

The Role of the Family in Educational Achievement

Years of longitudinal studies reveal the powerful link between family situation and academic achievement; to be more specific, children from intact families enjoy better academic outcomes¹. Moreover, children from intact families have fewer behavioral problems at school², and are more likely to attend college³. Almost by definition intact families tend to enjoy relative economic advantage⁴, yet even factoring for this, children in homes where mother and father are married do better in K-12 than others⁵. Academic success is to some extent generational: where parents have done well in school and value education, children are inspired to do the same; when parents are unaccomplished in or ambivalent about education, children are less likely to do well.⁶

Nevertheless, society's embrace of the traditional family is changing. A half-century ago (1970) 84% of children lived with their married biological parents; by 2009 only 60% did so. For many individuals, cohabitation is a desired alternative to marriage, yet children of cohabitants are three (3) times more likely to experience parental separation than those whose parents are married, and these children experience three (3) times as many family transitions.⁷ This is not to suggest that family situation preordains a given child to success or failure – but children who succeed in spite of a challenging family context typically must have great personal determination and exceptional schools and teachers. We therefore should do what we can to encourage family development and cohesion as well as great teachers and schools – wherever they might be found.

- We cannot discuss public education without, at some point, acknowledging the central role family plays in education – talking about education policy without discussing family policy is short-sighted and bound to produce a

¹ Cf. “The impact of family structure on the health of children: Effects of divorce,” American College of Pediatricians position paper, *The Linacre Quarterly* 81 (4) 2014, 378-87 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4240051/>).

² Cf. “What Happens at Home Doesn't Stay There: It Goes to School”, by Nicholas Zill and W. Bradford Wilcox, and the plethora of sources cited there (<https://ifstudies.org/blog/what-happens-at-home-doesnt-stay-there-it-goes-to-school>).

³ “Marriage, Family Structure, and Children's Educational Attainment”, Patrick F. Fagan, Leonie Ten Have, Wendy Chen, *Marriage and Religion Research Institute Research Synthesis*, September 19, 2011 (<http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF11138.pdf>).

⁴ Cf. McLanahan, Sara, Percheski, Christine, “Family structure and the reproduction of inequalities”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 34(2008) 257-76; Paul R. Amato, “research on divorce: continuing trends and new development,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(2010) 650-66; Hyun S. Kim, “Consequences of parental divorce for child development”, *American Sociological Review* 76(3) (2011) 487-511; Fabrizio Benardi and Jonas Radl, “Parental separation, social origin, and educational attainment: the long-term consequences of divorce for children”, *Demographic Research* 30 (2014)1653-80.

⁵ See “What Happens at Home Doesn't Stay There: It Goes to School”, by Nicholas Zill and W. Bradford Wilcox (<https://ifstudies.org/blog/what-happens-at-home-doesnt-stay-there-it-goes-to-school>).

⁶ See Eric F. Dubow, Paul Boxer and L. Rowell Huesmann, “Long Term Effects of Parent's Education on Children's Educational and Occupational Success: Mediation by Family Interactions, Child Aggression, and Teenage Aspirations,” (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2853053/>).

⁷ Wendy Manning, “Cohabitation and Child Wellbeing”, in *The Future of Children (Princeton-Brookings): Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited* 25,2 (2015), 51-66, esp. p. 54 (<https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/Full%20Journal%20Marriage%20Revisited.pdf>).

Colorado House Republicans/Last update: March 2019

flawed analysis. In football terms, if education policy is the game, family context is the draft – they are inextricably linked.

- Since we know that intact families produce better students, we ought to pursue social and legislative policies that will encourage marriage and perseverance in marriage. How do we incentivize personal and family behavior that will benefit our children and, ultimately, our state and country? How do we disincentivize actions that are demonstrably harmful to children and, ultimately, our state and country? Are there changes to family law, the Colorado tax code, property taxes and the like that can be altered to promote the best learning environment for children?