

STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

COMMIT TO HIGH-IMPACT FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

It is no secret that that family engagement in school has tremendous benefits for students' learning and well-being.¹ Specifically, research indicates that family engagement can offer a plethora of benefits, including improved student self-esteem, better student behavior, higher attendance rates, and increased achievement and academic outcomes for students "regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial background, or parents' education level."² Consequently, districts and schools should work actively to forge authentic, collaborative, and equitable partnerships with families based on mutual exchange of information about students and complementary application of school- and home-based supports to foster students' academic achievement and their physical and social-emotional health.³



WHAT IS HIGH-IMPACT FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

High impact family engagement is a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children's learning and development from birth through college and career.

Source: Institute for Educational Leadership³

Educators promote more effective family engagement in a number of ways that embed parents and guardians more directly in school-based activities and strengthen familial self-efficacy and capacity to support students outside of school.⁵ In fact, districts and schools should apply a variety of strategies and a layered approach to family engagement to best support their involvement (such as those [listed here](#)).⁶ Common strategies involved in such an approach include:⁷

- Building personal relationships and mutual understanding with families via class meetings, informal one-on-one conversations, and home visits;
- 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 into classroom lessons.

The Institute for Educational Leadership, through collaboration with various organizations in Connecticut, compiled examples of practices that yield higher impact on children’s development. Click [here](#) to access the complete list of high impact as opposed to moderate or low impact practices.

Sample High-Impact Strategies for Family Engagement in School and After School Programs

SCHOOL PROGRAMMING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Back to School Night class meetings where parents and teachers share learning strategies, review key skills for students with home learning tips, and develop a communications plan ▪ Regular two-way calls, texts, and emails to share progress and tips ▪ Family center, staffed, with workshops on learning strategies, referrals to social services, and informal gatherings ▪ Relationship-building home visits by teachers, voluntary for both teachers and families and available to all families ▪ Classroom observations with mini-lessons; weekly data-sharing folders go home, with space for parent comments ▪ Student-led conferences with portfolios of student work, followed by 1:1 conversations about learning, to set goals

AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Frequent, informal gatherings for families, school staff, and community partners to foster collaboration and information sharing ▪ Staff and families co-develop intervention plans to address students’ social and academic concerns ▪ Family support groups and education classes promote family learning, develop job skills, and address health needs ▪ “Community advocates” develop rapport with families of children at risk, provide advice and links to extra support, and help families navigate social services ▪ Local partners co-sponsor community-building and cultural events at afterschool site, such as a Health Fair of Heritage celebration, that attract hundreds of families and community members

Source: Institute for Educational Leadership⁸

IDENTIFY AND PUBLICIZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Districts should determine and publicize where needs and opportunities for family involvement exist in the larger district, at individual schools, in classrooms, and with students, as families may want to be involved, but feel unaware of ways to participate or unsure if they have anything to contribute.⁹ By accessing a published list of school needs, parents can easily identify how and where they can contribute based on their strengths and time. Teachers can also meet with parents or the PTA to share needs and availability lists and identify opportunities for engagement that build on parent strengths as well as school and student needs.¹⁰

In particular, the National PTA recommends seeking parents out for engagement, rather than waiting for parents to offer.¹¹ Such family engagement can occur in many formats, and schools should provide families with multiple ways to get involved.¹² Parents can engage in their child’s learning at home, in the classroom, at school, or at the district office. At home, parents can create supportive learning environments, talk with students about their homework, set goals and discuss college and career aspirations and plans, and read school communications. At school and in the classroom, parents can meet with teachers, volunteer, and participate in parent-teacher associations/organizations. Additionally, at the district office, parents can attend school board meetings, attend and lead trainings, serve on advisory committees, and participate in decision-

making.¹³ Click [here](#) to access additional parent-initiated engagement opportunities presented by California Department of Education.

School/District-Initiated Practices to Promote Family Engagement



AT THE DISTRICT

- Solicit input from families on district family engagement policies
- Provide training on curricular and budgetary decision-making for parent coordinators and families
- Create and support parent centers at school sites



AT SCHOOL

- Create a welcoming environment
- Celebrate families and the assets they bring to schools
- Work with families as partners to improve student achievement
- Assist families to access community resources



AT HOME

- Promote effective two-way communication with families
- Assist families with creating home conditions that support academic achievement
- Provide information on expectations, standards, and how families can be involved in an accessible language and format
- Keep families informed on student progress and maintain regular communication

Source: California Department of Education¹⁴

Strong communication between the school and home is crucial to promoting family engagement.

Two-way communication helps create a positive partnership between the home and school, while a lack of effective communication can inhibit family engagement.¹⁵ While schools routinely provide information to families through handouts, websites, and phone calls, families rarely have easy and routine ways to respond. Therefore, “the most effective way to build a real partnership is to create regular opportunities for open, honest dialogue. All families should feel that the school keeps them informed on important issues and events and that it is easy to communicate with teachers, the principal, and other school staff.”¹⁶ Families should have both regular communication and access to further communication with the school as a precursor to other forms of engagement.¹⁷

To facilitate better communication between home and school, **principals and teachers should survey families at the start of the school year to determine preferred communication styles and needs**, as “it is critical that schools have a variety of communication strategies that reflect the types of communication preferred in their community.”¹⁹ Communications from the district, school, and teacher should be available in languages that families and the community understand.²⁰ Educators may also need to adapt their communication strategies depending on student and family needs. For example, educators can access strategies for engaging and communicating with hard-to-reach families [here](#).

Communication Strategies to Increase Parent Engagement

Universal Strategies (for all students and families)

- Teachers encourage and plan for parent-teacher conferences with all families;
- Teachers send home daily communication in student agendas;
- Teachers and schools develop electronic grade booklets so families can monitor their child's progress frequently;
- Staff send school or class newsletters to every family and post them on the school Web site;
- The school clearly communicates school policies to all families in their home language; and
- Administrators ensure that teachers and administrators have positive communication contacts with families about students before they contact families about negative issues.

Targeted Strategies (for some students and families)

- Staff members hold parent-teacher conferences as needed;
- School staff members make frequent phone calls or send special weekly notes updating parents on their child's progress; and
- Educators explain specialized or technical terms about a child's academic or behavioral issues and interventions to families in everyday language.

Intensive Strategies (for a few students and families)

- Staff members including nurses, social workers, teachers or parent mentors conduct home visits to build relationships and share important information with the families of students receiving intensive interventions;
- The school works closely with families of students who are chronically absent to communicate promptly when a student is not at school; and
- The school works with highly mobile and homeless families to establish a communication system that fits the families' needs (frequent changes in phone number, home address and adult caregivers).

Source: Ohio Department of Education²¹

ACTIVELY REDUCE BARRIERS TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Parents may encounter a variety of barriers that inhibit their abilities to actively engage in their child's education and school. Often, these barriers are logistical, and schools can implement strategies to ease parents' engagement challenges:

Common Logistical Barriers to Family Engagement

TIME

Time and availability are major challenges for families. Activities such as joining decision-making committees, attending meetings, and volunteering often occur during the day and conflict with parents' work schedules and other commitments, especially for parents who work late hours or multiple shifts.²²



Districts and schools can offer flexible scheduling options and schedule events at various times and on weekends to accommodate parents' schedules.²³

CHILDCARE

Parents may struggle with childcare needs, be unable to attend school events or meetings due to a lack of childcare, and may feel discouraged from bringing their children with them.²⁴



Districts and schools can provide childcare during events and ensure that events at multiple schools (where parents may have multiple children) are not held at the same time.²⁵ Districts and schools can also provide food at weeknight events or meetings.²⁶

TRANSPORTATION

Families may lack transportation to the school or have trouble parking.²⁷



Districts and schools can bus parents to events, set up carpools, hold events in community locations that are easier for parents to attend (e.g., community centers, church halls, parks, libraries), conduct home visits, and provide clearly marked visitor-only parking spaces.²⁸

Source: Multiple

Questions to Consider

- What might make a family feel unwelcome at our school? How can we address this?
- What resources are available in our school and/or community that can help families learn the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the education system?
- What are we doing to build trusting relationships with families? What resources are we devoting to this? What resources do we need?
- How might families experience language barriers in our school, and what can we do to support them?

Source: WIDA²³

Relatedly, **families may hold beliefs or have negative prior school experiences that act as barriers to their involvement in their child's school.** Families may be unfamiliar with the school or school's culture and practices.²⁹ Schools can address these barriers by warmly welcoming families to the school, building mutually trusting and respectful relationships, establishing regular communications, personally welcoming parents who seem uncomfortable and withdrawn, and developing a [parent handbook](#) that lists rules, procedures, policies, and where to find answers to frequently asked questions.³⁰

Language and culture can also act as significant barriers to engagement.³² For example, language can obstruct engagement when meetings, events, and communications are not available in the family's primary language.³³ Schools can reduce language and cultural barriers to engagement by:

- Providing educators with targeted professional development on engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families.³⁴
- Providing translators for all events and activities for families who do not speak English and translating family notices and newsletters.³⁵
- Viewing interactions from the families' perspective and working to understand how a person's cultural lens influences interactions and family and community engagement.³⁶

PROVIDE PARENT EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Parent education initiatives and programs should provide parents with the tools, knowledge, and skills to support their child’s learning or increase their own knowledge.³⁷ For example, teachers can provide parents with resources and effective study habits for supporting and reinforcing what students are learning in the classroom at home, from content such as fractions to tools such as PowerPoint.³⁸ Parent education can also offer parents strategies and information related to child development, effective parenting strategies (e.g., nutrition, communication, behavior), and tips for establishing supporting learning environments at home.³⁹ Districts and schools can support parents’ efficacy and capacity in multiple ways, such as providing resources, offering classes and workshops, and providing a parent resource center:

Effective Practices For Parent Instruction

- Implement programs of sufficient duration to enhance learner progress;
- Build on parents’ prior knowledge, skills, and experience;
- Respect parents’ cultures and ways of knowing;
- Get to know parents and their needs; and
- Focus on the information and skills parents will need to help their children.

Source: Center for Applied Linguistics³²

Parent Education Methods

PROVIDE RESOURCES

Districts can provide parents with physical resources to help them learn about the school and support their child’s learning. For example, the NEA offers [parent guides](#) on a variety of topics, such as math and literacy, the Kindergarten transition, and bullying.⁴¹



Salt Lake City School District offers multiple online resources for parents on its website, accessible [here](#).

Source: Multiple

OFFER CLASSES

Districts should offer classes based on topics that parents would find helpful and about what their students are learning. Districts can determine what parents want to learn by conducting a needs assessment or survey of parents’ interests.⁴² Topics can span child development, strategies to support students’ learning, or parent skill development such as ESL, for example.

IMPLEMENT A PARENT RESOURCE CENTER

Parent centers are welcoming, comfortable locations within schools or districts that provide parents with additional support.⁴³ Parent centers serve a variety of functions, such as welcoming families; modeling effective parent engagement; providing information, resources (e.g., on disabilities), and communication; and providing technology access and assistance.⁴⁴







Sample Parent Education Topics

- How the school system works and expectations for parent engagement;
- What their child is learning/content covered at certain grades;
- Preparing for school or grade level transitions;
- Child growth and development;
- Students’ social-emotional development, behavior, and bullying;
- English as a second language; and
- How to help with homework, improve study skills, and support student learning.

Source: Multiple⁴⁵

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources provide further information on family engagement and can support educators in engaging parents on specific topics or in working with specific populations.

RESOURCE	TOPIC	PUBLISHING ORGANIZATION	SHORTENED URL (with embedded hyperlink)	QR CODE
“English Language Learners and Parental Involvement”⁴⁶	Parent engagement for ELs	National Education Policy Center	https://argo.page.link/YtnhM	
“Parent Engagement Strategies and Resources to Communicate with Families”⁴⁷	Parent engagement for college and career readiness	Oregon GEAR UP	https://argo.page.link/gS1Me	
“Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence”⁴⁸	Parent engagement for increasing student attendance	Attendance Works	https://argo.page.link/sCfdA	
“Newcomer Toolkit Chapter 5: Establishing Partnerships with Families”⁴⁹	Parent engagement for newcomer parents	U.S. Department of Education	https://argo.page.link/DgaRY	
“Handbook on Family and Community Engagement”⁵⁰	Family and community engagement	School Community Network	https://argo.page.link/YZi8m	
“Partnering with Families to Improve Literacy Skills (K-5)”⁵¹	Family engagement for literacy skill development	Ohio Department of Education	https://argo.page.link/ASiqa	

ENDNOTES

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- ² "Benefits of Family Engagement." Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/FEI/benefits/>
- ³ "Building Effective Family Engagement." Flamboyan Foundation. <http://flamboyanfoundation.org/our-work/family-engagement/>
- ⁴ "What Does High-Impact Family and Community Engagement Look Like in Practice?" Institute for Educational Leadership. p. 1. <http://iel.org/sites/default/files/Handout%20High-Impact%20Charts.pdf>
- ⁵ "Family Engagement: A Guide to Tools, Strategies, and Resources." ExpandedED Schools, 2014. pp. 2–3. https://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/TASC_FamilyEngagement_Resource%20Guide.pdf
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- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
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- ²³ [1] Baker et al., Op. cit., p. 179. [2] "Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours," Op. cit., p. 1.
- ²⁴ [1] Baker et al., Op. cit., p. 179. [2] "Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours," Op. cit., p. 3.
- ²⁵ Baker et al., Op. cit., p. 179.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ "Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours," Op. cit., p. 6.
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