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‘Parenting Education’ a Mixed Bag From State to State  
Arizona, Louisiana, New York, Virginia Looking for Cohesion

New York City – Upon the birth of a child, many parents are struck with the reality that parenting doesn’t come with an instruction manual. Research has shown that parents who’ve acquired parenting skills through standardized education can vastly improve their child’s wellbeing and capacity to thrive, and that the more universally available the parental education, the stronger the outcomes for children.

A team of researchers at the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) found that what passes for “parenting education” varies wildly across the country, from Alabama to Wyoming. They examined efforts in four states that are trying to get a handle on what is actually entailed in such education, who their “educators” are, and what supports children and families in their states need.

According to NCCP, a think tank at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, most states are working to strengthen their supports for young children’s health and development and some states are increasing support for parenting as part of more comprehensive strategies. They reviewed initiatives in Arizona, Louisiana, New York and Virginia – each of which has in place measures to get a handle on parenting education in their state. Their research is part of NCCP’s “Project Thrive,” a federally-funded initiative to provide support to state early childhood systems.

“Most states strive to give families information and access to programs that help parents keep their children safe and healthy while nurturing their development and promoting their school readiness,” says Louisa Higgins, research analyst at NCCP and coauthor of the study. “These efforts make a great deal of sense in view of growing evidence that parents and young children can benefit in many ways from parent education, and that children in families experiencing economic hardship are at higher risk of poor health and educational outcomes in the absence of parenting supports.”

In New York, Louisiana, and Virginia, examples of strategies states can use to increase training are provided, especially professional development focused on effective, research-informed practices. These include state and regional trainings on best practices in parent education; efforts to link providers to additional, ongoing professional development; and training tied to parent educator certification.

NCCP recommends that states identify resources across multiple systems to help increase families’ access to information and parenting supports. In Arizona, which has developed a “New Parent Kit,” state-level planning and local outreach efforts that support its distribution of information to parents are examples of a strategy that draws on state-level funding from several systems like health, mental health, and child welfare, and uses local programs operating in these systems to help parents easily access assistance appropriate to their needs.
“New York, Louisiana and Virginia have each created state-level entities dedicated to strengthening supports for parents of young children. These are promising strategies for planning and financing parent initiatives across multiple systems, and can be used as models nationwide,” says Higgins.