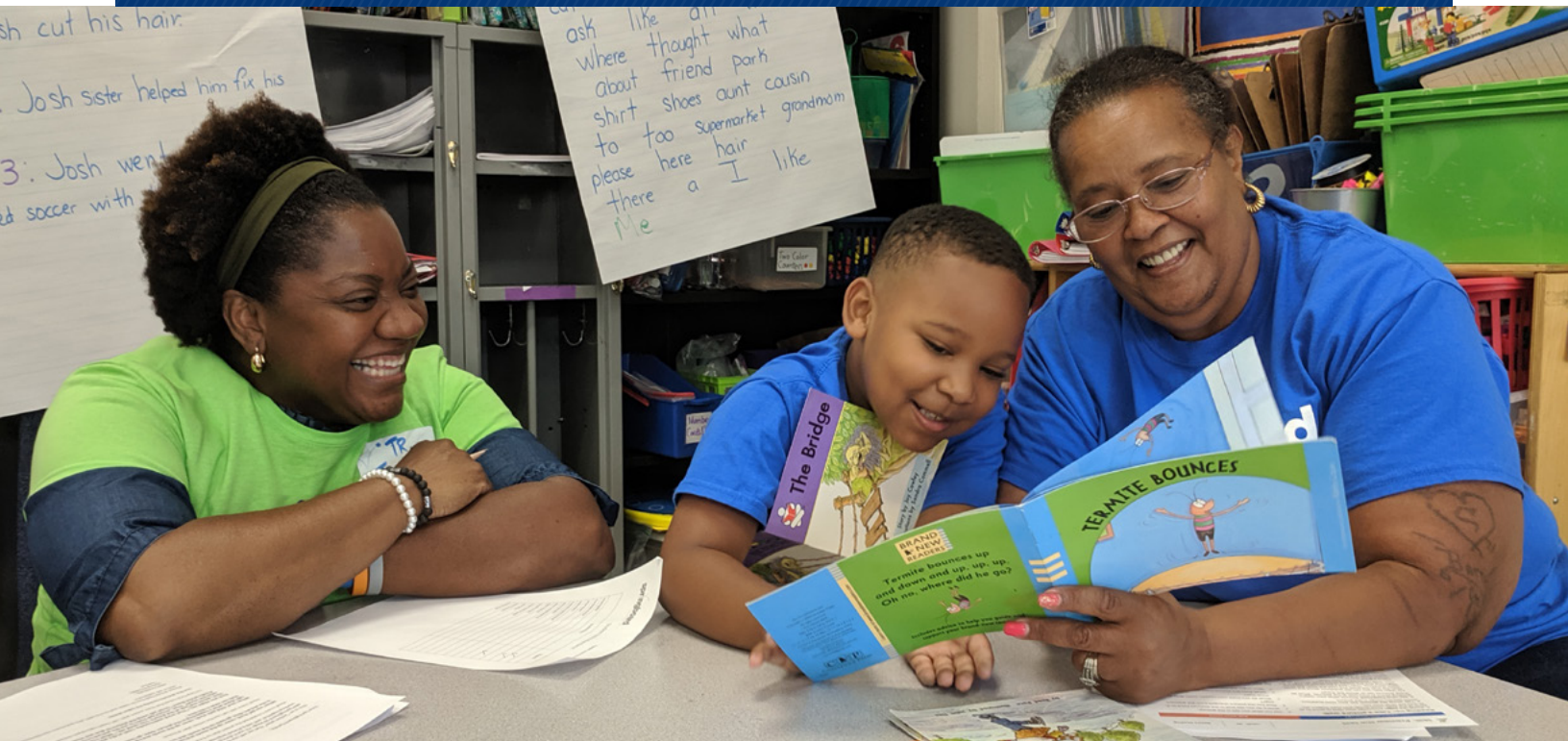


Becoming an Ally: Partnering with Immigrant Families to Promote Student Success



A Report From

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Written by
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To provide all children with an excellent education, educators must understand the needs of immigrant families and how to meet them. This report offers recommendations to guide educators in engaging immigrant families as true partners in their children’s learning.

– **Stephany Cuevas**, author of *Becoming an Ally: Partnering with Immigrant Families to Promote Student Success*

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PREFACE

The education program at Carnegie Corporation of New York seeks to empower families, communities, students, educators, policymakers, and the public as informed advocates for an equitable and high-quality educational system. Our grants and other activities aim to involve these stakeholders, especially families with various perspectives and backgrounds, in cocreating and advocating for the kinds of learning experiences that will prepare every student to participate actively in a robust democracy and dynamic global economy.

One in 10 public school students in the United States are English language learners, and most of them are in grades K–5 (Irwin et al. 2022). All children deserve access to the best education possible, regardless of their racial and socioeconomic background or personal circumstances. To improve the quality of education in our communities, we must first empower families as true partners in their children’s education. The research is clear: when families are empowered as true partners in their children’s education, students thrive, schools are strong, and communities benefit.

That is why we fund programs that bridge the gap between home and school. We want families, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds and immigrant communities, to have access to information, activities, and support to keep their children engaged in school and learning. We also want parents to be equipped with the resources they need to be effective advocates for their children’s education, for educators and schools to welcome all families and students, and for them to have the tools and competencies to do so.

To start a national conversation about family engagement strategies that can support immigrant and multilingual families, we commissioned Stephany Cuevas, assistant professor of education at Chapman University, to write this report, *Becoming an Ally: Partnering with Immigrant Families to Promote Student Success*. The report challenges us to build effective and equitable family engagement practices for immigrant families throughout our educational system. It provides recommendations for school leaders, funders, policymakers, and educators to support a high-quality education for every immigrant child.

We believe it is imperative that we provide culturally affirming and asset-based supports for immigrant families and emerging bilinguals. We want to empower children and their families to become active members of their communities, to build social connections, and to integrate into American society while honoring their identities and cultural backgrounds. Family-school-community partnerships are essential for the future of our nation and the success of *all* children, including their academic and socioemotional well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Family engagement is essential for students’ well-being and academic success. Decades of research underscore that students thrive when educators, families, and communities develop trusting relationships, communicate frequently with each other, and share similar goals (Mapp et al. 2022).

Engaging in their children’s education can be challenging for immigrant families, who are largely marginalized, minoritized, and underserved. These families are more likely to be low-income, have difficulty navigating school systems due to unfamiliarity and language barriers, and have limited access to social services, such as housing assistance and health care (Gelatt, Lacarte, and Rodriguez 2022).

It is important to consider these challenges, as children from immigrant families are a significant portion of the U.S. student population. Today, the United States is home to about 45 million immigrants (roughly 14 percent of the population), of whom 10–11 million are undocumented (Esterline and Batalova 2022). An estimated 4.5 million children — about 8 percent of all U.S. children, 91 percent of whom are themselves U.S. citizens — have at least one undocumented parent (Dreby 2015). These mixed-status families result partly from undocumented immigrants having U.S.-born children and partly from a volatile immigration system where an individual may hold one form of legal status on a given day and find themselves undocumented the next. By 2065, immigrants and their children are projected to make up 36 percent of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center 2015).

Just as ethnic, racial, and economic identities shape families’ interactions with schools, so does immigration status (see box, page 6). For example, undocumented immigrants live in constant fear of deportation (Dreby 2015), which leads them to live fearful and hypervigilant lives (De Genova 2002; Menjívar 2011; Sigona 2012). Many avoid or minimize interactions with government institutions, including schools, which can impact student learning and family-school relationships.

The U.S. Constitution requires that all children be given equal educational opportunities, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, sex, family wealth, or citizenship status. To provide *all* children with an excellent education, educators must understand the needs of immigrant families and how to meet them. This report offers recommendations to guide educators in engaging immigrant families as true partners in their children’s learning.



Important Terminology

- **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA):** an administrative relief program that protects from deportation and provides a work permit to eligible individuals who migrated to the U.S. as children. DACA recipients are sometimes referred to as *DACAmented*.
- **Immigrant family:** any family with at least one parent born outside the country of residence.
- **Lawful permanent resident:** a foreign-born individual who has been granted the right to reside permanently in the United States. Lawful permanent residents are also known as *permanent resident aliens* and *green card holders*.
- **Mixed-status family:** a family whose members have different legal statuses, including undocumented immigrants, DACA recipients, Temporary Protected Status holders, lawful permanent residents, and U.S. citizens.
- **Refugee family:** migrants seeking entry into a country who can demonstrate that they have been persecuted or have reason to fear persecution on the basis of one of five protected grounds: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.
- **Temporary Protected Status:** a temporary benefit granted to eligible foreign-born individuals who cannot return safely to their country of origin due to an ongoing armed conflict, environmental disaster, epidemic, or other extraordinary and temporary condition. Temporary Protected Status holders are protected from deportation based on immigration status and are eligible for employment and travel authorization.
- **Unaccompanied minor:** an individual under the age of 18 who entered the U.S. without lawful status and without an accompanying parent or legal guardian.
- **Undocumented immigrant:** an individual residing in a given country without legal documentation. Undocumented immigrants include people who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the government and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid.

CALL TO ACTION

The first time a teacher asked me what my dreams are for my child, I almost cried. That was the first time I felt like someone from the school cared about my son. As an immigrant, schools and programs and other places like that feel intimidating, and I do not feel comfortable in them. But when the teacher asked me about my dreams for my son, that changed my point of view of her and the school. That is when I knew that we had the same thing in mind — the best for my son.

— Parent, Central Valley, CA

A quality education can improve the lives and futures of children in immigrant families. Education offers students and their families the possibility of upward social mobility, including financial gains. It can help immigrants build social connections and community and integrate into American society. A quality education, which includes family-school partnerships, is an inherent right.

In their 2021 report *Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*, Karen Mapp and Eyal Bergman highlight the necessity of authentic school-family partnerships for student success. They also interrogate the dynamics that may prevent these relationships from flourishing. They argue that educators and community leaders must be mindful of the assumptions they make about families: to genuinely partner with them, they must see students' families as equals. Additionally, Mapp and Bergman ask educators to reframe family engagement practices to be more liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused to support the educational excellence of all children. They call for more inclusive, thoughtful, and intentional partnerships with families — especially nondominant families — where power is authentically shared.

To embrace liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused family engagement, educators, school leaders, policymakers, researchers, philanthropists, and anyone invested in children's well-being must truly know and understand families and communities. This means they must understand the unique needs and assets of immigrant communities. It also means that both society and individuals have a role to play.

This report extends Mapp and Bergman's call to action to focus on the needs of immigrant families, asking:

- How can immigrant families best be supported? What role do schools, districts, and community organizations play in supporting immigrant families?
- How can educators engage with immigrant families to support students' learning and socioemotional well-being?
- How do schools and other community settings knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate systems of power and oppression?
- How can schools and community organizations actively show solidarity with immigrant families?

CHALLENGES IMMIGRANT FAMILIES EXPERIENCE ENGAGING WITH SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Immigrant communities are far from monolithic. Their experiences are influenced by a range of factors, including immigration status, immigrant generation, geographic location, and ethnic or racial background, as well as whether they have access to stable jobs and how immigrant-friendly their communities are. For example, a naturalized Chinese family living in Los Angeles, California, may have vastly different experiences from an undocumented Honduran family living in Nashville, Tennessee. Contextual factors shape the daily lives of immigrant families, including their interactions with social institutions such as schools. The following are some of the challenges immigrant families experience in the United States that may impact their interactions with schools and communities.

Cultural Differences

Immigrant families often encounter significant cultural differences when they come to the U.S., requiring them to adapt to new societal norms and values. For example, U.S. schools may be structured differently from those in their home countries, with different schedules, expectations for family-school relationships, and roles for teachers and other educators in raising children. Many immigrant families come from cultures where teachers are highly respected. When they begin interacting with teachers in U.S. schools, they may defer to them to make most education decisions. This cultural misalignment can make it challenging for teachers to develop meaningful partnerships with families. Similarly, longtime residents in the receiving communities may be unfamiliar with the experiences and needs of immigrant families, which can impede effective communication and support.

Language Barriers

Language barriers often pose a challenge for immigrant families and communities. Immigrant families may not feel comfortable navigating U.S. institutions because they do not know how to communicate in English or are uncomfortable doing so. This discomfort limits their access to social services and interactions with social workers, healthcare providers, and educators; it also shapes their children's educational opportunities.

Children of immigrant families, even those born in the U.S., are more likely than their peers to be English language learners. Among public school students ages 5 to 17 who report speaking English "less than very well," 72 percent were born in the U.S., compared with 28 percent who were foreign-born (this group also includes students born abroad to American parents and naturalized citizens) (Bialik, Scheller, and Walker 2018).

Given that most U.S. schools instruct students in English, many children of immigrants who are English language learners struggle in school. Low English proficiency is associated with poor performance on standardized tests, lower grade point averages, repeating grades, and low graduation rates (Manspile, Atwell, and Bridgeland 2021). Students who are English language learners are also less likely than their peers to have sustained interactions with proficient English speakers in informal settings, which benefits academic achievement (Gándara and Hopkins 2010). Additionally, educators may consciously or unconsciously have negative perceptions of this population of students and their families. These perceptions may be due to their assumption that immigrants are intellectually inferior because they are not fluent in English or due to their political views on immigration, for example (Gonzalez 2016).

Challenging Assumptions about English Language Learner Students and Immigrant Families

Educators often assume that immigrant students and English language learners are interchangeable: if students are immigrants or are raised in immigrant families, they must have challenges learning in English. In fact, the majority of English language learners enrolled in U.S. schools were born in the United States: 85 percent of English language learners in grades pre-K through 5 and 62 percent of those in grades 6–12 are U.S.-born (Zong and Batalova 2015). While there is an overlap between immigrant students and English language learners, it is dangerous to assume that the two are synonymous. Some students may have migrated from countries where they were instructed in English or have parents who prioritized having them learn the language. Other students may have been born in the U.S. to immigrant parents but had limited exposure to English. The best way to find out the language needs of immigrant students is to work closely with them and ethically use diagnostic tests as needed.



Limited Resources

Immigrant families are more likely than U.S. citizens to live in low-income or working-class neighborhoods, which limits their access to stable jobs, social welfare programs, and educational opportunities. Immigrants often experience on-the-job exploitation, hazardous work conditions, job insecurity, and low pay. Additionally, due to limited financial resources, they are more likely to live in multigenerational homes. While this has its benefits, including multiple sources of income and caretaking availability, it also may cause undue stress and tension within families (Esterline and Batalova 2022).

Undocumented Immigration Status

In addition to navigating a new country and culture, undocumented immigrants experience challenges created by their immigration status. The ongoing threat of deportation and family separation shapes their everyday lives in countless ways and can have severe effects on their physical and mental health (Vesely, Bravo, and Guzzardo 2019). The stress and alienation created by their deportability lead to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and developmental problems among undocumented immigrants and their families. These symptoms are aggravated when families experience the deportation of a family member, which can cause financial strain in addition to psychological and emotional distress. Moreover, undocumented immigration status of parents and children prevents the integration of children of immigrants into American society: hiding their immigration status becomes a priority, and they navigate their daily lives with as little interaction with others as possible. Undocumented parents are less likely than U.S. citizen parents or parents with other forms of authorized legal status to use social services, even when they have U.S.-born children. In addition to health services, this includes academic services, such as free tutoring at libraries, and extracurricular activities, such as after-school sports (Vesely, Bravo, and Guzzardo 2019).

Anti-immigrant Climate

Throughout its history, the United States has demonstrated contradictory attitudes toward immigrants, welcoming some while discriminating against others. Historically, anti-immigrant sentiment has created unwelcoming environments, particularly for immigrants of color and low socioeconomic status. Additionally, policies that limit who can migrate to the United States and the lack of a clear pathway to U.S. citizenship and the protections this immigration status offers have increased fear within immigrant communities. Research has found that anti-immigrant sentiment increases immigrants' emotional distress and amplifies their distrust of social institutions, service providers, and non-family members. It also increases bullying of immigrant students and decreases students' motivation and engagement in school (Brown 2015).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had an outsized impact on immigrant communities. With many immigrants serving as frontline workers in health care, retail, agriculture, and transportation, they experienced heightened exposure to the virus and an increased risk of severe COVID-19-related complications and death. As described above, immigrant workers often hold low-wage jobs that do not offer paid sick leave or employer-sponsored health insurance. Without a social security number, undocumented immigrants and their families were also excluded from the federal stimulus checks provided through the CARES Act.

In addition to health and financial struggles, the emotional and psychological distress caused by the pandemic impacted the mental health of immigrant families and their children. Like other families, immigrant parents had to figure out how to support their children's education with the shift to remote learning. This shift only exacerbated educational inequalities:

the academic outcomes of the children of immigrant parents, who were already more likely to attend under-resourced schools and whose academic performance lagged behind that of their peers with U.S.-born parents, suffered during the pandemic (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020).

Unaccompanied Youth

Since 2014, over 469,000 unaccompanied minors have been released to sponsors across the United States (Migration Policy Institute 2023). Most come from northern Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) and are over the age of 14. Many are fleeing violence or seeking better job opportunities. Once released from an Office of Refugee Resettlement shelter, many enroll in schools across the United States (Migration Policy Institute 2023). Many unaccompanied minors are released to a safe and suitable sponsor, who most of the time is a parent or close relative. A small number are placed in long-term foster care under the custody of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Given the challenges associated with migration — such as traveling alone, navigating interactions with immigration offices such as U.S. Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, family separation, and workplace exploitation — unaccompanied minors have varying academic, health, and socioemotional needs. Schools and community-based organizations are working to support these students by integrating them into newcomer and English language learner programs and helping them balance work and school schedules. Yet, educators struggle to engage with their families, especially as some unaccompanied youth have weak or distant relationships with their families or sponsors. Educators need to know and work with the individuals who support these youths, including workplace managers, after-school program coordinators, or sports coaches.

REVISITING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORKS

Effective family engagement practices can empower immigrant families to better support their children’s learning, improving student outcomes and advancing equity. Designing family engagement strategies that are responsive to the needs of immigrant parents also fosters belonging, making immigrant students and families feel welcomed as vital members of the school community. Family engagement frameworks must center both the strengths and needs of immigrant families.

Fortunately, there is no need to recreate the wheel. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships is an excellent tool for developing and implementing family engagement practices that are liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused. This framework specifically focuses on building the capacities of both educators and families. In *Embracing a New Normal*, Mapp and Bergman (2021) describe the elements necessary to support the development of these dual capacities and family engagement strategies, policies, and programs. To fulfill the essential conditions they describe, family engagement practices, initiatives, and policies must be:

- relational and built on mutual trust
- linked to students’ learning and development
- asset-based
- culturally responsive and respectful
- collaborative
- interactive

Additionally, Mapp and Bergman describe the importance of institutional factors, noting that family engagement must be:

- systemic, or embraced by leadership across an organization
- integrated into all strategies
- sustained with resources and infrastructure

Mapp and Bergman describe the Dual Capacity-Building Framework as a compass that helps develop effective educator-family partnerships that support student and school improvement. As they note, the essential conditions they describe must be adapted for particular contexts. This report discusses what these conditions look like when schools center the strengths and needs of immigrant families.



Process Conditions

Relational: Built on Mutual Trust

For relationships and partnerships to flourish, trust must be established between all parties involved. Yet, developing or restoring mutual trust is one of the most difficult aspects of family engagement work. Developing authentic, relational trust requires educators to interrogate their assumptions and values about the families with whom they work.

I talk to the parents and let them know, “We are a team. We are a process. For me to be able to help your child, I need your support, too, and it’s also learning for you, too.” So, I always said I have an open-door policy. You could contact me if you have any questions. You want me to sit down with you and explain this to you? I will take the time to do that.

– School counselor, Los Angeles, CA

For marginalized families, trusting institutions may prove difficult due to experiences of discrimination and dehumanization. This is particularly true for immigrants who have had negative interactions with U.S. institutions. Undocumented immigrants, in particular, may distrust schools because disclosing their immigration status may impact them and their families, making it difficult for educators to establish collaborative, trusting relationships with them.

Educators must work especially hard to establish trust with immigrant families. In addition to reflecting on their beliefs and assumptions, they must show families that they value and care for them. They can do this by getting to know families, engaging them in conversation, and asking them what resources and information they need. One way schools can build trust with families is by connecting them with resources to address needs that are not directly related to education, such as access to health care, clothing, and housing assistance.

Linked to Learning and Development

Successful family-school partnerships must center on students: when families and schools share similar goals, students are successful. Family engagement practices must be linked to students’ learning and healthy development. Families want to be involved in their children’s education and want to know how they can best support them. By establishing relationships with immigrant families, educators can learn more about students’ strengths, interests, and hobbies. They can also help families understand the importance of their role in students’ education.

Family engagement can be hard work. You need to put in the work of getting to know your students and their families. That takes time. I am not saying that it is easy, but it is worth it. As a teacher, I can see the difference when I have a good relationship with my students’ parents and when I do not. And that motivates me to continue to invest in getting to know them.

– Teacher, Nashville, TN

Immigrant parents with limited English proficiency can better support student learning when programs are strategically designed to help them do so — for example, by providing translation services and translated materials. The organization Seek Common Ground, in partnership with Student Achievement Partners, has created [grade-specific guides](#) to assist families in supporting learning. The guides include information about what children should know and be able to do in literacy and math at each grade level. They also provide examples of everyday activities to support learning, explanations of education jargon, tips for talking to teachers, and additional resources. While these guides are already available in Spanish, valuable resources like these should be translated into multiple languages to benefit all families.

Like other families, immigrant families have high academic aspirations for their children and want them to succeed. Educators should articulate how programming, services, and resources can best support student learning and mitigate the challenges faced by children in immigrant families. Additionally, it is important for educators to recognize the different developmental needs of children in immigrant families. For example, children who migrate to the U.S. at elementary school age have different needs from children who migrate at middle or high school age. Educators must not assume that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting the needs of immigrant children and working with their families.

Asset-Based

An asset-based approach to family-school partnerships centers the strengths of families and educators. It also acknowledges that *all* families can support students' learning and development and be equal partners with educators. When families are having difficulty engaging in their children's education, an asset-based approach contextualizes the situation. Instead of blaming families for their perceived lack of interest in students' education, educators analyze the situation, critically examine the systemic and structural challenges preventing families from engaging, and address them.

Immigrant families face many challenges living in the U.S. Yet, these challenges do not define who they are. An asset-based approach to working with immigrant families recognizes that the challenges they face are due to a complex immigration process, poverty, and limited educational opportunities and resources. Most importantly, it acknowledges and invests in the knowledge they possess — the skills, knowledge, wisdom, and resilience they developed while navigating the U.S. as immigrants.

Culturally Responsive and Respectful

Immigrant families experience their children's education in a cultural context different from their own. For successful and respectful family-school partnerships to develop, family engagement practices must be inclusive of immigrant families' cultures and values. Such practices must go beyond cultural events and shallow demonstrations of diversity. As Mapp and Bergman (2021, p. 14) write, "In liberatory family engagement, educators explore, respect, and integrate the culturally based practices and resources of diverse families as key elements of their partnership." This entails getting to know families' cultures and values and creating an environment where they are valued. Educators must also be aware that the cultural values of immigrant families may not match their own and respect this difference.



Collaborative

Building from the strengths of all involved, successful family engagement practices set up the conditions for families and educators to work together. To collaborate with immigrant families, educators must empower families and proactively share power with them. Importantly, they must recognize the power dynamics that may make families feel like they do not belong in decision-making positions. Educators must invite immigrant families to make decisions about their children's learning. For example, if students are English language learners, teachers should inform parents about the resources available to support their learning and encourage them to access them so that they can make informed decisions about their children's education. Additionally, schools can empower immigrant families to make decisions about the school by inviting them to join parent-teacher advisory groups. Proactively including diverse families in such groups is essential for representation and equity efforts; it also taps into and develops immigrant families' leadership skills.

Interactive

Families and educators need opportunities to learn to work with each other. In other words, they need to develop the capacity to partner. For this to happen, their exchanges need to be interactive: they need opportunities to co-learn, practice, and coach each other.

Interactive family engagement practices are especially important when working with immigrant families, as they dilute some of the power dynamics and assumptions underlying these interactions. When immigrant families are invited to co-learn and practice applying knowledge with educators, they see the centrality of their role in their children's education. Educators, in turn, fine-tune their engagement strategies and understanding of the families they work with. These developments expand the potential for meaningful exchanges and relational trust.

Organizational Conditions

For the process conditions to support successful family engagement practices, the Dual Capacity-Building Framework establishes the need for infrastructure that sustains these practices and works to remove barriers.

Systemic: Embraced by Leadership across the Organization

District and school leaders must embrace the assets and input of immigrant families. Leadership theory has established the importance of organizational leaders setting the example and tone for educational change (Mapp et al. 2022). District and school leaders must clearly voice their desire to include immigrant families in partnership work and allocate the resources necessary to ensure it happens across the organization.

Integrated: Embedded in All Strategies

Family engagement — including the engagement of immigrant families — should be a part of all district and school plans, initiatives, events, and strategies. In other words, in all of their activities, districts and schools must critically examine how they are including the needs and voices of immigrant families.

Sustained: With Resources and Infrastructure

Schools must invest financial and human capital into family engagement practices. Funding, practices, and policies that explicitly support engagement with immigrant families are necessary for successful partnerships. Schools signal to families and educators that they prioritize family-school partnerships when they invest resources in these relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS: BEST PRACTICES FOR PARTNERING WITH IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

The following recommendations aim to help educators understand and partner with immigrant families for student success. At the core of these recommendations is the importance of developing relationships with families. When they have established and trusting relationships with immigrant families, educators are better positioned to learn from them, get to know students on a personal level, and understand their particular strengths and needs. Certainly, these are the elements described in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework: the process and organizational conditions. Here, the conditions center the needs and strengths of immigrant families. Educators can build from these conditions in their one-on-one interactions with students and broader programming.

Make the time to get to know families.

At the core of all family engagement work is relational trust, which takes time to develop. Educators must make the time to reach out to immigrant families, connect with them, and develop relationships with them.

Ongoing two-way communication is an important component of family-school relationship development. Educators need to create and sustain opportunities for this communication. They might do this, for example, by greeting families every morning at drop-off, having a standing open meeting time (such as weekly “coffee with the principal”), or texting families every day with questions they can ask their children about what they learned during the day.

Furthermore, educators should work with other school staff to develop relationships with immigrant families. Often, immigrant families have good relationships with individuals who interact with them most directly, including receptionists, parent coordinators, family and community engagement specialists, and community liaisons. Educators can tap into those relationships by partnering with those individuals and asking them to connect them to immigrant families.

As communication develops, relationships develop, and trust is gained. With relational trust, educators can learn more about immigrant families, including their hopes and aspirations for their children, students’ interests and hobbies, and challenges or concerns they may have, including understanding and navigating school systems. For example, in working with immigrant families, the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) realized that families had misperceptions about the workings of the American school system. There are fundamental differences between schools in the United States and those in their countries of origin, ranging from expectations of teachers to the time students spend in the classroom. Schools should not assume that immigrant families know these differences. Thus, educators may need to explain how schools work to immigrant families and invite them to ask clarifying questions. Promoting an understanding of how the education system works in the United States is part of family engagement.

About the Parent Institute for Quality Education

PIQE is a national organization that develops evidence-based programs that engage, empower, and transform parents to actively engage in their children’s education. It also focuses on strengthening parent-school collaborations. Specifically, PIQE caters to the needs of low-income families, communities of color, English language learners, and immigrant families. Its programs include workshops for parents about socioemotional learning; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; digital literacy, inclusion, and adoption; and civic engagement. PIQE also has workshops for educators.

Ensure that curricula are culturally responsive and rigorously implemented.

When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they have better academic outcomes. Schools need to implement curricula that embrace the diversity of immigrant communities. This includes using books that center immigrant characters in reading lessons, introducing the intellectual contributions of immigrants in biology and chemistry courses, and discussing contemporary immigration policy in high school government courses. For example, an elementary school educator might teach the picture book *My Diary from Here to There/Mi diario de aquí hasta allá* by Amada Irma Pérez. In the book, Amada recounts her family's migration from Juarez, Mexico, to Los Angeles, California, with diary passages describing her fear and excitement presented in both English and Spanish. A teacher can use this story to engage students in conversations about immigration, home, and belonging.

Schools must ensure not only that their curricula are culturally responsive and inclusive of immigrant experiences but also that they are rigorously implemented. For example, teachers working with immigrant students who are English language learners need to make sure not only that their curriculum includes narratives of immigrant communities but also that their pedagogy supports the development and learning of English language learners. This means that educators need to have the capacity to work with children from immigrant families, and they need to be knowledgeable of the circumstances immigrant families face. Again, this signals the importance of family-educator relationships in supporting students' academic and socioemotional well-being. School leaders should invest in continuous professional development for teachers to enable them to learn best practices for working with English language learners.

Create welcoming and immigrant-friendly organizational cultures and environments.

Especially as anti-immigrant sentiment spreads, it is important for schools and organizations to signal to immigrant families that they are welcome by embracing and celebrating cultural differences. Schools need to go beyond one-day or one-week celebrations of multiculturalism and diversity. They need to embed the stories and experiences of immigrant communities in their curriculum, and they need to hire and support teachers and staff who are part of immigrant communities. In short, schools and organizations need to reflect the immigrant communities they work with. School districts should partner with local teacher preparation programs to ensure that educators reflect the communities they serve. Sometimes referred to as “grow your own” programs, partnerships between school districts, community-based organizations, and colleges can be an effective way to recruit community members to teach in local pre-K–12 schools.

Schools can further promote a pro-immigrant culture by having all staff (including teachers, counselors, administrators, office staff, nurses, and social workers) take professional development sessions about working with undocumented students and families. Often called “undocuALLY trainings,” these trainings educate staff about the challenges undocumented immigrants face and best practices for supporting them. Improving awareness of the plight of mixed-status families and undocumented immigrants can increase empathy and support for these populations among school personnel.

Schools and organizations also need to be vocal and visible allies to immigrant communities. When anti-immigrant sentiment is expressed, whether at the local, state, or federal level, they must be quick to publicly condemn it and reiterate their support and care for immigrant families. Schools can visibly support immigrants through simple actions such as displaying pro-immigrant signage in school buildings and school

Culturally Responsive and Rigorous Curriculum in Practice: Springboard Collaborative

Springboard Collaborative focuses on closing the literacy gap by coaching educators and parents to work together for students' reading abilities. Springboard Collaborative's recipe for impact is a method the organization calls Family-Educator Learning Accelerators (or FELAs). FELAs are five- to 10-week cycles during which teachers and parents team up to help children reach learning goals. The FELA model maximizes family engagement and helps teachers and families build relational trust, often across lines of difference. Educators and families work together to set goals, make game plans, share skills, and support each other's efforts. Springboard ensures that its programs are accessible for families regardless of reading level or language barriers, providing techniques that can work even for parents who cannot access a given text themselves. All materials are available in English and Spanish, and many are also available in Chinese, French, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Amharic.

Springboard's instructional approach emphasizes inclusivity, with differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners. Every Springboard student and family receives a personalized Student Action Plan based on a pre-assessment. The plan focuses on the individual skills needed to advance each student's reading ability. If a student is learning English, Springboard's framework allows teachers to use specific strategies to move the student forward in language acquisition and reading acumen. A Spanish version of Springboard's



pre-reading assessment, the Reading Readiness Inventory, is used for pre-K English language learners or older students who are not yet reading English at grade level. In this assessment, students can demonstrate skills in different categories beyond reading at grade level (e.g., comprehension).

Finally, as part of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, Springboard Collaborative frequently evaluates its materials and practices to ensure it is creating a culturally responsive and anti-racist environment for learning. For example, the organization conducts an annual equitable and inclusive review process with its book libraries to ensure the books are representative of the communities Springboard serves and free from bias.

leaders publicly denouncing anti-immigrant sentiment. The message of support is what matters to families.

Share power with immigrant families.

Successful family-school partnerships happen when family members and educators are equal partners. Schools need to create the conditions to make this happen. This includes sharing power with immigrant families by inviting them into leadership positions. Schools may invite immigrant parents to join parent-teacher groups or create advisory boards that include students and their families. Sharing power also entails involving immigrant families in decision-making practices such as teacher hiring committees or budget allocation conversations. All school and district decision-making procedures — such as local control and accountability plans, which often frame family engagement initiatives — should proactively include immigrant families.



Sharing power may also look like inviting families to cocreate programming and curriculum. For example, the Mental Health and Counseling Department at Aurora Public Schools in Colorado partnered with RISE Colorado and the organization’s family and student leaders to cocreate an inclusive and culturally responsive social-emotional learning framework for all students in the district. Throughout the cocreation process, 100 family and student leaders from across the district came together via Zoom and in person to discuss, in their native language, the values that matter most to them in Aurora Public Schools. In October 2022, family and student leaders, district leaders, RISE staff, and school staff came together to celebrate the finalized framework. The district communicated its excitement and the next steps for the framework, such as creating an adult social-emotional learning framework, and has invited RISE to continue the partnership around this work district-wide.

About RISE Colorado

RISE Colorado’s mission is to educate, engage, and empower low-income families of color to become change agents for educational equity in the state’s public school system. The organization works alongside Black, Indigenous, Latino, Southeast Asian, immigrant, refugee, and undocumented families. The organization’s model works to create awareness among families about educational inequity and support them as they create solutions to improve schools and academic achievement. RISE focuses on creating strong partnerships between schools and families with the goal of improving academic outcomes for low-income students of color.

Inform and train educators about the needs of immigrant families.

Educators need to develop their capacity to work with immigrant families. Professional development for in-service teachers and other educators needs to include sessions on supporting and working with immigrant families. Teacher preparation programs need to include courses on family engagement and family-school partnerships in their curricula. Prospective teachers and other educators need to reflect on their beliefs about families, develop their capacity to partner with families, and learn best practices to develop relational trust. Furthermore, these courses need to include the information necessary to work successfully with immigrant families. Educators need to develop an understanding of the different circumstances these populations face. Educators must be aware of the challenges and barriers they experience and proactively address these in their family engagement practices.

When school staff – teachers, counselors, the receptionists – speak your language, that is a game changer! It just makes the school feel more welcoming, like I belong there. I feel comfortable walking in there and asking questions about my daughter’s grades. Something just changes when I know that I can have a conversation in Spanish without having to worry about a translator or feeling too shy to ask.

– Parent, Boston, MA

PIQE has a capacity-building training program for school personnel – including teachers, counselors, and school administrators – that helps them more deeply understand the families they work with. PIQE’s culturally responsive family engagement curriculum for educators not only highlights the importance of family-school relationships but also deepens educators’ understanding of implicit biases and effective approaches to advancing equity through family engagement practices. This is done through facilitated conversations and scenario discussions that illustrate to educators the challenges to involvement families face. During workshops, educators consider questions such as:

- What assumptions are you making about the families you work with?
- What do you need to understand in your community?
- What does it mean to be welcoming?
- Have you asked families, “How do you feel welcomed? In what ways do you or do you not feel welcomed?”

The PIQE curriculum emphasizes the importance of educators engaging in self-reflection and understanding the context they work in. After developing a deep understanding of the families they work with and their needs, educators can move into action and develop site-wide family engagement action plans.

Organizational Conditions in Practice: The Importance of School Leadership

School leaders have the power to create the organizational conditions the Dual Capacity-Building Framework calls for to maintain successful family engagement practices. It is important for them to model prioritizing family engagement by making it systemic, integrated into all strategies, and sustained with resources. When PIQE works with educators, they emphasize the important role of principals in setting the tone for family engagement and investing in capacity-building training programs for staff.

School leaders also need to do self-reflection work. For example, after working with PIQE, a school principal understood the importance of getting to know his predominantly immigrant and Spanish-speaking families. Understanding the importance of asking families how they felt welcomed, he engaged in conversations with them. The principal learned that families wanted a Spanish-speaking receptionist at the front desk – they wanted to be greeted and welcomed into the school by someone who spoke their native language. Understanding that this was important to help families feel welcomed, the principal took stock of the school's budget and hired a Spanish-speaking receptionist. This example shows the importance of reflection, inquiry, and moving into action.

Strengthen the role of schools as community resources for immigrant families.

Immigrant families often depend on schools as resources. Schools can be spaces in which immigrant families connect with other families, access essential resources such as food and primary health care, and get answers to questions about the social services available in their neighborhoods. Schools can become de facto community centers where immigrant families feel welcomed and see that their children's well-being is prioritized.

For example, El Sol Science and Arts Academy, a dual-immersion PK–6 school in Santa Ana, California, provides students and families with social services, medical services, transportation support, access to technology, and computer literacy classes for parents. El Sol accomplishes this through its partnerships with different organizations. For instance, Mercado El Sol is a free mini-market that is restocked every day with meat, dairy, fresh produce, canned goods, toiletries, paper goods, and other items. The market is open to the local community, and families can visit the market once per week. It is predominantly run by parent volunteers. El Sol also has on-site laundry services for families. The school has also partnered with the nonprofit organization Share Our Selves and the UC Irvine Program in Nursing Science to provide a wide range of free on-site healthcare services, health education, and social services to students and families. El Sol also provides students and families support with school supplies and scholarships for uniforms. Families can access these services even after their children transition out of the school. Families and students remain part of the El Sol family.

Get to know and partner with community organizations.

It is unrealistic for schools to address all the questions and needs immigrant families may have. To best serve immigrant families, schools need to partner with community organizations, especially those whose mission is to support immigrant families, and build upon already established relationships and trust. Community organizations often have strong and trusting relationships with immigrant communities. Schools should develop a community asset map, where they identify organizations in their area that support immigrant families and connect with them. Partnerships with these organizations are ideal. School personnel should begin by introducing themselves and learning about the resources and services they provide to immigrant communities. With that knowledge, schools can become hubs for resource-sharing for families and refer them as needed.

We want to make sure that family engagement really makes sense to educators. The concept of parent involvement, they understand that. But meaningful family engagement with the families that they serve, their immigrant families — that has to be more intentional, more meaningful.

— President of national nonprofit organization

Seek Common Ground helps schools and organizations work together by creating space for schools and community organizations to learn from each other. Its work is guided by the ethos of partnering with bridge builders, or trusted individuals within communities, schools, and organizations. For example, using its Action Accelerator model, Seek Common Ground assisted the Ohio Department of Education in developing and implementing innovative approaches to meet the needs of the Akron, Cleveland, and Southeast Ohio communities. This became known as the Ohio Whole Child Action Accelerator Project. Using a whole-child approach to education, the organization supported 15 community organizations and leaders by providing



funding for innovative ideas and developing a learning community. The learning community was essential: it gave organizations, including schools, the opportunity to learn more about their communities and discuss goals and best practices with each other. One organization that was part of the Ohio Whole Child Action Accelerator Project was International Student Services Association in Cleveland. To ensure that immigrant and refugee youth had the resources to pursue their education and career goals, the association worked with families to provide career readiness, college planning, and skill-building programs for minority, low-income immigrant students aged 14 to 19.

About Seek Common Ground's Action Accelerators

Seek Common Ground's mission is centered on the idea that programs and policies are most successful when the communities they are meant to support are involved. Trust and relationship-building are at the core of this work. Through its Action Accelerator model, Seek Common Ground provides organizations with seed funding to test promising practices and learning communities where project leaders can support each other as they cultivate their ideas.

Stay informed about immigration-related policies.

Educators should remain informed about immigration-related policies and how they may impact their immigrant families and students. This can be done by partnering with local immigration organizations and asking them to translate legal jargon. National organizations such as the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and United We Dream also do an excellent job of translating immigration-related policies into user-friendly language. Educators should follow these organizations on social media or sign up for their newsletters. Such best practices are essential for policies like DACA, whose legality is constantly being debated in the news and in the courts. This uncertainty has created substantial stress for DACAmented immigrants and their families.

Mitigate language barriers.

Challenges with the English language are some of the most cited barriers for immigrant families (Gándara and Harper 2010), and schools and community organizations have the responsibility to support families in overcoming these issues. Schools should prioritize hiring staff who speak the languages families in the community speak. When this is not possible, schools should identify language-access resources and ensure that families and staff know that families are entitled by law to receive information in their home language. For example, if schools host curriculum nights or workshops to help parents help their children with math homework, resources for non-English-speaking families need to be available on demand, including real-time translation of workshop content and materials provided in multiple languages.



Additionally, schools should invest resources to support the teaching and development of English language learners, including professional development for teachers using curriculum that focuses on best practices for teaching and working with English language learners. For instance, the EL Education Language Arts Curriculum is a standards-aligned, research-based, comprehensive literacy program that exemplifies best practices by engaging students through complex texts, real-world concepts, and culturally affirming content. Support for multilingual learners is not an add-on in the EL Education curriculum — it is deeply integrated. For example, as students read Pam Muñoz Ryan’s novel *Esperanza Rising*, both multilingual and monolingual learners discover how the English language plays a role in supporting the working rights of an immigrant family. Students then practice English in their own writing and make connections between the curriculum’s topics (e.g., immigrant working rights) and their personal lives, experiences, beliefs, and cultures. This practice helps students develop lifelong language learning habits of inquiry, perseverance, and collaboration, which are themes and topics also found in the book. Such practices should also be shared with and explained to families: educators should help families understand their role in supporting this curriculum, linking their involvement to children’s learning.

What Can We Do to Support Families?

Given that students spend far more time at home and in the community than they do at school, building strong connections between diverse families and educators is essential to supporting student learning, especially as immigrants and children of immigrants are some of the fastest-growing populations in the country.

To support student success from early childhood to postsecondary education and careers, school leaders, educators, funders, and policymakers must engage immigrant families in public education. Recommended strategies for each stakeholder group are outlined below.

School Leaders

- Ensure that all staff develop the capacity to work with immigrant families. Invest in professional development for all school personnel focused on working with immigrant families.
- Invite immigrant family members to serve in leadership positions on Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) or district parent advisory boards, or to serve as parent liaisons.
- Develop relationships and partner with local organizations that work with immigrant families. Invite them to host events at schools.

Educators

- Intentionally develop relationships with immigrant families. Get to know families and students.
- Do not make assumptions about what families need to support students' learning and development. Consult with them first, and align on engagement strategies.
- Be mindful of the academic needs of students in immigrant families. Proactively address them. Work with families to support student learning by showing them how they can support students' academic growth.

- Provide academic support for English language learners based on the evidence of how emerging bilinguals learn to read and write in English.
- Incorporate immigrant narratives and experiences into the curriculum.

Funders

- Invest in programs that assist immigrant families in understanding how the education system works. Support programs that will increase families' awareness of their education rights so they can build demand for equitable education for their children.
- Invest in the professional learning of teachers and school leaders to build the competencies and mindsets they need to engage *all* families in their everyday practices.
- When supporting organizations to develop family-oriented resources, include a commitment to translation in the project, and develop budgets accordingly.
- Invest in programs and organizations that treat bilingualism as an asset.
- Consult with schools and community organizations that work with immigrant families to learn about the needs of immigrant communities.

Policymakers

- Require aspiring educators in graduate or credential programs to be trained in family engagement practices and working with diverse families, including immigrant families.
- Propose and support pro-immigrant legislation that will make immigrant families' lives easier. This includes policies focused on access to health care, vocational training programs, driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, and comprehensive immigration reform.

CONCLUSION

The information presented in this report is only the beginning of understanding the diversity of experiences of immigrant families in the U.S. It is intended to motivate educators to arm themselves with the knowledge and intentions needed to develop strong, trusting relationships with immigrant families. Educators need to reflect on their beliefs, perceptions, relationships, and practices with immigrant families and ask:

- What is the nature of my relationship with the immigrant families I work with? Is it an asset-based understanding?
- What other information do I need to support immigrant families in my school? What resources do I need? Whom do I need to connect with? What local community organizations can I connect with?
- How do I show the immigrant families I work with that I am a resource?

Family engagement is a tool for social and educational justice and serves as the foundation for equity work (Lowenhaupt and Montgomery 2018; Mapp and Bergman 2021). By designing family engagement practices that center immigrant families and the children being raised in them, schools will not only better support their particular needs but also engage in transformative practices. If we do not rise to this occasion and invest in partnerships with immigrant families, we will continue to exacerbate inequities in education. The time to act is now. We owe it to our students, our families, and our communities.



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