

Creating Conditions for Meaningful Family Engagement From Prekindergarten to High School

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Introduction

“Child and youth serving systems broadly define ‘family’ in family engagement as including parents and other adult caregivers, acknowledging today’s varied family units and their needs for extended supports.”

—Youth.gov (n.d.)

Have you ever asked yourself, “What is family engagement?” in the context of schools? If you were to ask that question to 10 colleagues, chances are you would get 10 different responses describing variations of traditional parent participation or family involvement activities. This is unsurprising because the roles and expectations of families and schools have been rapidly changing and evolving in recent years. Particularly, family engagement, social and emotional learning (SEL), and equity have each been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (McGee et al., 2021). Students of color and their families have been affected by issues such as healthcare disparities, economic injustice, racism, police brutality and lack of access to education and technology (Courtney et al., 2020; McGee et al., 2020; Rozenfeld et al., 2020). A combination of all of these factors has substantially contributed to a gap within family-school partnerships (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023)—more specifically, feelings of hesitancy to engage with school from minority families due to reports of feeling not heard, not understood, and excluded from their child’s education (Piper et al., 2021). Recognizing and understanding these impacts is necessary for fostering equitable family engagement in the PreK–12 school system.

The past gauge for family involvement was mostly based on tracking attendance at parent–teacher conferences and PTA meetings, fundraising, school trips, and volunteerism. And, in the past, families often deferred to schools on the content and delivery of instruction. Today some families are actively questioning what school teach and how schools operate while others are minimally engaged.

Research on Family Engagement

Current national policy informed by recent research is setting standards that call for meaningful family engagement in today’s schools, districts, and state education systems. Advancements in brain science have confirmed the critical role that parents, caretakers, and family members have in their children’s learning, development, and well-being from birth on. Research indicates that young children as well as older students benefit when families are meaningfully and continuously engaged in their children’s education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss et al., 2016). Family engagement contributes to positive student outcomes, including improved child and student

achievement, decreased disciplinary issues, improved parent–teacher and teacher–student relationships, and improved school environment (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family engagement has also been shown to improve classroom dynamics and increase teacher expectations and cultural competence regardless of students’ age groups (Boberiene, 2013). More and more, research-based practices that foster meaningful family engagement and partnership in children’s learning and development are being adopted by preschools to high schools.

What Creates Meaningful Family Engagement?

Meaningful family engagement occurs when educators and family members work in partnership, at both state and local levels, to design, plan, and implement system improvements and programs that matter in the lives of children and their families. Whereas educators bring professional experience to the planning table, family members share “lived experience.” Lived experience represents the direct encounters that families have with services, programs, policies, and systems as well as critical knowledge families have about their children and neighborhoods. Whether collaborating about a new policy or addressing an individualized education program (IEP), a family’s lived experience provides an up-close and real-time perspective on what is needed and working as well as what is not working for their child and school community. Broad family representation that reflects the diversity of the school community is essential in planning, decision making, and co-creating education policies and programs that positively impact every child, youth, and family.

What Is Being Done to Promote Meaningful Family Engagement?

State and local leaders have been taking significant strides in implementing effective and formal collaboration with families to improve their education systems. The Connecticut State Board of Education’s Comprehensive Plan for Education (2023–2028) supports all local and regional boards of education to incorporate multigenerational approaches and partnerships that focus on each student’s education; whole family well-being; and shared responsibility among staff, families, and community members that includes increasing the number of family engagement practices and school-family partnerships to promote student success (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2023). At the local level, districts can invest funding and create a family engagement position to provide guidance and support to schools and connect families to school staff and community resources. This position can be critical in developing relationships with all families in the community and ensure that their voice is part of all decision-making policies and procedures affecting children and youth in the school buildings (National School Boards Association, 2023).

At the national, state, and district levels, policies are becoming more precise regarding standards, methods, and expectations for family engagement that focus on student achievement, school performance, and district planning. In June 2018, the Nevada Department

of Education partnered with the Council of Chief State School Officers; the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement; and 12 other states to form a [State Consortium on Family Engagement \(Consortium\)](#). Each state education department committed to this partnership due to the awareness of the impact that family engagement has on student outcomes and the strong desire and commitment to offer systemic and strategic approaches to family engagement throughout each of our states. Nevada’s [Office of Parental and Family Engagement](#) has since adopted a set of five foundational principles to guide the state and districts in policy making and expansion of parent and family engagement. At the national level, the Every Student Succeeds Act includes provisions requiring that local education agencies (LEAs) engage families in meaningful and substantive roles in developing the district’s family engagement policy and plan and in monitoring progress toward building family engagement as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Every Student Succeeds Act Title I – Parent and Family Engagement

**Every Student Succeeds Act
Title I—Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged
Sec. 1116—Parent and Family Engagement**

- LEAs are required to reach out to all parents and families in the district.
- Engage LEAs and families to partner in co-creating the district’s family engagement policy, establishing the agency’s expectations and objectives for meaningful family involvement.
- Provide coordination and technical assistance to build school capacity in planning and implementing effective family involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance.
- Coordinate and integrate parent and family engagement activities across relevant federal, state, and local laws and programs as appropriate.
- Include meaningful involvement of families to conduct an annual evaluation of policy effectiveness and impact in improving academic quality.
- Identify and address barriers to family participation affecting diverse subpopulations.
- Conduct an assessment to learn what families need to support their children’s learning and to increase school engagement.
- Use evaluation findings to design evidence-based strategies to build family engagement.
- Collaborate with community-based organizations experienced in family engagement.
- Establish regular two-way communication with families in their preferred language.
- Offer an option to establish parent advisory boards that reflect families served by the district to develop, revise, and review the parent and family engagement policy.

Source: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 [As Amended Through P.L. 114-95, Enacted December 10, 2015]

Family engagement in Title I schools calls for a differential approach to engaging families, including families from nondominant racial and ethnic groups. Although a schoolwide approach to family engagement may work for some families, schools often find that broad-based tactics alone are not effective in reaching all families.

Instead, a differentiated approach is needed to reach and engage families of all children who are academically struggling and most at risk. Therefore, a family's lived experience and perspective is essential in prioritizing and framing their student's strengths, challenges, and needs. Collectively, family perspectives and lived experiences present opportunities for mutual learning that prepare educators and families to collaborate in effectively addressing the academic and social-emotional challenges and needs of all students. It is also important to recognize families who have had troublesome experiences with schools, such as feeling unheard, which may cause reluctance. Given this reality, families who have had negative experiences with schools are increasingly important for schools to reach. This resource will highlight how districts and schools have implemented a differentiated approach that includes selective, intensive strategies and culturally responsive methods to build relationships, trust, and connections with families once considered hard to reach.

[Washoe County School District \(Nevada\)](#) has an advisory body called the Council on Family Engagement, which engages families in systemic reform to improve "biased curriculum standards and institutional practices." The Washoe County School District and the council work together to survey stakeholders, manage grants, and inform ongoing program evaluations (Hanover Research, 2016).

Although family engagement policy and practices in education are changing in significant ways at the state and national levels, considerable efforts are still needed to meaningfully engage and prepare families to take on new roles in their school community. Continuity of active family engagement throughout a child's education offers an added protective effect. The more families support their children's learning at home, the more likely their children will do well in school and continue their education (Harris & Goodall, 2007). It is also important to acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on K–12 family engagement. When schools shut down and shifted to virtual learning in March 2020 due to the pandemic, it gave families the opportunity to have an inside look at their children's learning. It helped forge the existing gap between home and school. It was unavoidable for schools and families to forge a partnership to support their students' learning and development during virtual learning (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2021). The emergence of the pandemic increased the need for family engagement in K–12 education. Research has shown that schools and educational organizations that prioritized trusting relationships with families found it easier to respond effectively to the transition to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2021). Nevertheless, despite their best efforts and strides made

during the pandemic, many schools still struggle to establish inclusive connections and regular communication with all families.

Tips for Cultivating Equitable Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in PreK–12 Schools

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the sole crisis that reached a critical point in 2020. Nondominant families including those affected by systemic oppression such as marginalization by race, language, immigration status, or class faced several challenges during this time. Mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic oppression is critical to improving family engagement given that family engagement is an essential element of equitable K–12 educational practice (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2021). Practice and prioritize equitable family engagement by using the following strategies:

- Strive to provide inclusive opportunities for family engagement (meeting families where they are) (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).
- Continue to maintain regular communications with families to promote family engagement, even those that are not engaged.
- Keep in mind that every family structure looks different. Try using inclusive language when referring to students' main caregivers (every student does not have a mother, father, or either in the home).
- Create senior-level positions dedicated to family and community engagement (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2021).
- Integrate family engagement into equity agendas (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2021).
- Welcome families in consistently appropriate and culturally competent ways (Jacques & Villegas, 2018).
- Communicate based on cultural norms and priorities (Jacques & Villegas, 2018).

This resource is intended for educators, school administrators, and family leaders interested in strengthening their family engagement approaches and practices in schools and classrooms. An overview of key family engagement policies is provided to shed light on regulatory requirements, expectations, and recommendations meant to support districts and schools in their efforts. The guide will discuss how to cultivate family engagement in early childhood programs, build up family engagement in elementary schools, and strengthen family engagement in middle and high schools. The guide also features examples from previously funded Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) grantees that have advanced family engagement in their states and schools by implementing strategic approaches and guiding principles. Also highlighted are early education

programs recognized by Head Start. Finally, this resource guide includes tips on how families and schools can work together to use their collective expertise to create optimal conditions for meaningful family engagement from prekindergarten to high school.

Cultivate Family Engagement in Early Childhood Programs

“Strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central—not supplemental—to promoting children’s healthy intellectual, physical, and social–emotional development; preparing children for school; and supporting academic achievement in elementary school and beyond.”

—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2016), p. 1

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees Head Start, and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued a joint policy statement addressing the critical role of family engagement in promoting children’s success in early childhood systems and programs titled *Family Engagement From the Early Years to the Early Grades*. The stated goal of the HHS and ED policy statement is that all early childhood systems recognize and support the essential role of families in children’s development, learning, and wellness. The joint statement puts forth guiding principles for family engagement in early childhood systems and offers guidance on setting policies and procedures to effectively support and sustain family engagement in early childhood programs and schools. The joint policy statement also includes a comprehensive overview of family engagement best practices and recommendations for implementation in early childhood systems.

[Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems](#) is a visual guide for understanding how early childhood system components can be aligned to support early childhood program providers, family caregivers, family childcare givers, and community service providers. This framework was developed to support the [Policy Statement on Family Engagement From the Early Years to the Early Grades](#).

In addition to the publication of the joint policy statement in 2016, the [Parent, Family, and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework for Early Childhood Systems](#) was developed to support the statement’s guiding principles. The PFCE framework is a visual guide that highlights how equity, inclusiveness, and cultural linguistic responsiveness relate to parent, family, and community engagement (National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, 2023). The PCFE Framework is an ideal process map for program wide strategic planning, program design, and management, continuous learning and improvement activities, and parent/family groups. It can also be used by early childhood educators as a professional

development tool to better understand their role in family engagement (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2023).

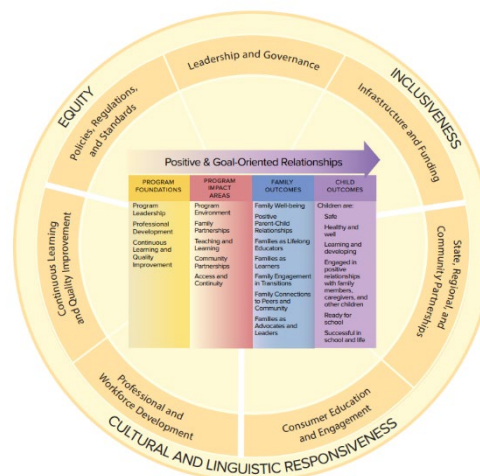
High-quality early learning programs are making significant gains in preparing young children and families for future success in school. Waterford Upstart, an at-home early learning program that can be used for additional prekindergarten education in the home has been shown to contribute to early childhood education success. The national average of 3- to 5-year-old students who enter school ready to learn is 42%, compared to 90% of Waterford students who enter school reading at grade level or above (Kelly, 2023). Family involvement in at-home learning shows a positive association with early childhood education success.

New Hampshire’s Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) grant staff recognized that family partnership is an essential element in early childhood programs.

The state’s SS/HS program focused on building family engagement by implementing strategies to connect early on with families to learn about the children’s and families’ interests and to maintain family–school connections throughout the year. Early childhood programs in Wisconsin and Oklahoma were recognized by Head Start and other organizations for producing positive outcomes in literacy skills, school readiness, and health (Acelero Learning, 2016; CAP Tulsa, 2011). Key themes to their programs’ success included data-driven improvement processes, intensive professional development, and designing training and supports for their diverse family groups. Their robust family engagement approaches build upon family strengths and foster family empowerment. Acelero Learning and CAP Tulsa Head Start programs continuously worked at engaging parents from diverse socioeconomic, educational, and racial/ethnic backgrounds in supporting their children’s learning at home (Acelero Learning, 2016; CAP Tulsa, 2011). Acelero and CAP Tulsa families received individualized feedback on their children’s progress during regular home visits by parent educators and were provided with a curriculum tailored for the families and children to work on at home.

Other opportunities for skills development offered by early childhood programs include online videos, family-to-family networking, and workshops that engage families in hands-on learning activities to address gaps in learning. Studies show a positive association between supportive parenting practices and social–emotional outcomes, such as fewer behavioral problems, increased cooperation in school, and being liked by peers (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Early

Alexandria City Public School (ACPS) regularly hosts a 16-week course that is offered in the fall and spring to help families develop basic English literacy skills.



Source: National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2023).

childhood programs are increasingly focused on providing families with personalized guidance on social–emotional development, addressing behavioral problems, implementing appropriate discipline practices, and establishing home routines and structure (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

Tips for Cultivating Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in Early Childhood Education Programs

Probably the most difficult phase of family engagement is laying the groundwork for meaningful and lasting family engagement. Educators must dedicate the time needed to develop positive relationships and build trust with each family. Dialogue with families is the best way to communicate, build relationships, and learn about families and their students' strengths and needs. Maintaining regular connections strengthens parent–teacher partnership and contributes to a child's academic success. The following tips can help pave the way for meaningful family engagement in early education programs:

- Strive to establish good relationships with families by getting to know each individual family from the start. Families appreciate knowing that you share common interests regarding their children. This investment of time early on will pay off over the school year.
- Keep in mind that every family is unique. Ask families how to correctly pronounce their child's name or surname if unfamiliar to you. By doing so, you are demonstrating respect and appreciation for their culture.
- Ask families/parents to share about their children's personal strengths and anything else they feel you need to know.
- Show a genuine interest in recognizing and understanding each family's cultural background. Ask whether there are any cultural considerations you need to be aware of that may affect their child's experience in the program (beliefs, values, customs, practices, religious/nonreligious).
- Review purpose, process, and frequency of communication with parents/families.
- Advise families of their role as partners in their children's learning and development at home and in school. Ensure that both school staff and parents/families review and fully understand their roles and expectations outlined in parental agreements or contracts. Agreements should be in each family's language of preference and written in a family-friendly format.
- Learn about activities or routines implemented in the home to stimulate their children's learning and play and ask about needed training and materials as the year progresses.
- Reinforce the continued importance of a parent's primary role in the child's learning and development at home and explain how it complements progress at school.

- Create opportunities for families to acquire knowledge, confidence, and skills about developmentally appropriate ways to promote their children’s learning and development at home. Offer family-friendly materials in a range of formats, including training videos, toolkits, and bilingual products.
- Provide families strategies that will help their children become intentional learners—to “learn how to learn” in classrooms and in the future (Leong, 2023).
- Always be strengths based! Keep in mind that preschool may be the first time a family with a young child experiences another adult’s feedback about their child’s behavior and development.
- Support families in preparing for their transition from preschool to kindergarten to include guidance on the following:
 - Kindergarten registration process
 - The new school’s academic program: What does the child need to know? What will the child learn?
 - Expectations for behavior, while keeping in mind that the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten may cause challenges for some children (kindergarten tends to be more academic focused and tiring due to longer school days compared to prekindergarten programs)
 - How to advocate for a child with special health and mental health needs

Build Up Family Engagement in Elementary Schools

“The relationship between schools and parents cuts across and reinforces children's health and learning in multiple settings--at home, in out-of-school programs, and in the community. Engaging parents in their children's school life is a promising protective factor.”
—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018)

Transitioning to elementary school marks a very important milestone for children and their families. This is an exciting time that starts with “first day of school” photos and jitters. As is common with any change, many families feel unsure about how to support their children in making a successful transition to kindergarten from home, child care, or preschool. Oftentimes, families must figure out on their own how the new school system works. Preschool programs

that provide family coaching, training, home visits, and supports are smaller in size and more relationship based, whereas school systems seem complex, formal, and difficult to navigate. Families commonly feel overwhelmed by new school policies and unwritten campus formalities. Children and families must adapt to longer school days, classroom protocols and procedures, and different methods of communication. School administrators, teachers, and staff have titles and roles that are unfamiliar to families. Families of children with identified developmental and behavioral needs may have the added stress of figuring out how and where to get help for their children. While advancing to kindergarten is exciting, it can also signal a change for the family and their relationship with the school throughout their child's elementary grades.

Alexandra City Public Schools (ACPS) provides a 4-week training series in math, literacy, or science that provides extended learning opportunity to students while simultaneously training families in strategies to support learning at home.

Current data show that family involvement tends to decline as children enter kindergarten and elementary grades. On the other hand, a comprehensive review of research on family involvement in early childhood indicates that efforts to strengthen family involvement may be a significant factor in supporting learning and development of children in preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary grades (Jeynes, 2005; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). For these reasons, schools are implementing different methods to smooth the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten for children and to connect with families early. Schools are working jointly with prekindergarten programs in development and implementation of companion curricula to bridge learning and prepare children and families for the structure and learning expectations of the kindergarten classroom. For example, in Wisconsin elementary schools, families and children benefit from opportunities to visit the new school campus and classroom and meet their kindergarten teacher prior to the first day of school. If home visits are planned, measures are taken to ensure that the family understands and has consented to the visit in advance. Families are provided with verbal and written information as to the purpose of the home visit, the process, and alternative options, which may be especially important to families of color who may have concerns about privacy, trust, or preparing their home for a guest.

Promising models have shed light on strategies that work in strengthening family engagement. School campuses are adapting leadership approaches, assessing school climate, and addressing staff readiness to engage families. High-quality school–family relationships are recognized as having a positive influence on family and student engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Yet with everything teachers must do, how do they find the time needed to build relationships with each family? Fortunately, group approaches that engage families in learning and discussion have been found to work in building family–school relationships. Classroom gatherings versus schoolwide events create opportunities for family-to-family networking, which can be an

ongoing source of support and information for families (Project Tomorrow, 2018). However, educators must also make time for one-on-one dialogue with each parent or caregiver and encourage two-way communication at every opportunity. Planning such meetings must consider barriers to family participation, such as inconvenient meeting times, lack of transportation, and child care needs. To address access barriers, schools hold family orientation and training events in neighborhoods and places that are convenient and easily accessible to families, such as community centers, libraries, apartment complexes, and parks. The best locations can be identified by asking families for their recommendations. Diversity in language and culture is another common barrier that keeps families away. When teachers, staff, or volunteers of a similar culture and language cofacilitate school events, they create comfortable and safe zones for diverse families to interact and ask questions in their preferred language. In the absence of bilingual staff, consider enlisting the support of experienced family volunteers. When schools clear access barriers, they communicate awareness of diversity and thoughtfulness of family needs.

Tips for Creating Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in Elementary Schools

Elementary school staff can play a key role in paving the way for a smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten by supporting the child's and family's adjustment to their new school system. This is also an opportune time to learn about and build upon family engagement skills and practices that parents/families learned in the preschool environment.

Opportunities for Engagement:

- Plan activities before the school year begins to prepare and help children and their families to make a smooth transition from kindergarten.
- Provide multiple opportunities for families and children to visit the new school campus and classroom and to meet their kindergarten teacher.
- Provide staff training on family engagement, how to learn about family strengths, and how to respond to a family's communication preferences.
- Provide training and access to materials that families can use at home to build their children's math, reading, writing, and literacy skills.
- Establish clear, open, and reliable two-way communication channels so that families know who to discuss their concerns with before they escalate to a crisis.

Ways to Enhance Engagement:

- Request a family’s agreement in advance of a home visit and engage family members in planning. Discuss the purpose and process before, during, and after the visit.
- Support parental skills building, such as how to manage challenging behaviors and nurturing ways to promote social–emotional development.
- Encourage families to network with other families when hosting family training events. Parents of elementary school children are most likely to rely on parental “word of mouth” for information about their school (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- To improve attendance, engage families in planning and problem-solving barriers, such as transportation, interpreters, dinner, and child care.
- Show families how to access homework assistance, use materials such as home kits, and establish structured study habits early.
- Improve engagement of diverse families by utilizing training videos with actors that match the families’ race/ethnicity and language preferences.
- Ask families about their informational needs and interests, such as accessing school and community services. Host regular meetings to present information and learning activities.
- Engage the assistance of an interpreter or volunteer to improve two-way communication with non-English-speaking families and to ensure understanding of educational materials.

Similar to the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten/elementary school, the transition from elementary school to middle school may pose challenges for students as well. Students may find that there are fewer class parties and field trips and more intensive instruction and independent study as they enter middle school. Involving families in this transition is necessary so that they can support their child during this potentially challenging time. Families can help prepare their child for middle school by doing the following:

- Explain that they will have multiple teachers rather than one main teacher like they did in elementary school.
- Encourage them to communicate with each of their teachers.
- Help transition them to independent learning.
- Maintain their social and emotional needs.
- Encourage them to keep an open mind to all big and small changes that may occur during the transition.
- Help them stay calm about having more intensive academic standards.

Strengthen Family Engagement in Middle Schools and High Schools

“Parents who are viewed as ‘hard to reach’ often see the school as ‘hard to reach.’ Where schools have made concentrated efforts to engage the ‘hard to reach’ parents, evidence shows that the effect on pupil learning and behavior is positive (particularly of hard-to-reach parents), showing improvements in attendance, behavior, and student achievement.”

—Harris and Goodall (2007)

Although family engagement may begin to decline in middle school (e.g., families less likely to attend scheduled meetings, volunteer at school functions and events), research indicates that when families continue to communicate with teachers and are actively involved in their children’s education, these students attend school regularly, have fewer behavioral problems, have better academic performance, have positive social and emotional outcomes, and are more likely to complete high school than students whose parents are not as involved in their school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jensen & Minke, 2017; Kreider et al., 2007). For these reasons, districts and schools have ramped up efforts to strengthen family engagement in middle school and high school education.

The [Michigan Department of Education’s Michigan Career Development Model](#) recommends high schools in the Michigan educational system provide workshops for parents/families on PSAT, SAT, and ACT exams, as well as on completing college applications and applying for financial aid.

Middle and high school family members are more likely to actively engage when their needs and interests are taken into account. As an example, student-centered, student-led conferences are gaining traction in middle and high schools across the country, replacing typical parent–teacher conferences and significantly boosting family engagement in one district in New Hampshire from 20% to 90% (Richmond, 2016). Students take responsibility for inviting their parents and families, coordinating and scheduling the conference, and preparing a portfolio of their academic work. Students not only present their work but lead the meeting and discussion with their families and teachers. Overall feedback from all involved has been very positive (Richmond, 2016). This approach additionally builds youths’ skills in planning and executing meetings that can be applied to other settings.

Family Engagement During Post-Graduate Pathway Planning

This approach can also serve as an opportunity for collaboration between teachers, students, and their families around post-high school pathways (college and career pathway success). Research shows that more than 77% of families reported that it is essential/very important that their middle school or high school student goes to college. Current data also show that 14% to 16% of families feel that being prepared for college and good opportunities after high school

are most important to them right now, and 15% to 24% of families of high school students reported that being prepared for college and good job opportunities are most important right now (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2023). Discussing college and career pathways during student-led and student-centered conferences will allow students to communicate their post-graduate interests with their families and teachers. It will also allow families, teachers, and/or guidance counselors to collaboratively create a plan for students to achieve the goals they have set in place. These discussions will give students a space to work with their families, teachers, and guidance counselors to engage in goal setting and goal monitoring.

School-Provided Trainings for Families

Training and informational seminars have increased family response when topics are relevant to their needs and barriers to participation are addressed. New Hampshire's Family Resource Center staff found that holding on-site trainings resulted in a significant increase in family participation across all three districts that participated in the SS/HS initiative. Most important is that topics of focus addressed the needs and interests identified with family input rather than staff only. New Hampshire held parent-caregiver education programs in middle schools focused on homework support, promoting healthy choices, Internet safety, and substance misuse.

Michigan's family resource centers staffed by family engagement specialists were effective in serving as a central access points for information and services within middle and high schools. These centers are staffed to provide training and information to families. Michigan also co-located health and human services agency caseworkers in schools to facilitate access to state health and social services for families and their children. Broader schoolwide efforts focus on building educators' readiness for meaningful family engagement through self-reflection and professional development.

To address system gaps for students with intensive needs, Wisconsin's SS/HS schools implemented parent peer support (PPS) services to assist families in accessing school and community-based mental health and social services and supports for their children. PPS providers were highly effective in helping families of students with intensive mental health needs navigate systems (e.g., transitioning from day treatment or other placements back to school) or when involved with external agencies (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice).

PPS providers were also trained and experienced in guiding families through IEP and Section 504 meetings. When families are supported, they are better informed and prepared to actively participate in planning appropriate programs and services for their children at these important meetings.

Families considered “hard to reach” respond to strengths-based engagement approaches. For example, Parent Cafés focus on strengthening families through meaningful conversations about what is important to them (Be Strong Families, 2018). Wisconsin’s Menominee Indian School District, an SS/HS program site, implemented Parent Cafés and successfully increased family engagement in its schools and community. Parent Cafés have been broadly implemented in the United States and territories to strengthen family engagement of diverse family groups in their communities, including Latino, Chinese, and Chamorro communities (Be Strong Families, 2018). Parent Cafés are an adaptation of the World Café model that has effectively promoted collective learning and collaboration to problem-solve community issues in the United States and internationally (The World Café Community Foundation, 2018).

New technology-based strategies are being used to improve teacher–parent communication. School websites with parent portals offer convenient access to parent surveys, training videos, tools, school calendars, and general school information. Some districts have expanded portals to provide families access to students’ attendance records, homework assignments, and grades. During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology-based parent-teacher communication was the only option; therefore, it was important for schools to utilize communication preferences that were most convenient for families. For example, Cambridge Public Schools created student focus groups to gain feedback about the district’s interaction with families. These focus groups served as an opportunity for schools to gain information about families’ preferred communication methods, given that many students serve as language interpreters for their families (Merod, 2022). Although many families may not use a computer, most families have access to mobile devices, such as cell phones and tablets. Project Tomorrow (2018) reported that the parents surveyed prefer educators communicate with them through e-mail, phone calls, and texts, in that order.

Tips for Strengthening Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in Middle School and High School

Families and school staff may not expect or be accustomed to working in partnership over the course of a student’s middle and high school years. There are fewer parent–teacher conferences and communications than in the early years of a child’s education, or they may cease altogether until there is a problem. Yet having families as allies can be more effective in addressing issues of concern. The COVID-19 pandemic created more challenges for teachers and families to maintain consistent communication due to additional amounts of stress. For this reason, it’s important that educators reset their values and approaches and partner with families in fostering their students’ success in school and life. The following are suggested strategies to strengthen family–school connections:

Tips for Communicating Important Information for Families:

- Engage each parent in creating a communications plan to keep them informed of the student's successes, progress, and struggles. Agree on communication methods and time frames.
- Be sure to inform students and follow through with plans to regularly communicate with families about students' strengths and needs. Directly inform families about learning expectations for each class, classroom rules, and test schedules rather than rely on students or school portals to communicate the information.
- Provide families and students with information on what they can do each year to become college and career ready. All families and students should be equally advised of college and career options.
- Engage parents/families and community partners in teaching students about various career options. Students are showing increased interest in work experience, field trips to companies, learning from professionals, and online abilities/career assessment (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- Support students in creating a college or career plan that can be regularly updated and disseminated to their families.
- Encourage families to regularly engage their youths in discussions about educational and career goals. What are the youths' aspirations? What will it take to achieve their goals?

Tips for Communication Methods:

- Consider that, when communicating about an individual student, middle and high school parents/families prefer e-mails, texts, or calls and rank handwritten notes as the least preferred communication method (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- E-mails, automated phone messages, texts, and online newsletters are most preferred by families for general communications from school to home (Project Tomorrow, 2018). Engage in student-led, student-centered conferences with families at least twice per school year.
- Consider using a technology/communication platform that can translate materials and information for non-English speaking families.

Family–school partnerships are most effective and sustainable when implemented as a collective effort between families and school staff—one that is fully integrated with the school's overall mission and goals, supported by leadership, and provided with sufficient staffing and funding. When all family members in a school community are meaningfully engaged,

supported, and respected as equal partners, their “voice” and experiences are invaluable in creating innovative solutions that support a student’s academic success and healthy development at home, at school, and in the community.

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