

What Others Say about *The Family: America's Smallest School*

"I am delighted that ETS has chosen to explore more deeply the role families play in the education of their children. This report affirms the vital role parents have in guiding, supporting and monitoring their children's formal education. Educators and policymakers need to recognize that family assets can contribute greatly to student academic success and 'America's Smallest School' can help shape their belief system and their efforts."

— **María Casillas**, *President*
Families in Schools, Los Angeles,
California

"This report makes a compelling, data-driven case for focusing on the overwhelming relationship among parental educational levels, parental involvement and children's school success. It reinforces the importance of family literacy efforts nationwide that directly affect the parents' ability and effectiveness in helping their children learn, while at the same time enhancing their own basic skills to improve employment."

— **Sharon Darling**, *President and Founder,*
National Center for Family Literacy,
Louisville, Kentucky



“I applaud the way your report draws the parallel between number of parents in the household and the teacher/pupil ratio in the school. The analogy is an excellent way of communicating why two parents can do a better job of raising a child than one parent, without implying any moral judgment on the single mother. More generally, I found the report very useful in summarizing what parents can do to promote their children’s success in school.

— **Sarah McLanahan**, *Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and Director, Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University*

“A comprehensive, fact-based report on the relationship between family characteristics and home conditions that influence our children’s cognitive development and school performance. This report is a ‘must’ reading for parents, foundations, school administrators and teachers.”

— **Loui Olivas**, *Ph.D., President American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), Phoenix, Arizona*

“The Moynihan report inspired a wide-ranging set of studies over the next four decades concerning how the American family has been changing and what difference that might make for public policy. Now, with this report, we have a rich tapestry of knowledge of modern family life, and we know that what we are seeing in this country is quite similar to the family changes that are occurring in most other rich countries. What has not changed here, as opposed to changes in many other countries, is the unwillingness of political institutions and leadership to adapt to these changes in ways that improve the life of parents and, particularly, of children.”

— **Lee Rainwater**, *Professor of Sociology Emeritus, Harvard University, and Co-Editor, The Future of the Family, published by the Russell Sage Foundation, 2004*

“Too often, the implicit assumption has been that our schools are responsible for ‘pouring learning’ into empty vessels, called students. As this report makes clear, school achievement occurs only when students, their parents and schools are actively engaged as a team in ensuring that children succeed. That means turning off the TV, providing encouragement for learning in the home and taking homework seriously. For all children, but especially those from less-advantaged families, high-quality early childhood education can also make a big difference in getting children on the right track.”

— **Isabel Sawhill**, *Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Center for Children and Families, The Brookings Institution*

“Years of experience have proved to us the power of parents — armed with knowledge and nerve — to make their schools better. It’s tricky business to make it clear that family problems are a cause of but not an excuse for school deficiencies. The authors of this report handle this challenge brilliantly. Now the nation needs to find its own will to address the real stresses challenging too many of the nation’s families.

— Robert Sexton, *Executive Director Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence, and Founder, Institute for Parent Leadership, Lexington, Kentucky*

“I applaud the authors of the wonderful report, ‘The Family: America’s Smallest School.’ This document reinforces and nicely summarizes a growing swell of national and cross-national evidence on the importance of the home environment and parenting for early childhood development and learning. The key roles of books in the home and reading to children at younger ages for their subsequent school preparedness and performance cannot be understated. I recommend this report to educators, pediatricians, family advocates and especially to the parents of very young children.”

— **Timothy M. Smeeding**, *Maxwell Professor of Public Policy, Maxwell School of Syracuse University, and Co-Editor, The Future of the Family, Russell Sage Foundation, 2004*



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In 1965, when James Coleman published his finding that family characteristics accounted for more of the variance in school achievement than did differences in schools, Doxey Wilkerson was talking about differences in parental knowledge of what is required to support the academic achievement of students. He claimed that low-income parents of color held high aspirations for the education of their children but had little knowledge of how to translate those aspirations into support for academic achievement.

In the same period, Richard Wolfe and Jane Mercer were reporting data to suggest that when home environments include high levels of support for academic achievement, differences in the academic achievement levels of children from different backgrounds tend to diminish. Barton and Coley draw upon more recently collected data to re-introduce this important variable into the calculus by which we try to understand the variations in academic achievement that tend to be associated with students who are identified with different human social divisions.

Perhaps because of the desire to avoid “blaming the victims,” the powerful evidence of the association between family characteristics and achievement in school has not been exploited. Instead the emphasis has been placed on school reform. Yet I am convinced that despite the tremendous need for improvement in the delivery of high-level schooling and institutionalized opportunities to learn, it is possible that we have reached an asymptote with respect to gains to be made in academic achievement through school reform.

I predict that the next big gains in closing the academic achievement gap will come from the direction pointed to by Barton and Coley, Coleman, Wilkerson, Mercer, Wolfe and others. As I have concluded in my book, *Supplementary Education: the Hidden Curriculum of High Academic Achievement*, high levels of academic achievement are likely to be achieved when opportunities to learn and supports for academic achievement are redundant in the lives of academic learners. Barton and Coley remind us that families, communities and schools can provide that redundancy. Parents are indeed children's first teachers, and family is the smallest school.

—**Edmund W. Gordon**, *John M. Musser Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, Yale University; Richard March Hoe Professor of Psychology and Education, Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University; Senior Scholar in Residence, The College Board and Rockland Community College*

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