

Student Supports: Getting the Most out of Your LCFF Investment

WHY FAMILY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Most school leaders agree that family engagement is a key factor in students' success. But how can schools engage families in ways that really move the needle on improved student outcomes?

When schools are asked to describe their family engagement practices, they often refer to activities like volunteering in the classroom, participating in school site councils, or attending events. While these are valuable ways for families to support the school, research shows that the biggest and most direct impact on student achievement comes through an authentic partnership between the teacher and each family in support of a child's education.¹ Consequently, to be effective, the work of family liaisons, community school and resource coordinators, principals, and community-based organizations must support – and not attempt to make up for the lack of – strong family-teacher partnerships.

Many things get in the way of these partnerships, including the assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and fears that families and teachers bring to their interactions. Capacity-building is vital to establishing impactful family-teacher partnerships as the norm. Until recently, the focus for capacity-building has been on families – parenting classes and academies are fairly common. But experts are now shining a light on evidence that teachers and other school staff also need support if they are to effectively play their role in this most important aspect of family engagement.² This need for 'dual capacity-building' is a main thrust of the U.S. Department of Education's new family engagement framework. Without training and follow-up coaching for school staff that are truly supportive, the divide between teachers and families will persist, contributing significantly to prevailing achievement and opportunity gaps.

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Family Engagement: Key Facts

Family engagement makes a difference.

- ◆ Family involvement in a child’s education is the single most important predictor of student academic success and social adjustment.³
- ◆ Research over several decades has shown that when families are involved in their own child’s education, their child does better in school – regardless of family background (e.g., race, educational level, income, marital status). Students with involved families are more likely to:^{4,5,6,7}
 - Earn higher grades and test scores
 - Enroll in higher-level programs
 - Attend school regularly
 - Have fewer behavioral problems
 - Pass their classes, be promoted, and graduate

Teachers and administrators need help with family engagement.

- ◆ In a recent MetLife study, over 72% of both teachers and principals said that engaging parents was challenging or very challenging.⁸
- ◆ Teachers and staff are not getting the training and support they need to effectively engage families. But we mistakenly assume that they are.⁹

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Successful leaders spearheading family engagement efforts recognize that most family engagement happens on a spectrum from participation to partnership, with varying quality and effectiveness. Moving toward a focus on strategies that facilitate authentic partnerships between teachers and families can ensure academic success. These partnerships occur and have full impact when family engagement activities are connected to student learning and evaluated on improved student outcomes.¹⁰

To ensure this type of family engagement becomes central to the educational vision, best practices related to school culture, capacity-building, and continuous improvement should be employed as follows:

Districts and school communities adopt a strengths-based vision.

Step one in building effective family-teacher partnerships is recognizing that schools need families as much as families need schools – and that all families have something powerful and positive to offer their children. Make a district-wide commitment to a vision for family engagement that explicitly inspires school staff to see parents and guardians as partners. Families’ strengths should be acknowledged and encouraged. Each family should be respected as a child’s first and most influential teacher, valuing learning that occurs at home alongside a family’s participation within the school. A school’s efforts around family engagement should be grounded in genuine respect and curiosity about families’ cultures, goals, and circumstances. This strengths-based approach to family engagement sets the foundation for a school climate in which all families are welcomed, respected, and ultimately engaged in a meaningful way.



✓ **Teams (not individual staff) are responsible for planning, design, and quality assessment.**

At each school site, a team is charged with assessing existing family engagement practices, building an annual plan, assigning responsibilities for implementing activities, evaluating effectiveness, and engaging in a process for continuous improvement. A team approach to creating family engagement plans empowers school leaders, parents, teachers, and community members to address root causes and work together to remove barriers to effective partnerships. Together they can then make a commitment to linking family engagement activities directly to student learning. This kind of ownership will allow the team to dig in, ask hard questions, get past blaming, and ultimately build programs that support capacity-building for both school staff and families.

A representative family engagement team includes:

- ✓ A school administrator
- ✓ 1 – 2 teachers
- ✓ 2 – 3 parents
- ✓ All staff members in coordination of services roles (such as the parent liaison, resource or community school coordinator, and after school site coordinator)
- ✓ At least 2 students at high schools.

This team could be a subcommittee of the School Site Council, the school improvement team, the PTA, or another existing group charged with organizing family activities.

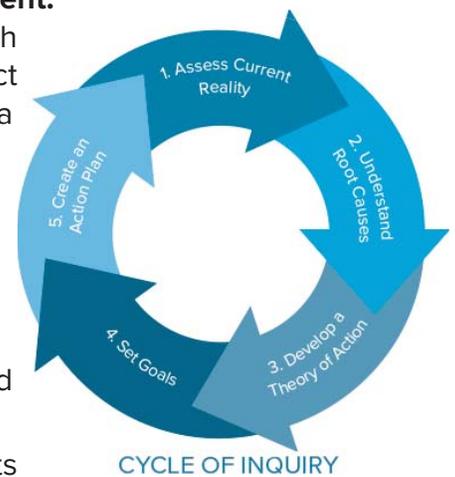
✓ **Family engagement activities focus on student success.**

The family engagement team focuses on student outcomes in three key ways: 1) student data – including attendance, behavior, and academic assessments – are used to understand which students are struggling and around what issues; 2) activities are aligned with and support student achievement goals; and 3) impact is assessed based on movement toward these goals. Success is measured not by how many people show up, but on whether students are doing better and continuing to improve.

By focusing on student outcomes, the family engagement team adopts a get-down-to-business approach – and, in turn, leverages this common interest in student success to build partnerships, avoid negative assumptions and stereotypes, and bridge any differences. An unyielding commitment to supporting family-teacher partnerships then arises as a core instructional strategy.

✓ **Family Engagement efforts are rooted in continuous improvement.**

Family engagement teams develop and test an annual plan through a cycle of inquiry. Using student outcomes to assess the impact of activities in the plan brings family engagement to the fore as a central strategy for academic success. All school staff members play a role in implementing the plan, but the school community recognizes that the most impactful partnership is between the teacher and the family. Family engagement planning is then poised to be integrated into the classroom, at the heart of the school’s improvement plan. Fully integrating family engagement work by consistently assessing and improving the strategies used ensures that efforts are successful and sustained.



To fully support a continuous improvement process, districts should invest in an on-site staff person who has the training and capacity to identify and pull the team members together, ensure that parents of struggling students are represented, gather and synthesize the critical student data, and lead the team through a cycle of inquiry.



Capacity-building for teachers and other school staff is a priority.

A commitment is made to ensure competency around effective family engagement throughout school systems, not just among “family support” staff. Employing a strengths-based approach, teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to actively and effectively engage families. Family engagement is a priority in the overall plan for teacher professional development, and the district commits the necessary resources to build this capacity, including making investments in training and coaching. Teachers should be provided a set of tools for families to use to support learning, along with training so they can confidently offer the right tool(s) to a family for targeted skill-building for a student.

Principals, lead teachers, family liaisons, and/or other resource coordinators are trained to build and lead family engagement activities and have the skills they need to utilize student data and lead teams through family engagement planning and continuous improvement processes.

Capacity-building for families strives to address unequal power dynamics.

Capacity-building for families is focused on leveraging the assets each family brings to the table. Families are provided the knowledge and tools they need to support their own child’s education at home and at school. There is a conscious shift from training families to help with homework, to building their capacity to support, monitor, encourage, and advocate for their child’s overall progress in school. Families are also supported in understanding the goals and strategies being employed in the classroom and ideally receive support around effectively engaging with their child’s teacher.

Information about academic standards, instructional tools, school climate strategies, or child and youth development issues is shared in a respectful and accessible manner. Whenever possible, teachers and families are trained together to promote partnering through equal access to information and to build a sense that everyone is working as a team to support students.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUPPORTS PROGRESS ON THE LCFF PRIORITIES

Parent participation in the development of local accountability plans is a state requirement under LCFF legislation. Additionally, improving ‘parent involvement’ in schools is one of the eight state priorities. The state’s minimum criteria for this priority touch on efforts to seek “parent input” and “promotion of parental participation.”

However, for the greatest impact, family engagement work should have a broader focus that leverages the pivotal role family members can play in student success. When family engagement is “systemic, integrated, and sustained,” supporting true partnerships between families and teachers, it can help drive improvements in student achievement and other state priorities.¹¹





Student Achievement

Strong family-teacher partnerships, along with other types of family engagement, improve student achievement across many facets of school life, including higher grades, better scores on standardized tests, increased participation in AP courses and passing of AP exams, and increased reading, language, and math skills from an early age (up to 50% in one study).¹² Family engagement can also increase students' sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning, as well as influence beliefs about the importance of education.¹³



Student Engagement

Family engagement has a positive effect on students' social skills and decreases behavioral issues within and beyond school. By reinforcing supportive and nurturing practices as well as opening communication channels between students, families, and teachers, family engagement improves the following important student outcomes, which may precede academic gains:^{14,15,16}

- positive attitudes toward school and learning (both students and families)
- students' social skills, behavior, and resilience
- student attendance



School Climate

Studies also show that family engagement can make school environments feel safer and more welcoming for students from diverse communities, which is linked not only to improved behavioral statistics, but also academic achievements. Developing a school climate that allows both parents and students to feel more welcome to engage with the school exponentially increases the impact of other programs.¹⁷



Parent Involvement

Clearly, family engagement supports improvement in parent involvement. But families need to be fully engaged in their children's education and not just involved in activities that are evaluated by participation rates. Building authentic partnerships between teachers and families is arguably the most difficult of these practices to bring to fruition. But to get the full effect of family engagement on student success, it needs to be much more than families volunteering in classrooms and attending events.

FUNDING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The new flexibility under LCFF opens the door to making family engagement an integral part of academic programming across the district at every school. Family engagement has often been treated as optional or an extra that has little to do with teachers or classroom practices. But as the research shows, meaningful family-teacher partnerships are crucial for student success and addressing the equity issues posed by the achievement gap. An investment in professional development for teachers to build productive, respectful relationships with families should be one of the district's highest priorities.

An LCFF investment in family engagement with stronger family-teacher relationships as a central goal should be substantial enough to support efforts from initial planning through long-term sustainability. Investments of Title I funding or outside grants from private foundations should be leveraged, but family engagement needs to be central to the LCFF investment plan and not relegated to a “special project” status.

School District Investment

In order to establish systemic practice, family engagement work should be both embedded within other funded initiatives (such as Professional Development for teachers) and built into district policies and plans (such as LCAPs and other district-wide improvement and strategic plans).

A major portion of a district's investment in family engagement should be in staff responsible for establishing and supporting family engagement teams, including training and skill development in: using student data, the principles behind strengths-based practice, and leading continuous improvement processes.

To provide start-up resources at the beginning of new family engagement work, many districts have received grant support from foundations (e.g., Heising-Simons Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, PNC Foundation, Omnova Foundation, Barr Foundation, and Lynch Foundation). Other communities have launched their family engagement work with Title I funds. But again, it is critical to make a long term and ongoing commitment with core funding, instead of limiting family engagement investments to Title I or pursuing outside grants.

Partner Agency Contributions

Numerous government agencies and organizations at the local, state, and national level have family engagement in schools as a core mission. They produce a variety of informational resources and curricula that can provide a valuable starting point for staff professional development and parent education efforts.

Often, local organizations within a school community can also provide critical resources to support family engagement. Family resource centers partnering with schools can bring an understanding of community assets. Parent teacher organizations (e.g. PTAs and Home and School Clubs) can act as conveners of the parent community and support school efforts to develop parent skills and knowledge around student learning and advocacy.

These types of contributions can support school and district efforts around family engagement, but they should never be a short cut around an institutional commitment and investment by school staff.



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: GETTING STARTED

Focusing on family-teacher partnerships and dual capacity-building represents a significant paradigm shift in family engagement work. Establishing and supporting family engagement planning and action teams for the long haul is critical to making deep and lasting change in culture and practice. Below are some key questions and a brief roadmap to help you get started.

Critical Questions:

- ? Has the district adopted a strengths-based vision for family engagement?
- ? What is the district's understanding of the need for and commitment to dual capacity-building for family engagement?
- ? Is there school site personnel to support principals in establishing and staffing family engagement teams? E.g. family liaisons, resource or community school coordinators?
- ? Are there representative teams already in existence that can be tasked with family engagement planning and continuous improvement work at school sites?
- ? Do our schools have regular access to student data? What systems could be built or improved to make student data accessible to family engagement teams?
- ? What are our current family engagement activities and who is responsible for carrying them out? How is the effectiveness of these activities assessed? Is there a process in place for surveying families and teachers to assess connections and satisfaction?

Roadmap of Tasks Ahead:

- ➔ Adopt a strengths-based vision for family engagement at the district level.
- ➔ Commit to a dual capacity-building approach to family engagement and create a plan for piloting and/or implementing district-wide.
- ➔ Assess whether schools have a point person to hold the team-building, planning, and continuous improvement processes.
- ➔ Commit funding and establish a professional development plan that includes training and support for teachers to work with families, and for team leaders to facilitate improvement processes.
- ➔ Establish a system to ensure school site family engagement teams have the student data they need to do their work.
- ➔ Support school-site teams to assess whether existing family engagement practices are linked to positive student outcomes.
- ➔ Identify opportunities for staff and families to be trained together.



CONCLUSION

Developing authentic partnerships between families and school staff takes a real commitment, and can feel like a daunting task. To teachers, it may feel like another thing added to their already full plate. But skill-building for family engagement is essential for teacher effectiveness. It gives teachers a critical tool, without which they are working with one hand behind their backs. With training, coaching, and support, teachers and families can partner in ways that will have a real impact on student achievement. The research is clear, we cannot afford to ignore the powerful impact of home-school partnerships. We must build the capacity of both teachers and families to be equal partners in school success.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▶ High Expectations Parental Service can help build the capacity of school staff and families, establish and train school site teams, and build systems for sustainability. www.highexpectationsonline.com
- ▶ Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. SEDL in collaboration with the US Department of Education. 2013. http://www.sedl.org/expertise/family_community.html
- ▶ “What Research Says About Parent Involvement in Children’s Education in Relation to Academic Achievement.” Michigan Department of Education, 2002. http://titleone.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/titleone/pdf/fact_sheet_14732_7.pdf
- ▶ Organizing Family and Community Connections with Schools: How Do School Staff Build Meaningful Relationships with All Stakeholders? <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/rb/rb4-Rel.pdf>
- ▶ Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School Districts Promote Family Engagement. Harvard Family Research Project and PTA. Issue Brief, July 2009. <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/seeing-is-believing-promising-practices-for-how-school-districts-promote-family-engagement>

ENDNOTES

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www.highexpectationsonline.com



An initiative of the Partnership for Children and Youth, the California Community Schools Network is an informal group of community members, educators, and policymakers working together to share information and think comprehensively about supporting California's students.

www.partnerforchildren.org

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