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How Districts Can Lay the Groundwork for Lasting Family Engagement

Family engagement in a student's education can lead to improved student academic achievement, attendance, and behavior. Yet many districts and schools still struggle to form strong partnerships with the families they serve. Having a supportive district-level infrastructure is key to the success and sustainability of family engagement initiatives. This issue of *SEDL Insights* outlines district supports that can lay the foundation for high-impact family engagement.

Family engagement is increasingly recognized as the "missing link" in school improvement.¹ As observers have noted, however, there is still a gap between acknowledging the importance of family involvement and implementing strategies to facilitate that involvement.²

In SEDL's 4 decades of family engagement work, we have learned that family engagement initiatives

SEDL Insights on How Districts Can Lay the Groundwork for Lasting Family Engagement

1. Provide training and supports for both educators and families.
2. Integrate family engagement standards and measures into educator evaluation systems.
3. Leverage funds and resources from multiple sources.
4. Create staff positions dedicated to family engagement.
5. Focus on school improvement instead of procedural compliance.
6. Make student and school data accessible and meaningful to families.



are not going to succeed unless they have buy-in, training, and policy support at the district level. Districts should see family engagement as an area of practice, not an individual strategy—with the goal of supporting school improvement and improving student outcomes. Although the insights below are not intended to be a comprehensive list, they offer some key ways that districts can support systemic, integrated, and sustained family engagement activities. They are based on recent research, as well as SEDL staff members' experiences participating

¹ Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hardy, 2012.

² Cavanagh, 2012.



in the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group and our work leading the Family Engagement State Leaders Network and the National PIRC Coordination Center.

In our examples, we discuss practices used at the state, district, and school levels, with the understanding that they can be employed at different levels in the education system. Although we discuss systemic, district-level strategies, we believe that these insights will be informative for all stakeholders who support lasting, high-impact family engagement initiatives.

Insight

1

Provide training and supports for both educators and families.

Many educators express a desire to work with families to develop stronger home–school partnerships but report that they do not know how to accomplish this. Similarly, many families, especially those in high-need areas, say that although they want to support their children, they do not know what to do to engage in their children’s

learning and school improvement.³ Recognizing the need to help “families, schools, districts, states, and the broader communities to build capacity for student achievement and school improvement,”⁴ the U.S. Department of Education released the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships. The framework calls for creating opportunities for *all* adult stakeholders—district staff, educators, and family members—to develop the skills, knowledge, relationships, networks, sense of comfort, self-efficacy, and worldview to engage in effective family engagement.⁵ It also calls for educators to create the right conditions for adult learners to come away with not only the knowledge but also the ability and desire to apply what they have learned. This includes linking initiatives to student learning; building respectful and trusting relationships between home and school; building stakeholders’ intellectual, social, and human capital; providing collective and collaborative learning situations; and giving participants the opportunity to test out and apply new skills.⁶

An initial step in developing structures that support effective family engagement is to train educators and staff in creating an environment in which they can warmly receive family members into the school and help them support their children’s education. This will include developing a strong, positive front-office staff with a consumer orientation and ensuring *all* teachers and staff have respectful attitudes toward family members, students, and visitors. In areas with histories of low family engagement, professional development can focus on rethinking what benefits students’ families can contribute—even in poor, underserved, or low-resource neighborhoods and schools.⁷ Subsequent professional development sessions can address more complex topics like how to integrate family engagement into school improvement planning and how to collaborate with families on instructional issues. This could also include modeling how to conduct and maintain respectful interactions during difficult conversations and continuing the momentum of discussion and contacts during and after contentious sessions; familiarizing educators

³ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005.

⁴ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8.

⁵ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8.

⁶ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8.

⁷ Boethel, 2003.

with the district's family engagement plan; and helping them examine data and evaluate the effectiveness of family engagement activities.⁸

Parents play myriad roles in their children's education: they are supporters, encouragers, monitors, advocates, decision makers, and collaborators.⁹ Yet many do not receive the information and support from school and district staff to understand the importance of their role in their child's education and how to fulfill this role.¹⁰ Although parent training on family engagement may not explicitly be described as such, districts should strive to encourage parents to become involved in their children's education and show them that regardless of their education and income levels, they can support students' academic success.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, district leaders implemented a bilingual curriculum called *Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors*. Designed with parent input and created for families of preK children (birth through 5 years of age), the curriculum has helped parents recognize the knowledge and skills they already possess to support their children's education. The curriculum also helped immigrant families navigate their role in the public education system. As an indicator of the program's success, the program evaluation found that participating parents acknowledged they stayed closely connected to their children's learning and became stronger advocates for their children. Training for families can progress with a student's development and education; activities for parents of adolescents can focus on ways they can help their middle and high school children prepare for college and a career.

⁸ Albuquerque Public Schools staff, focus group, March 13, 2012; Karren Dunkley, School District of Philadelphia, personal communication, March 14, 2012; Maria Casillas, Los Angeles Unified School District, personal communication, March 19, 2012; Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009.

⁹ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013.

¹⁰ Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Westmoreland et al., 2009.

¹¹ Albuquerque Public Schools staff, focus group, March 13, 2012; Karren Dunkley, personal communication, March 14, 2012; Maria Casillas, personal communication, March 19, 2012.



For parents who become, or who already are, comfortable being involved in their children's school and education, professional development can focus on leadership and decision-making skills and can show families how to navigate the school and district environments so that they know how and where to offer opinions and input about school improvement. Other training topics include how to understand and use student data and relevant education legislation and funding, such as Title I opportunities, rights, and responsibilities. In addition, many districts and schools have parent advisory councils but report that parents need training on how to effectively participate in councils, as well as fact-finding, presentation, and persuasion skills.¹¹

In the School District of Philadelphia, Parent University is a keystone of the district's Title I program. Parent University aims to provide parents with evidence-based knowledge, skills, and resources to support their children's education and increase their student achievement; support parents in navigating the educational process to build social capital; and promote networking and connections among families and schools. With the cooperation of partner organizations, Parent University offers courses at accessible local sites. Topics have included financial literacy; arts; literacy programs for fathers; health and wellness classes; and technology-oriented classes to help parents go online and check their student's grades, communicate with teachers,



and look at attendance records. The program has also included parent engagement courses like Parent Power: The Importance of Being Involved, Asking the Right Questions, and parent leadership programs for parents who want to advocate or become ambassadors in the school.

When providing training, districts need to be sure to create opportunities that allow educators and parents to meet and learn how to work *collectively*.¹² Districts should plan events that allow both groups to work together on their chosen school-based problem over time. Developing skills to act together includes learning to work in teams, learning to share leadership, and operating collaboratively with patience and persistence.

Insight 2 Integrate family engagement standards and measures into educator evaluation systems.

One way to truly embed family engagement into a district's culture of improvement is to integrate family engagement standards into teacher and

¹² Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005.

¹³ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013.

¹⁴ Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 17.

¹⁵ Salazar & Fitzpatrick, 2013.

¹⁶ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012.

principal evaluation systems. Doing so promotes family engagement as a core value of the district.¹³ State legislative changes and federal initiatives such as Elementary and Secondary Education Act waivers and Race to the Top funds are driving states and school districts to seek new and innovative ways to evaluate educator effectiveness. This provides an opportunity for districts to embed family engagement expectations into their accountability systems, making it an integrated component of their districtwide structure.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, for example, includes family and community engagement as one of the four "pillars" of effective teaching in their Massachusetts educator evaluation standards, and Boston Public Schools offers family engagement credit courses in collaboration with the district's Office of Educator Effectiveness.¹⁴ In addition, the Nevada Educator Performance Framework includes family engagement as one of the professional responsibilities that administrators and teachers are expected to perform.¹⁵

Massachusetts' Model System for Educator Evaluation sets expectations that teachers will promote "the learning and growth of all students through effective partnerships with families, caregivers, community members, and organizations." The indicators they use to assess effective teaching practice in this area include:

- **Engagement:** Welcomes and encourages every family to become an active participant in the classroom and school community.
- **Collaboration:** Collaborates with families to create and implement strategies for supporting student learning and development both at home and at school.
- **Communication:** Engages in regular, two-way, and culturally proficient communication with families about student learning and performance.¹⁶

Many states and districts have developed or adopted family and community engagement standards or frameworks, but few are currently

tied to educator evaluation. Both administrators and educators need guidance on engaging and responding to parents. In addition, states and districts need assistance developing measures to use when assessing staff performance. For family engagement to become a fundamental part of a district’s culture and expectations, state and district leaders need to hold teachers and administrators accountable for embedding these actions into their practice.

Insight 3 Leverage funds and resources from multiple sources.

Implementing successful, high-impact family engagement activities depends on adequate funds, staff, time, and materials. This poses a challenge when budgets are limited, but we have seen enterprising states, districts, and schools combine different resources to support their family engagement initiatives. Districts can leverage funds and resources from multiple programs and funding streams to support family engagement initiatives. By doing so, they not only model ways to blend these resources for their schools but also provide specific guidance. Strategies include partnering with other organizations and departments for staff and resources, collaborating on funding proposals, combining federal and state funds, and looking to private organizations for funds, as well.

Because so many community-based organizations have relationships with families in their communities and because their staff or volunteers often speak families’ native languages, they make ideal partners for outreach. In the School District of Philadelphia, for example, the district office has partnered with local faith-based organizations to send Welcome Wagon materials to the multilingual neighborhoods in the district. In addition, the community service programs of local businesses can serve as a source of volunteers—and possibly funds. Partnerships with community-based organizations can also support fundraising efforts. Some districts have written grant proposals with partners from faith- and



community-based organizations to fund additional parent involvement positions. Others have combined matching federal funds with those from community- and faith-based sponsorships to fund parent liaisons at their lowest-performing schools.

Many federal and state programs, such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act, allow, and sometimes even require, that the programming include family engagement activities. Family engagement is also a requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act; 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool grants; the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative; and early childhood programs like Head Start, Early Head Start, and Even Start.¹⁷ This list is not comprehensive but outlines the many government funds that districts can use to support family engagement.

Some schools and districts also use a combination of public and private funds. Stanton Elementary School in Washington, DC, for example, used a combination of School Improvement Grant funds and a grant from the Flamboyan Foundation to initiate a family engagement pilot program.¹⁸ We encourage district leaders to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among different departments and organizations so the district can effectively use these various resources to support family engagement initiatives.

¹⁷ Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010.

¹⁸ Taber, 2014.



Insight 4 Create staff positions dedicated to family engagement.

Having dedicated family engagement professionals in the district and in schools can help your team move beyond one-time, poorly attended events like a single open house to sustained family engagement where parents truly feel invested in their children's education and school. A district infrastructure that supports sustained family engagement includes a person in a dedicated, senior-level family engagement position who regularly interacts with other district leaders and manages district family engagement specialists.¹⁹ For example, Boston Public Schools employs an assistant superintendent for family and student engagement, and Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada, has the Department of Family-School Partnerships with an administrator who oversees the district's strategic plan for family engagement, the District Parent Involvement Council, professional development for administrators, and Parent University.²⁰

District family engagement specialists can train school-based family engagement coordinators

¹⁹ Westmoreland et al., 2009.

²⁰ National PIRC Coordination Center, 2010.

²¹ Westmoreland et al., 2009; ED, n.d.

²² Albuquerque Public Schools staff, focus group, March 13, 2012.

²³ Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007.

and parent liaisons and provide professional development on family engagement for administrators.²¹ Most use a variety of assistance strategies—monthly meetings, annual Parent Involvement Institutes, districtwide meetings, site visits, and phone or email support. Through these various approaches, they can help schools develop and implement parent involvement policies, provide support and guidance on managing Title I budgets and appropriate expenditures for parent involvement funds, and provide support for teachers and staff as they work to build stronger relationships with parents.²²

Some schools hire and provide training for family engagement coordinators and employ parents to serve as parent liaisons, providing a link between families and schools. With adequate training and support from the district, these staff members can support many of the professional development activities discussed earlier: welcoming parents and orienting them to the district, helping parents understand how they can support their children's education and become involved in the school, promoting understanding of students' families and cultures among school staff, and fostering communication and partnerships between school staff and students' families.²³ As districts face budget shortfalls, family engagement positions are often eliminated; yet they are critical factors in creating a welcoming environment for parents and family members and fostering family-school partnerships.

Insight 5 Focus on school improvement instead of procedural compliance.

Educators often see family engagement as a separate activity, something done largely in compliance with district, state, or federal mandates. In fact, when we talk to district and state leaders, they often tell us that they struggle with *how* to move beyond procedural compliance. Karen Mapp, family engagement expert and senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, notes

that she has seen a change in some districts: “I’m beginning to see many districts shift away from isolated, disconnected family engagement programs and activities . . . to thoughtful, purposeful initiatives that focus on student achievement and whole school improvement.”²⁴ When family engagement is integrated into the overall strategic plan to improve student performance and schools, it becomes systemic.

Districts that receive Title I funds are undoubtedly familiar with the program’s family engagement requirements, which include district staff conducting monitoring visits at schools, district- and school-level written Title I parent involvement policies, and Title I schools having School-Parent Compacts. Some states and districts are moving beyond complying with requirements and are using these activities to foster authentic family engagement. In Albuquerque, for example, district administrators do not limit themselves to the required two monitoring visits per school year. Instead, they visit schools as many times as needed. According to Laurie Everhart, executive director for the district’s Title I program, this approach was instrumental in moving the intention of the district Title I office “from compliance to something much greater—something in which capacity building is integral to the vision of what we see as necessary to support families.”²⁵

The Alabama State Department of Education has also adopted strategies to help districts use mandatory site visits to inform family engagement. The state department of education developed a process to formally include parent interviews as part of its on-site monitoring process with districts. Districts invite 6 to 10 Title I parents to participate in Title I-focused conversations during state monitoring visits. The parents selected must reflect the district’s demographics. For example, if the



district has a high percentage of English learners, they should be included in the parent group (with an interpreter, if needed). When schools are in improvement status, parents from those schools are also part of the interview. Although federal Title I requirements do not require the inclusion of parent groups in district monitoring visits, the practice helps the state department of education and districts gather information about what parents know about Title I and their rights as Title I parents, identify their needs, and subsequently plan strategies for family engagement and improvement.²⁶ As a result, the state and districts are using a compliance-driven activity to develop opportunities for meaningful family engagement.

Title I regulations also require that schools and families jointly develop School-Parent Compacts that “describe what teachers, other staff, students, and parents will need to do to ensure that all students meet state standards.”²⁷ Schools that focus only on requirements develop compacts with boilerplate templates and complete the related compliance activities—ensuring that the compact contains the required elements and distributing it annually at the beginning of the year to all Title I parents. After that, the compact is often filed away and rarely seen, much less used, again.

Some districts, however, use conversations around the development of these compacts as catalysts for authentic engagement.²⁸ For example,

²⁴ ED, 2011.

²⁵ Albuquerque Public Schools staff, focus group, March 13, 2012.

²⁶ Baldwin & Wade, 2012.

²⁷ Ferguson, 2009.

²⁸ Henderson, Carson, Avalone, & Whipple 2011.



the Connecticut State Department of Education spearheaded a method for transforming Title I School–Parent Compacts into effective action plans linked to school improvement plans. They brought in consultants to work with state department of education staff to design a training curriculum and offer professional development around the development of the compacts. These “revamped” compacts are designed to open meaningful communication channels among school staff, parents, and students and list specific actions that members of each group can take to improve performance. They are also linked to school improvement plans and achievement data.²⁹ This approach has transformed compliance-driven compacts into powerful tools for engaging families and impacting student achievement. This effective process is now being used in other locations across the country, including districts in Georgia and California.³⁰

Insight

6

Make student and school data accessible and meaningful to families.

Sharing data is an effective strategy that schools and districts can use to engage families and communities in school improvement.³¹ As such, the strategy should be an integral part of a district’s systemic plan for family engagement. For these strategies to work, however, leadership from district

administrators is needed to model this data use and provide supports to ensure the data are accessible, understandable, actionable, valid, and reliable. Often, educators don’t have experience using data to highlight issues and engage in conversations around areas for improvement. If educators have difficulty with this, many families and community stakeholders will have the same struggles.

States and districts are already required to measure student progress in areas such as grades, attendance, and positive behaviors. As we discussed with Title I requirements, we encourage educators to move beyond using student and school data primarily for compliance purposes and instead see it as an opportunity to leverage stakeholders in meaningful ways to promote improvement and decision making. Good data and good data systems can be leveraged to help teachers and administrators, parents and other family members, policymakers, and even students better understand where they are and how to move forward. Families can use data to understand what their student needs to strengthen skills and address challenges in school. Teachers can use it to understand what they need to adjust in their instructional practices or outreach efforts to better serve students and families. Policymakers can use it to understand the impact of school improvement strategies and identify opportunities to scale up promising practices. Students can use data to identify strengths and weaknesses and work with teachers and parents to set goals and develop strategies.

The Academic Parent-Teacher Team is a model designed by Maria Paredes to ensure that educators and parents share responsibility for student academic success. Several districts and schools across the United States, including Creighton School District in Arizona—where it was piloted—and

²⁹ Henderson, Carson, Avalone, & Whipple 2011.

³⁰ For more information about this process for developing School-Parent Compacts, visit <http://ctschoolparentcompact.org/>.

³¹ Data Quality Campaign, 2011; The Education Trust, 2004; Means, Padilla, Gallagher, & SRI International, 2010; Owens & Peltier, 2002; Taveras, Douwes, Johnson, Lee, & Caspe, 2010.

Stanton Elementary School in Washington, DC, use it. The model provides structured opportunities for parents to meet with teachers. During a series of three group meetings with the teacher, parents receive data about their child's performance indicators. Parents also receive coaching from teachers on how to understand and interpret the data in relation to classroom performance, school benchmarks, and state standards. In addition, they receive strategies and tools to support learning at home. Teachers work with the parents to jointly set goals for individual students and for the class as a whole.³²

Linking data use with parents to college and career readiness should also be a key family engagement strategy for districts. Creating opportunities for data-informed discussions around career and opportunities for post-secondary education allows teachers and parents to set goals and co-create strategies. This then leads to opportunities for teachers, parents, and students to monitor progress together.³³ This collaborative process provides a great opportunity for districts to create systemic, districtwide family engagement efforts around post-secondary goals.

Conclusion

Although many educators recognize the importance of family engagement, there is still much for districts, schools, and parents to do in this area. By treating family engagement as an area of practice in school improvement and providing sustained, systemic support, district leaders can help schools implement high-impact family engagement activities.



How SEDL Can Help

SEDL's technical assistance and professional development services in the area of family engagement include directing needs assessment activities that engage a variety of stakeholders, guiding district and school teams to plan and implement systemic engagement approaches, providing practical strategies for integrating engagement into school or district improvement processes, helping determine effectiveness of implementation, and developing sustainability plans.

We offer a range of tools and resources to help districts and schools do a better job of engaging families in their children's learning. For more information, please explore the following resources:

- [*Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*](#)
- [*Working Systemically in Action: Engaging Family & Community*](#)
- [*A Toolkit for Title I Parental Involvement*](#)
- [*Family Engagement Webinar Series*](#)

³² ED, n.d.

³³ Hinton, Jennings, Rudo, Taveras, & Crain, 2010.

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SEDL is a nonprofit education research, development, and dissemination organization based in Austin, Texas. Improving teaching and learning has been at the heart of our work throughout our nearly 50 years of service. SEDL partners with educators, administrators, parents, and policymakers to conduct research and development projects that result in strategies and resources to improve teaching and learning. SEDL also helps partners and clients bridge the gap between research and practice with professional development, technical assistance, and information services tailored to meet their needs.

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