be accomplished. For example, some states provided general statements about building trust, primarily setting the expectation and attitude for which schools should operate from (e.g., “Families are active participants in the life of the school and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class”; Hawaii). Other states elaborated and provided practical suggestions about strategies to welcome diverse families that closely align with the National PTA’s goals and practice indicators for creating a welcoming environment for all families. Louisiana, for example, recommended that schools “create a family friendly office, greet families in their home language, make family parking only spaces, train all staff to welcome families, celebrate families with a bulletin board or hallway as a celebration area, provide easy to navigate school buildings with clean, concise, and culturally sensitive signage”, which reflects the goal of creating an inclusive environment.

Standard 2: Communicate Effectively. Many SEAs referred to communication in their guidance as a key feature of family engagement, which is aligned with research supporting Standard 2. Commonly discussed strategies for this standard included sending communications in a variety of formats (e.g., text, social media, website, email) and reducing language barriers by providing translation, which are consistent with the practice indicators outlined by the National PTA to meet the goals of facilitating family-school communication and providing culturally and linguistically appropriate information exchange. Some practice indicators were less commonly included; for example, some SEA guidance discussed the importance of asking for family preferences in communication method (e.g., “Be intentional about communication channels; be responsive to whatever works best for the families in your district.” Arkansas), while others did not.

Standard 3: Support Student Success. The majority of SEA guidance referenced the importance of keeping families updated about their child's progress and the importance of reinforcing skills at home, in ways that aligned with Standard 3. Some SEAs provided general statements and guiding questions for school staff to consider that were consistent with the goal set forth by the National PTA to support learning by engaging families, (e.g., "Teachers inform parents of the strategies they are using to promote students' academic, physical, social, emotional, and behavioral development," Illinois), although they did not explicitly provide strategies for reaching this goal. Conversely, other SEAs included specific strategies consistent with the National PTA's practice indicators to meet the goals for this standard (i.e., partnering with families in their children's learning at school and at home). Michigan, for instance, described low impact strategies to support learning at home, (e.g., "Teachers send home written materials on developmental areas") as well as high impact strategies, (e.g., "During classroom observations, teachers model strategies to support specific learning at home. Families ask questions and practice strategies with each other then go home with a 'tip sheet.' Short videos modeling the strategies are sent with emails or texts to families who couldn't attend, and a list of the families' questions and teachers' answers are attached along with the tip sheet."). This highlights the range in how SEAs discussed standard 3 and how guidance differed in the extent to which it provided specific, practical strategies for school staff to implement.

Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child. States varied considerably in the ways in which they discussed equity as it pertains to Standard 4. Some states made equity a central component of their guidance, referencing the National PTA's goals of helping families navigate the school system and advocate for their children and addressing inequitable outcomes and access, especially for families and students from marginalized backgrounds, while others made indirect

mention of these goals, if at all. For example, Vermont discussed equity as a core principle "Educators are responsible for ensuring that every child and family has the opportunities they need to be successful in the educational experience, including ensuring that children are treated equitably and have access to high-quality learning opportunities. Educators must differentiate their services and supports based on the unique needs of each child and family, including disability, culture, language, and socioeconomic status" and provided examples of what it looks like in practice (e.g., "The school ensures that representation on advisory bodies and committees reflects the composition of the student body, including families that are living in poverty, have limited English proficiency, have disabilities, or have a student with a disability."). Other states did not explicitly make equity a focus in their guidance but described some general practices that align with this standard, such as complying with families rights and sharing data (e.g., Tennessee).

Standard 5: Share Power. Many SEAs asserted the importance of families in decision making in ways that were consistent with standard 5 in their guidance. There was variability in how this was discussed, with some SEAs making broad statements without clarification (e.g., "allow parents and community some voice in key school decisions", Wisconsin) while others provided more specificity about the ways to reach the National PTA's goal of building families' connections in informing, influencing, and creating policies, practices, and programs (e.g., "every school should have a strong, broad-based parent organization that can advocate on behalf of families and children", Connecticut). Some SEAs discussed strategies to remedy power imbalances, such as collecting and sharing data to help with more informed decision making from diverse family perspectives (e.g., Louisiana) which is aligned with practice indicators

provided by the National PTA to reach the goal of strengthening families' voice in shared decision making.

Standard 6: Collaborate with Community. Many SEAs discussed the importance of working with community organizations to help expand opportunities for learning, leadership, and support as recommended in standard 6 in their guidance; however, they varied in the extent to which they emphasized this. Some SEAs made general statements about involving community without providing additional context about the ways in which this can be accomplished. For instance, Florida stated "through school-community partnerships, connect with community-based programs/resources (e.g., health care and human services) that strengthen and support students' learning and promote well-being". Although this is consistent with standard 6, it does not directly describe how it will reach the National PTA's goals for this standard. Conversely, other SEAs provided specific strategies and comprehensive resources for community asset mapping to help match needs with available supports (e.g., Oregon). Some guidance emphasized the importance of school staff understanding community needs, opposed to simply what community organizations can offer a school (e.g., Vermont). Both of these instances are directly aligned with National PTA practice indicators for collaborating with community.

Emerging Family Engagement Best Practices

Table 2 provides summary statistics for SEA guidance that included the emerging areas of family engagement research that are not explicitly capture in the PTA's National Standards (i.e., mental health and developmental considerations). Of the 38 state guidance documents that were included in this study, eleven (28.9%) were coded for discussing engagement in student mental health and seventeen (44.7%) were coded for including developmental considerations. Qualitative data for SEAs that met these codes is reviewed below.

Mental Health. The guidance that included mental health varied in the ways and extent to which it was discussed. Some SEAs included a brief statement pertaining to increasing social-emotional skills, while others discussed ways to directly engage families in mental health supports. For example, one guidance recommended “Conduct a survey to obtain input from parents and students on current and potential school workshop topics in order to identify ways to provide support for social and emotional learning. Host family engagement nights for families and students presenting on topics identified” (Florida). Another guidance asserted that family counseling would be available to students and their families by district trained therapists “for families (both youth and their parents) dealing with family challenges ranging from divorce to social and economic hardship” (Illinois). Though discussed and incorporated in different ways across SEA guidance, mentions of social-emotional learning tended to be limited in quantity and brief in nature and did not appear to be a primary component of most family engagement guidance.

Developmental Considerations. Of the SEA guidance that included developmental considerations, there was variability in how it was discussed. Some SEAs made brief mention prompting school staff to take into consideration the age of the student. For example, California’s guidance includes a prompting question “Are the responses from families different between elementary and secondary or between different school sites?” Some states specifically organized their guidance by elementary, middle, or high school and provided tailored recommendations and standards accordingly (e.g., Michigan). For example, this guidance recommended doing home visits and weekly data-sharing folders with space provided for family comments for elementary school students; for high school students it recommended inviting

families to workshops on higher education and having families check classroom websites for course information and deadlines.

Discussion

Our review of SEA guidance on family engagement aimed to provide a lay of the land for how states are discussing family engagement policies and practices. This contributes to the family engagement research by identifying the extent to which SEA guidance is aligned with national standards and by providing information to SEAs interested in improving their family engagement efforts to better support their districts, schools, and other stakeholders. Non-regulatory guidance set by SEAs is one important data source because it helps describe how the state is interpreting federal policy, thus setting the tone for districts, schools, and school staff. In addition, SEA websites are a centralized place to communicate information about policy and research and can provide some consistency and support across districts and interested parties (e.g., teachers, families, principals). Results from this review identify several themes relevant to SEA family engagement efforts as described below. This helps inform recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and researchers interested in utilizing SEAs as a means to bridge the gap between research and policy to practice in family engagement.

Alignment with National Standards

SEAs that included non-regulatory guidance on family engagement generally discussed practices that aligned with the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. This is a promising finding and reflects that SEAs are promoting best practices for family engagement. Of states that provided guidance on family engagement (n = 38), nearly all (94.7%) of SEA guidance documents discussed welcoming and valuing families (standard 1) and communicating effectively (standard 2). This is aligned with recent results from a nationwide survey on parents

and guardian's satisfaction with interactions with their child's school, which found that families across grade level and demographic factors generally felt respected and welcomed (National PTA, 2022).

Despite high frequencies of national standards being discussed, findings also indicate that SEAs vary in how they provide guidance on family engagement best practices. Results indicated that areas of equity (standard 4) and community collaboration (standard 6) had the relatively lowest frequency of being included in SEA family engagement guidance with 84.2% and 78.9% including practices for each of these respective standards. Within guidance that did include these standards, many made high-level, vague assertions about what to do without recommending how to do it. Many SEAs' guidance could be strengthened by providing a clearer definition of equity, detailing corresponding practices to promote equity, and integrating equity as more of a focus throughout the guidance. Given the significant disparities in U.S. public schools (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2022), families are an important part of understanding student needs and helping to address them; this is especially true for families with marginalized groups who are bearing the brunt of educational inequities (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022). SEAs interested in improving their recommendations for how schools can leverage family engagement to address inequities could benefit from looking at other SEAs who provided specific practices and recommendations for how to implement systematic activities focused on equity (e.g., Massachusetts, Vermont).

Family engagement in mental health

We were particularly interested in examining how mental health was discussed within family engagement guidance given that research supports improved student mental health outcomes when families are engaged in schools (Smith et al., 2020). This could be an important

focus area for SEAs in light of the current youth mental health crisis (Jones, 2022) and the increased attention on schools to help address it (Duong et al., 2021). Results from this review indicated that very few states specifically discussed mental health within their family engagement guidance (less than 30%). Those that did varied in how they recommended schools engage families in school mental health efforts. For example, some mentioned providing families with information on social-emotional learning to reinforce learning at home, while others discussed providing specific school-based interventions for students and their families (e.g., family counseling in school). Other SEAs discussed that mental health is important, but failed to describe how it could be integrated within their family engagement efforts. Although there may be unique concerns for family engagement in student's mental health (e.g., confidentiality and safety) (Girio-Herrera et al., 2019), many of the universal practices for family engagement for school mental health (i.e., tier 1 supports) are similar to practices discussed in the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships (National PTA, 2022), including building trusting relationships, improving communication, providing information for families to reinforce at home, and welcoming all families to the school (DeBoer et al., 2022; Lowie et al., 2003). Therefore, there is basis for more explicit integration of school mental health and family engagement practices. This is relevant for a variety of stakeholders; policy makers can include mental health provisions in family engagement regulations; school staff can advocate for training and increased support in engaging families in school mental health, and researchers can identify barriers and facilitators on the part of school staff and families to better understand how student mental health can be prioritized in family engagement practices.

Variability in guidance accessibility and comprehensiveness

Findings from this study indicated that it was difficult to access and identify SEA guidance on family engagement due to a number of challenges (e.g., inactive links, information embedded across multiple locations on the website, and poor search tools). This is especially relevant for SEA staff, as making family engagement research and policy guidance more accessible is a critical component in addressing barriers to implementation, such as school staff reporting a lack of clear directives and families being unsure of what to expect. It is important to acknowledge how these challenges may disproportionately impact families from non-English Speaking and historically marginalized communities who already face barriers to navigating the school environment (Griner & Smith, 2006), considering that both researchers had difficulty accessing SEA guidance despite speaking English and having extensive knowledge and experience working in the public school system. Given the increased focus on equity in family engagement (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Jacques & Villegas 2018), improving the accessibility of SEA websites and making it easier to find family engagement materials is one small, albeit important, step towards equitable family engagement practice. SEA websites are a central platform where expectations for family engagement can be communicated, which can help set forth and clarify activities for families and school staff who are most directly involved in family engagement practice. Improving accessibility of family engagement guidance on SEA websites presents an opportunity to address gaps in school staff's understanding of what is being expected of them as well as resources available to help them carry out those expectations. In doing so, this could help tackle some of the barriers to family engagement reported by school staff (Baker et al., 2016).

There was also significant variability in the types of guidance SEAs offered as well as the comprehensiveness of guidance. While nearly all SEAs included policy, resources, or guidance related to family engagement on their website in some capacity, the quality of information varied: some states had limited, generalized text on their website about why family engagement is important, others exclusively referenced regulations and provided sample policy templates, while others had comprehensive toolkits and guides detailing specific ways to implement family engagement practices which were publicly available for districts, school staff, families, and other stakeholders to use and refer to. This variability could also be observed in length; some guidance documents were one page, while others were over 200 pages. State education guidance differed in the extent to which it described *what* family engagement encompasses or *why* schools should do it, but in general few described *how* to do it. This is consistent with research that indicates that many families and school staff value family engagement but fall short in efforts to reliably implement such practices (National PTA, 2022). This underscores the gap between research and policy and practice implementation, which can be remedied by developing concrete tools and guides on how to put best practices into action (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016). This is relevant for policy makers and SEAs as it emphasizes the need for guidance to provide more specific family engagement practices to help mitigate the challenge many school staff face in translating policy and research into practice. Although SEA guidance is non-binding, SEAs play a prominent role in communicating expectations for family engagement and delineating regulations. Even SEAs that did not have a state-level guidance and instead leave family engagement practices and decision making solely to schools and districts may benefit from having a centralized location to provide resources about national standards and best practices to guide their decisions and local

policies. Aligning the vision and standards for family engagement at the SEA level is a critical first step in supporting those most directly involved in putting those standards into practice.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study are important to note. First, whether a SEA does or does not provide guidance on family engagement does not necessarily provide information on how well schools are implementing family engagement practices. Although SEA guidance is a first step in understanding how schools are advised to engage families, future studies that examine school-level implementation would advance the research into how closely guidance is related to implementation. Second, the study excluded supplementary materials, additional resources, and links to external guidance or frameworks developed by other organizations (e.g., nonprofits, quasi-governmental organizations). Although this approach allowed us to make comparisons state by state, it is possible that SEA family engagement practices and resources could me more or less robust in practice than their guidance suggests. In addition, we were unable to comment on family engagement practices or standards in states that did not have a publicly available formal guidance to code (due to not hearing back from SEA liaison, being in the process of revamping their guidance, or deferring to district or school level).

Regarding school mental health, this study looked exclusively at how it was discussed within family engagement guidance. It is possible SEAs discuss family engagement in school mental health elsewhere on their websites (e.g., specific school mental health guidance), however, since that was outside the scope of the current study that was not reviewed. Last, this review utilized deductive coding to categorize if a guidance referenced a national standard or not. Though we included qualitative data to help elucidate the different ways SEAs discussed the standards in their guidance, our binary coding approach inherently reduces the nuances of the

data. Nevertheless, we believed this approach was appropriate as it allowed us to provide a broad comparison across states.

Conclusion

This review provides a first step in identifying the landscape of how SEAs are discussing and utilizing national standards for family engagement in schools. Results from this review highlight strengths in how frequently SEAs discuss activities consistent with family engagement best practices (e.g., recognizing families as partners, importance of building trust) along with identifying areas for improvement (e.g., improving equity recommendations and integrating student mental health). Specifically, we recommend the following considerations for SEAs, school staff, policy makers, and researchers based on the results from this review: 1) Make family engagement guidance easier to access and identify by clearly labeling them and displaying them in a user-friendly area of the SEA website, in multiple languages when appropriate. If a SEA does not have a formal guidance, clearly denote that and describe why so stakeholders know where else to look for support; 2) Provide practical suggestions and practice recommendations to concretely describe *how* to implement family engagement strategies, not just describe *what* they are; 3) More explicitly define equity and the practices that promote equity in family engagement; and 4) Expand research on family engagement in school mental health and integrate findings and evidence-based practices into guidance. These recommendations are intended to help address the family engagement research and policy to implementation gap and leverage family engagement efforts as a way to meet student needs.

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Table 1

National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Across State Education Agency Guidance

State	Standard 1: Welcoming All Families	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Standard 5: Share Power	Standard 6: Collaborate with Community
Alabama						
Alaska	√	√	√	√	√	√
Arizona						
Arkansas	√	√		√	√	√
California	√	√	√	√	√	√
Colorado	√	√	√	√	√	√
Connecticut	√	√	√	√	√	√
Delaware						
Florida	√	√	√			√
Georgia	√	√	√	√	√	√
Hawaii	√	√	√	√	√	√
Idaho						
Illinois	√	√	√	√	√	√
Indiana	√	√	√	√	√	√
Iowa		√		√		√
Kansas	√	√	√	√	√	
Kentucky	√	√	√	√	√	√
Louisiana	√	√	√	√	√	√
Maine	√					
Maryland	√	√	√		√	√
Massachusetts	√	√	√	√	√	√
Michigan	√	√	√	√	√	√
Minnesota	√	√	√	√	√	√
Mississippi	√	√	√	√	√	√
Missouri						
Montana						
Nebraska						

Nevada	√	√	√	√	√	√
New Hampshire	√	√		√	√	
New Jersey						
New Mexico	√	√	√	√	√	
New York	√	√	√	√	√	√
North Carolina	√	√	√	√	√	√
North Dakota	√	√	√		√	√
Ohio	√	√	√	√	√	√
Oklahoma	√	√	√			
Oregon	√	√		√	√	√
Pennsylvania	√	√	√	√	√	√
Rhode Island	√			√	√	
South Carolina		√	√	√		√
South Dakota						
Tennessee	√	√	√	√	√	√
Texas						
Utah	√	√	√	√	√	√
Vermont	√	√	√	√	√	√
Virginia	√	√		√	√	
Washington	√	√	√	√	√	
West Virginia						
Wisconsin	√	√	√		√	√
Wyoming						
Total N that met national standard	**36**	**36**	**31**	**32**	**33**	**30**
% of coded state guidance that met national standard	94.7%	94.7%	81.6%	84.2%	86.8%	78.9%

Note. States shaded gray indicates guidance not available and/or did not meet inclusion criteria.

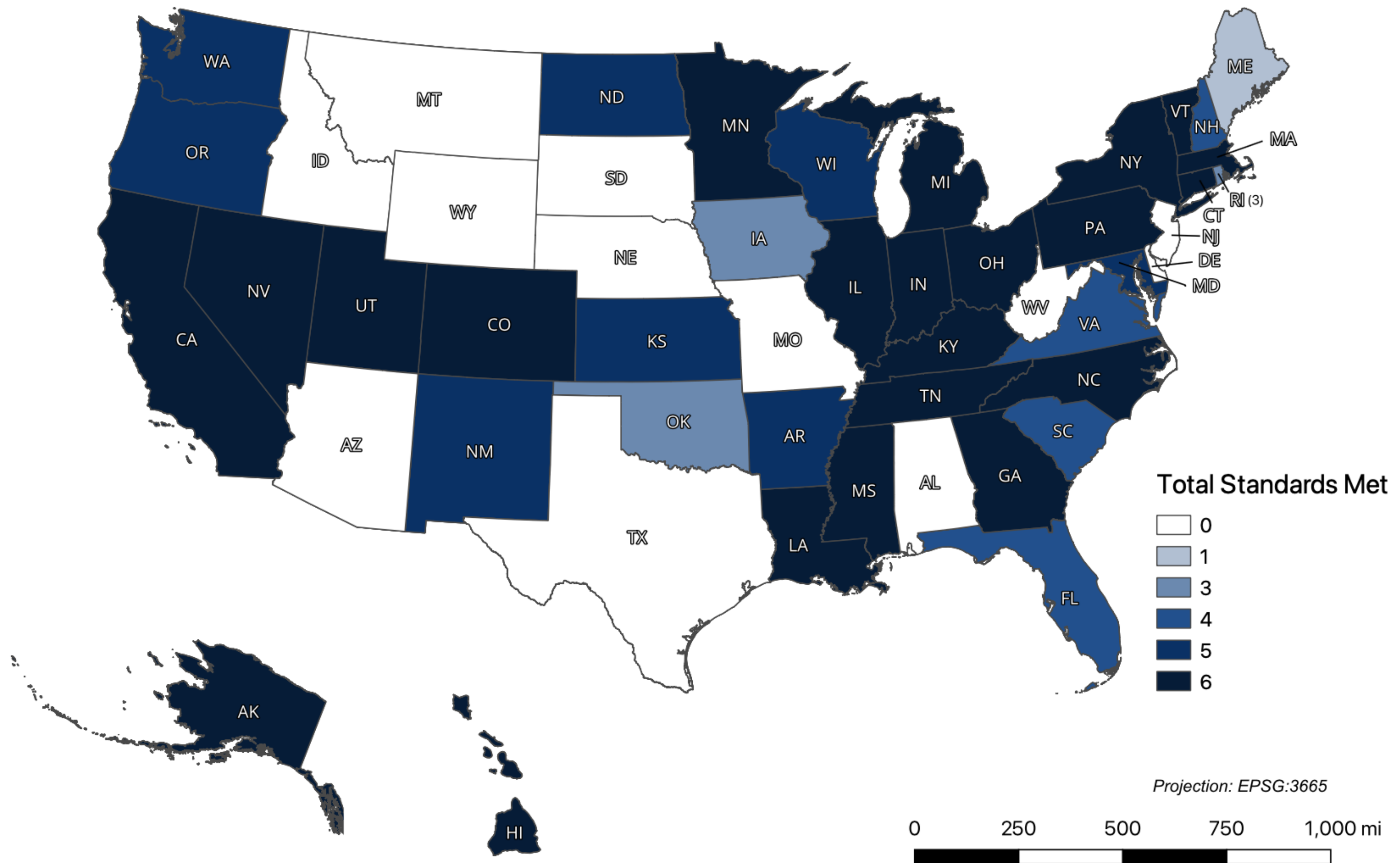
Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for State Education Guidance that Included Family Engagement Best Practices

Practice	**n (%)**
Developmental Considerations	17 (44.7)
Mental Health	11 (28.9)
All Six National Standards	22 (57.9)

Figure 1

Total Number of National Family-School Partnership Standards Met by State Education Agency



Appendix A

Code Book

Code	Description	Example Quote
Standard 1: Welcome All Families	The school treats families as valued partners in their child's education and facilitates a sense of belonging in the school community.	"A welcoming school environment and culture is one that builds trust and connection among students, families, educators, and other stakeholders. It is responsive to individual strengths and needs and ensures that all members of the community feel like valued contributors to students' academic achievement and healthy development"
Standard 1A: Community of Belonging	● Learn about families and foster respectful attitudes ● Provide time, training and resources for relationship-building ● Facilitate opportunities for restoration and connection, especially with families and students historically marginalized ● Use culturally and linguistically responsive engagement practices ● Invite families to contribute to the school community	"Offer ongoing and systematic professional development for administrators, teachers and pupil-services staff on the utility of building strong partnerships with families; the importance of reaching out to families through multiple communication pathways; designing meaningful parent conferences; and implementing and coordinating family involvement programs schoolwide"
Standard 1B: Inclusive Environment	● Encourage school staff to see engaging all families as part of their responsibilities ● Create an accessible, family-friendly campus and/or virtual school ● Track family engagement data and regularly examine to identify gaps in access ● Learn about and remove barriers for families to participate fully	"Our staff implement FSCP practices that celebrate the diversity among families in the school community by designing practices that build on the strengths of this diversity. School events and workshops take place in the community and/or on weekends in consultation with community leaders, so that more families have easier access. Food, translation, childcare, and transportation are provided to enable more families to attend."
Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	The school supports staff to engage in proactive, timely, and two-way communication so that all families can easily understand and contribute to their child's educational experience.	"Ensure that all messages are culturally and linguistically appropriate, timely, accessible, and clear by designing communication plans featuring multimodal two-way communication mechanisms based on the preferences of each family."
Standard 2A: School-Family Information Exchange	● Learn about and meet families' communication preferences ● Address access by providing interpretation, translation, and/or accommodations ● Coordinate information-sharing across communication outlets ● Gather family input and report back with how input was used	"Provide parents and staff with current contact information and include preferred ways and times for parents, teachers, and staff to reach each other; utilize all existing communication systems (PowerSchool, newsletters, Back-to-School information, Robocalls, etc.) to keep parents informed and engaged"

	• Foster transparency and enable families to follow-up • Co-create engagement plans for times of crisis	
Standard 2B: Parent-Teacher Communication	• Co-develop communication expectations with families and staff • Provide time, training and resources for parent-teacher communication • Solicit teacher and family feedback on how communication is going and what could be improved	"Greeting and maintaining relationships with the families is just as important as working with the children. Through family check-ins, providers may identify any trainings, resources and tools they may be able to provide to promote resiliency"
Standard 3: Support Student Success	The school builds the capacity of families and educators to continuously collaborate to support students' academic, social and emotional learning.	"Effective family engagement requires a collaborative effort on the part of teachers, administrators, and families to support the success of students both in and out of school. Families are essential partners in understanding and meeting the needs of their child and must know how their child is progressing in school and what they can do to support their child's learning and development at home."
Standard 3A: Partnership in Student Success	• Support educators to partner with families and students to set social, emotional and academic goals • Provide an understandable and accurate picture of student progress, using multiple measures (classwork, rubrics, observations, assessments, etc.) • Ensure accessible, regular, two-way communication about student learning and wellbeing	"Provide information to parents about content knowledge, skills and expectations in all subjects and at all grade level; provide parent training on how students will be evaluated"
Standard 3B: Family Engagement in Learning	• Get to know students and families and their strengths • Invite families to contribute to classroom learning • Provide families guidance and activities to support social, emotional and academic learning at home • Promote learning and enrichment outside of school • Help families and students plan for the future	"During classroom observations, teachers model strategies to support specific learning at home. Families ask questions and practice strategies with each other then go home with a 'tip sheet.' Short videos modeling the strategies are sent with emails or texts to families who couldn't attend, and a list of the families' questions and teachers' answers are attached along with the tip sheet"
Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	The school affirms family and student expertise and advocacy so that all students are treated fairly and have access to relationships and opportunities that will support their success.	"Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success."
Standard 4A: Navigating School System	• Build school staffs' skills to build trust and problem-solve with students and families	"Equitable family engagement comprises intentional and meaningful engagement activities and systems for all families or groups of families irrespective of families' level of or

	• Make it easy to understand how the school and district operate • Comply with families' rights under federal and state laws • Connect families to resources that address their questions or concerns • Make school staff and families aware of conflict resolution processes and apply them fairly	approach to engagement. Providing equity-based opportunities for family engagement can help family members become effective advocates for their children. This principle encourages fundamental practices that include but are not limited to … valuing opportunities to engage with all families to learn more about them, their experiences, culture, and goals; and recognizing the need to build and rebuild trust with families who experience inequities and bias"
Standard 4B: Address Inequitable Outcomes/Access	• Encourage community and leadership among historically under-represented groups • Share understandable, disaggregated data on school progress and practices • Recognize and work to eliminate bias in family engagement practices and policies	"The school ensures that representation on advisory bodies and committees reflects the composition of the student body, including families that are living in poverty, have limited English proficiency, have disabilities, or have a student with a disability."
Standard 5: Share Power	The school partners with families in decisions that affect children and families and together—as a team—inform, influence, and create policies, practices and programs.	"Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs."
Standard 5A: Shared Decision Making	• Transparently and accessibly communicate about decision-making processes • Build shared knowledge about decisions that affect children • Give families and students voice in decisions that affect children • Identify and remedy power imbalances • Track data and fill gaps for representative input and power in decisions	"Recognize that families lead, make decisions, and advocate for their interests and may have experiences in formal leadership and advocacy roles. Include families and Community Partners in decision-making, planning, implementing, and evaluating change at different levels."
Standard 5B: Family Connections	• Connect families to local officials • Foster student and family leadership and civic engagement • Support the development of an effective family/parent organization that represents all families	"Every school should have a strong, broad-based parent organization that can advocate on behalf of families and children."
Standard 6: Collaborate with Community	The school collaborates with community organizations and members to connect students, families and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services and civic participation.	"Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation."
Standard 6A: Foundation for Community Partnership	• Map community needs and assets • Align partnerships to school improvement planning • Work with partners to clarify roles and responsibilities	"Host outreach activities in community, i.e., library, fire hall, community center, etc. Invite local family support services and community organizations to share resources at school events. Consider 'asset mapping' to better

		understand and embrace the strengths, talents, and resources that family and community members bring to support the school."
Standard 6B: Connect with Community Partners	• Understand issues affecting the community and contribute to community-wide solutions • Address student and family basic needs through community resources • Build staffs' cultural competence through community partnerships • Act as a hub of community life	"Build strong partnerships and assist parents and families in connecting with entities such as community-based programs, higher-education institutions, libraries and business resources to enhance students' in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities, including field- based education, internships, mentoring programs, arts and sports programs, and community service activities."
Mental Health	The guidance references involving families in specific mental health and/or social-emotional needs, goals, or intervention considerations	"Conduct a survey to obtain input from parents and students on current and potential school workshop topics in order to identify ways to provide support for social and emotional learning. Host family engagement nights for families and students presenting on topics identified."
Developmental Considerations	The guidance differentiates considerations or strategies based on grade or developmental level	"Offer workshops for families focusing on: courses needed to graduate and go to college/postsecondary education; what high-level academic work looks like at each grade level; where to get needed help for students; tests, applications and timelines required for college or trade schools; how to complete financial assistance applications" (High school example)
Guidance Accessibility	Describes how easily guidance was to obtain and identify on State Education website on 5 point Likert scale: 1) Easy to access and identify guidance; 2) Somewhat easy to access or identify guidance; 3) Neither easy or difficult to find; 4) Somewhat difficult to access or identify guidance; 5) Difficult to access and/or no clear guidance available	n/a