



# Improving how schools engage families during the crucial 9th-grade year

A research-practice partnership helped schools change how they involved families in their 9th-grade students' education.

**By Martha Abele Mac Iver, Joyce Epstein, & Steven B. Sheldon**

“We don’t know what we don’t know,” said the parent of a 9th-grade student, summing up the dilemma of millions of parents whose children are making the transition from the middle grades to high school. These parents are familiar with how schools work, and many have learned how to stay in touch with their children’s schools and teachers. But high school presents new and unfamiliar challenges. For example, parents may be unaware of how easily students can fall behind in ways that will influence their course grades, credit accumulation for graduation, and eligibility for selective college enrollment. They may not understand course selection issues that can influence the probability of being accepted at certain colleges or be aware of services that can support their child’s high school success.

Decades of research confirm that systematic school efforts to engage families in their children’s education have positive effects on student learning and development, but as students move into the “make or break” 9th-grade year (Phillips, 2019), efforts to engage families have historically declined (Spera, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Because student attendance and course performance in 9th grade are such

important predictors of on-time high school graduation and postsecondary education (Easton, Johnson, & Sartain, 2017), this year is precisely the time when schools should be putting a special effort into leveraging the family support that can make a significant difference in those high school outcomes (Simon, 2004).

But, notably, fewer high school principals than elementary principals report that their schools provide various types of parental engagement activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This could reflect a different value system within high school faculty cultures that emphasize student independence. Research shows that high school teachers are significantly less likely than elementary teachers to view communicating with parents about students’ academic progress as part of their professional responsibility and parents of high school students report they receive too little communication from the schools (Benner & Quirk, 2020). Yet studies asking students to describe the role they want their families to play in their schooling indicate that students do want their families to be involved in discussions about their future, to share strategies for setting goals and planning for their future, and to help learn to monitor and manage their time (e.g., Hill,

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2015). This suggests that the decline in family engagement during high school is driven more by the reduced outreach from schools than by the desires of students and parents.

In an effort to learn more about how to mobilize schools to improve their family engagement efforts during this key transition, we engaged in a four-year continuous improvement project with one urban district, beginning in fall 2015. The partnership not only enabled the district to better interact with families but also helped us, as researchers, learn more about what effective family engagement looks like in practice.

### The research-practice partnership

Building on several decades of research by Joyce Epstein and colleagues (2019), we theorized that systematic professional development about effective family engagement strategies can help schools provide increased support to families. This support can, in turn, lead to improved student attendance and coursework, which will increase the percentage of 9th-grade students who stay on track to earn all credits required for graduation.

To test this theory, we turned to a large, western urban district that was a member of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. The district had worked for many years to implement research-based approaches to improving school, family, and community partnerships. The district's strategic plan encouraged schools to form "family engagement action teams" made up of teachers, parents, and administrators to plan, implement, evaluate, and continually improve their work. Although the district's family engagement work in elementary schools was relatively well-established, like many districts nationwide it had room to grow in its work with secondary schools.

The district's leaders had followed the research about the importance of 9th-grade indicators of successful high school performance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007) and had begun including a measure of 9th-grade course credits earned in its accountability framework. The district's interest in 9th-grade outcomes and an already established family engagement program made it an ideal partner to examine whether and how increased family engagement efforts by middle and high schools could contribute to improving 9th-grade student outcomes. In essence, our research interests were well aligned with the school district's goals, which made the partnership mutually beneficial.

Beginning in fall 2015 and continuing for four years, we worked with nearly 30 schools, with 22 schools participating actively for at least two years. We began by offering professional development workshops to middle and high school teams on how to improve their family engagement efforts as students began high school. These workshops brought school team members together to learn collaboratively and share their experiences with each other. They included a daylong workshop in the fall for teams of three to six teachers and administrators from each school and two shorter workshop

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meetings in the winter and spring (usually attended by only one or two representatives from each school, given schedule constraints). We also supported district leaders as they coached school team members to plan family engagement activities or strategies, implement them, and reflect on the challenges and successes of the activities so they could make good decisions about planning and improving the next stages of their work.

Given our physical distance from the district, we could only visit a few days per month, but maintaining a regular presence in the district and schools over four years allowed us to build important relationships. We connected in conversations with individual school leaders at workshops, school visits, and other meetings and attended more than 25 family engagement events at 15 schools.

### How the partnership work changed school practice

By the end of the second year of our partnership work, participation in the initiative appeared to have led to changes in schools' family engagement practices. Based on survey responses from school leaders, half or more of the participating schools reported that they had engaged in the following family engagement practices for the *first time*:

- Developing a family engagement plan that includes the transition to high school as a major component.
- Implementing more than one activity during the school year to reach families with students transitioning to high school.
- Working closely with feeder middle school(s) or receiving high school(s) on engaging families in the transition.
- Keeping records on parent attendance at activities and other types of family engagement.
- Engaging in a cycle of inquiry with others at their school to discuss and reflect on how family engagement activities are working and how they can be improved.
- Meeting with teams from other schools to share ideas about family engagement and learn from each other.

### Fewer students had failing grades at the end of a semester if their parent actively used the school's parent portal.

We also observed that several high schools added events during the school year in which they used specific ideas and tools from the workshop sessions to help families support their 9th-grade students. Recognizing that the first semester was when 9th graders would experience the greatest difficulty with transition, some high schools made progress in scheduling parent-teacher-student conferences earlier than they had in the past. But shifting their practice to hold conferences in time to have an effect on first semester grades remained a challenge for many schools.

At the middle grades level, some schools conducted high school information events for the first time, using materials shared with them at the workshops. Some connected with their receiving high schools to plan joint high school information events in ways they had not done before. Participating schools also reflected on their family engagement practice more deeply than they had previously, particularly with respect to communication strategies and more active ways to equip families to support their children's high school success.

In addition to offering workshops and coaching, our team also worked with the district on two specific strategies designed to help families support their 9th-grade students.

#### **The parent portal**

The district's online portal allowed parents to view their children's attendance and grades at any time and communicate by email with teachers. However, it was not clear how much parents used the portal and whether portal use had an effect on students. So our research team partnered with district analysts to examine district data on parent portal use.

Results showed that 9th-grade students with failing grades during the first quarter were less likely to have failing semester grades if their parent logged on to the district's parent portal during the first semester. Other analyses showed that when controlling for previous failure and other factors associated with failure, parent portal use was a significant predictor of students' passing all of their courses (Mac Iver et al., 2021). Although these analyses do not show that accessing the portal *caused* students to perform better, our results echo findings from rigorous experimental studies that found efforts to increase family usage of the parent portal made a positive difference in student outcomes (Bergman, 2016, 2019). Our findings, combined with the previous research, support our recommendation that schools engage in systematic improvement efforts to increase the number of families who access the parent portal (Mac Iver, Sheldon, & Clark, 2021).

#### **Interactive homework**

We also offered a series of four interactive homework assignments in which students discussed with a family member ways to be successful in high school, such as by having good attendance, passing all 9th-grade courses, maintaining a good grade-point average, and sharing their dreams for participation and success. This intervention was based on a component of NNPS's Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) process, which has shown evidence of positive emotional, behavioral, and achievement effects at the middle grades level (Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011).

This approach not only got students thinking about how they could be successful in high school, it also reached parents — including those who were unable to attend meetings at the school building — with information to help them effectively support their teens in the transition to high school. NNPS middle schools in several states piloted the activities with success (Epstein et al., 2021).

#### **Effects of the partnership**

The percentage of 9th-grade students passing all of their courses did increase over the course of the initiative; however, our evaluation study also found a similar result in a comparison district that was not part of the project (Mac Iver, Byrnes, et al., 2021), so we cannot be sure that the improvements we saw are attributable to the ramped-up engagement efforts. Several factors may help to explain this result.

First, despite improvements in the project schools' practices of family engagement, many schools tended to focus on the logistics of engagement events, rather than on ensuring that all families received the information and help they needed to assist their 9th-grade children. Further, the schoolwide focus of the intervention may have diverted some schools from giving enough attention to targeted interventions or supplemental communications for families of students who showed early signs of struggling in 9th grade.

At the same time, although the comparison district was not participating in our initiative to improve family engagement, it did implement other interventions designed to improve 9th-grade attendance and course performance. So, in this case, both districts may have implemented different, and equally effective, programs for 9th-grade students.

Although we cannot report a definitive positive impact on student outcomes, the partnership did lead to changes in school-level practices, including the implementation of new family engagement activities, more attention to the timing of engagement activities, and more reflection about the quality of engagement activities and how to improve them from year to year. And fewer students had failing grades at the end of a semester if their parent actively used the school's parent portal, which may have helped the parent monitor and influence student work.



## Sharing our learning

Our research provides a foundation other districts, schools, and researchers can build on to better understand how to help families and students through the 9th-grade transition. We share many family engagement tools and resources developed for district leaders, school teams, and 9th grade families on our website ([www.sfcp.jhuucos.com/efhss](http://www.sfcp.jhuucos.com/efhss)). These include frameworks for organizing and planning professional development on family engagement for school teams, as well as materials, tools, and resources to use in professional development or in planning and implementing their family engagement strategies and activities. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University ([www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org)) welcomes districts and schools to join others across the country in using research-based tools and resources and to connect with us for ongoing support and networking opportunities (Epstein et al., 2019).

Learning is a group effort, and we agree with Anthony Bryk and his colleagues (2015) at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that “learning to improve” requires schools to participate in networked learning communities that share what they’re learning to accelerate the process of continuous improvement for everyone. We invite readers to network with us and others as we seek to use research to influence family engagement practice at middle and high schools throughout the country. With our findings and those of others, we can make families, too, part of the learning process, for their children, their schools, and the wider education community ■

**Note:** This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305H150081 to the Johns Hopkins University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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