



Partnership for Public Education

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
INITIATIVE**

FAMILY AND SCHOOLS: HOW PRINCIPALS SHAPE CONTEXTS FOR ENGAGEMENT



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Introduction

Schools and families need each other. Family engagement benefits students' well-being and academic achievement, regardless of grade level, content area, school location, or school type (Jeynes, 2003; Jeynes, 2007). The positive effects of family engagement extend beyond attending report card conferences and checking homework. Family involvement, especially in students' early years, predicts student academic success long after elementary school. Even so, family contributions to academic support in the middle grades and throughout students' adolescent years are no less critical. While we know that it is important for parents to remain involved in their children's education even during high school, parents should be made aware of the impacts different involvement behaviors can have on their children's academic and emotional functioning (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). However, as students grow, their families' expectations of them are more predictive of long term academic success than activities such as direct school involvement.

Pathways to richer family-school engagement are not typically well understood by schools. In some cases, schools do not employ the practices that increase and amplify family engagement. But, as research develops and schools work with families to identify shared aims, we can point to a few recommendations for best practices in this area. Principals' influence on students is largely indirect, but their work in shaping school cultures, equipping teachers, and welcoming families all support students' academic achievement. A few pivots on the part of principals may transform the ways that parents and families participate in and engage with their students' schooling. The brief that follows is designed to help principals incorporate practices into their schools which invite the engagement and expertise of students' families.

This brief describes a survey study of about 180 parents and guardians of K12 students in the Wilmington, Delaware metropolitan area. The goal of the study was to better understand whether families trust schools, the extent of their engagement, and the strength of their efficacy beliefs regarding school engagement. Conversely, the research team also set out to understand what schools are doing or have done to contribute to feelings of trust and to cultivate families' efficacy for school engagement.

Engagement Frameworks

Both federal and Delaware state legislation recognize the value of family engagement. In the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the law's language has shifted

from "parent involvement" to "family engagement." This semantic shift represents a revised perspective on families and schools. In ESSA, the language of family engagement implies two significant new directions for federal education policy. First, it acknowledges a much broader definition of family that expands beyond parents. This is appropriate given that 27% of children in the United States live with only one birth parent and 6% of US children live in homes with no birth parents (Livingston, 2014). Second, ESSA emphasizes family engagement rather than merely involvement. Historically, parent involvement may have been comprised of scattered performances, events, or conferences that required parents' attendance and perhaps support in terms of finances or volunteer hours. ESSA's conception of family engagement requires that schools and districts create long term plans that integrate the ideas and expertise of parents into all aspects of decision-making, inform families about academic planning for students, and collaborate with families to evaluate the efficacy of those plans at

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the district and school levels. This is a marked difference between what schools have called involvement—which placed the burden on families—to an environment of engagement opportunities for a diverse array of families.

Barriers to Engagement

Researchers and educators have found it more instructive to consider the ways in which families encounter barriers to engagement rather than to characterize families as disengaged from schools. While all families' situations and specific relationships to schools are unique, those barriers to engagement can often be sorted into one of four categories: individual parent and family factors, child factors, parent-teacher factors, and societal factors (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Parents (or other family members who provide care) may experience individual difficulties which prevent them from consistent or visible engagement with their students' schools and classrooms. Broadly, this category includes the families' beliefs about the importance, efficacy, and worth of involvement. Those beliefs are shaped by the realities of families' lives and, in turn, direct the kind of school-related activities they can incorporate into their lives. For example, a guardian's work schedule may be organized in a way that makes it impossible to attend report card conferences, even if they are held at varying times throughout the day. Similarly, an adult's work or care schedule may preclude volunteering for an event or field trip.

Individual child factors include the kinds of demands placed on families by a child's individual needs. Students' needs change across the spectrum of age and it is sometimes believed that family engagement is less essential in the middle and high school grades. This is not substantiated by research. On the contrary: family engagement during the middle and high school grades contributes to positive academic and social outcomes for adolescent students (Jeynes, 2007). Additionally, students' exceptional needs may demand so much of parents' energies that there is not enough left over for school engagement. For example, students who present as gifted and talented, who have learning differences, or who exhibit behavioral challenges may need additional services or need to interface with extra-school agencies, which take up families' resources that may otherwise be dedicated to involvement or engagement.

Parent-teacher relationships play a substantial role in family engagement as either a facilitator of or barrier to engagement. If families hold different goals for their students' schooling than do teachers, families are likely to feel disenfranchised and subsequently decrease their engagement activities. This is one reason why communicating in families' first languages is critical to increasing engagement. Perhaps even more importantly, schools must examine the rhetoric they use with regard to family engagement and seriously investigate whether the language used captures the school's aims and motivations. Bastiani (1993) suggests that, despite schools' use of language which emphasizes partnership, collaboration, trust, and shared goals, "home-school relationships are typically much more adversarial, and about rights and power" (Hornby & Lafele, 2011). In a similar vein, Hegarty (1993) suggests that specifically the word *partnership* casts a "warm glow of right thinking" over school-family relations but can actually lead to lack of activity or a damaging sense of complacency (p. 123). Language then—both the language used for communication and the words chosen to describe goals of engagement—must be selected with great care and chosen to accurately represent the ways in which the school values family engagement.

Research Methods

While ample research addresses the ways in which family engagement supports student achievement, there are relatively few studies which address parent perceptions of their interactions with schools. Schools are organizations and families comprise an essential—although often minimized—component of those organizations. Other research regarding organizational participation suggests that school leaders can establish and maintain parent trust by adhering to policies and practices that meet families' affective needs (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009). However, there has been little to suggest what organizational characteristics best support families so they can, in turn, support students.

We hypothesized that a set of factors would work together to shape families' perceptions of their students' schools and that the cluster of variables would be positively and significantly correlated with families' self-reported degree of involvement. That is, if families reported that their students' schools were trustworthy, communicated with and partnered with families to meet shared goals, and responded to families' needs, then families were more likely to do things that schools consider engagement—which can span tasks like fundraising, homework help, or attending report card conferences as well as contributing to or evaluating the district plan for family engagement.

Engagement Optimism

Our findings confirmed our hypotheses. We found that a constellation of variables correlates so strongly with one another that, together, they form a latent construct we term *engagement optimism*. That construct is comprised of: parent trust in schools, political efficacy (internal and external), parent efficacy, and teacher outreach.

Each of those component variables are defined as follows:

- **Parent trust:** the degree to which respondents assess schools as being open, honest, reliable, competent, and benevolent.
- **Political efficacy:** the degree to which respondents positively assess their own abilities to marshal and deploy the skills needed to negotiate schools as political terrain and the reciprocal responsiveness of the school.
- **Parent efficacy:** the degree to which respondents positively assess their own abilities to marshal and deploy the skills needed to support students' academic needs.
- **Parent-community ties (teacher outreach):** Respondents' perceptions of schools' outreach efforts

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We term this amalgam variable engagement optimism because each component variable represents the families' perceptions of the ways in which schools invite, respond to, and honor the contributions and expertise of families in positive ways.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow move from those most proximal to the principalship to the most distal from that role. This progression highlights the idea that leadership is essential to successful family engagement but that a school's engagement work does not rest solely with the school leader. Instead, family engagement must be rooted in the culture of the school and embedded into the mindsets of the school's faculty and staff. Similarly, the following recommendations underscore the sequential nature of tasks associated with family engagement so that the steps listed below are likely to build on one another.

Family engagement must be rooted in the culture of the school and embedded into the mindsets of the school's faculty and staff.

1. Role of principal

Principals should establish and model schoolwide norms for family engagement. Principals are “key drivers” of school improvement (Bryk et al., 2010). School improvement includes setting the schoolwide norms for family engagement. Effective school leadership may be realized in several ways, some of which may be indirect. Those may include: creating and sustaining school structures which invite, value, and apply the voices of students' families; recruiting and retaining teachers who contribute to a culture that values families in word and in deed; and setting a pattern of open and honest conversation with families that centers on the academic achievement of students. Leadership is critical to the quality of teaching and learning in a school; it is equally critical to the quality of a school's family engagement.

2. Diverse school faculties

Schools should prioritize hiring diverse faculty members as well as training in anti-racism, cultural responsiveness, and restorative justice practices. One of the most essential ways to reduce barriers between schools and families is to employ school faculties who reflect the school's students. Teachers may share students' race, socioeconomic status, language, geographic context, or other characteristics. While professional development may go a long way toward educating faculties about students' lives and contexts, teachers and staffs who share students' realities may be better able to understand, accommodate, and challenge them. Redding's (2019) review of literature on ethnic match suggests that Black students in particular tend to score higher on achievement tests when they are assigned to Black teachers. Additionally, math achievement of Black students tends to increase when they are taught by Black teachers and, when a school has a majority of Black teachers, more Black students are assigned to gifted and talented programs (Grissom, Rodriguez, & Kern, 2017). Finally, Meier (1993) found that where Latino students were in schools with Latino principals, students were less likely to be identified as needing special education or to experience school discipline, and more likely to be assigned to gifted programs than when they were with white principals. Taken together, these studies suggest that diverse faculties counteract the kinds of barriers that stand between Black and brown students and academic achievement. It stands to reason that these individuals may also be skilled at communicating with and inviting the involvement of families.

3. School climates mitigate barriers to engagement

Schools should explicitly adopt an assets-oriented approach to engaging parents and subsequently find authentic ways of celebrating families' contributions to all aspects of schooling. One of the most important findings of this study indicates that families' experiences of school culture are then interpreted by families as feedback about whether or not they should continue to involve themselves in schools. Families who receive positive feedback from schools are likely to uphold patterns of engagement while families who receive negative feedback are likely to withdraw and reduce their engagement—which ultimately harms students. This study showed that parents' experiences of schools—specifically parent trust in schools and their efficacy for school-related tasks—are highly related to each other as well as to subsequent patterns of interaction with schools.

4. Prioritize student physical and psychological safety

Schools should prioritize students' physical, emotional, and psychological safety and community to families how they do that. While families report caring a great deal about students' academic achievement, more parents than ever are concerned about their students' safety in schools (Blad, 2018). Prioritizing students' physical and psychological safety is, therefore, a key way of indicating that schools and families have the same goals. If families believe schools are equally committed to their students' well-being, they may be more inclined to engage with other efforts related to schooling and achievement. Some ways to underscore the school's concern for safety include: anti-bullying instruction, social-emotional learning integration, restorative disciplinary practices, culturally-responsive instructional practices, and anti-racist professional development.

5. Align language of engagement with engagement opportunities

Schools should align their language regarding parent engagement to their family engagement. Intuition, research, and experience suggest to us that the ways in which we talk about engagement really matter. We also know that, when organizational participation is delegitimized, participants themselves are delegitimized (Dyrness, 2007). It is easy to euphemize family engagement as a "partnership" or to discuss "working toward shared goals" without either establishing partnerships or inviting families to share their goals for themselves and their students. Groups of stakeholders in an organization (like families) are keenly aware of when the organization pays them lip service while simultaneously excluding them from legitimate participation. Schools in which educators talk about partnership and shared goals or efforts must in fact have ways for families to express their most important goals and then to partner with schools to achieve those goals. The Every Student Succeeds Act and, subsequently, aligned state laws provide useful avenues by which inclusion may take place. Specifically: families must be included in Title I planning, in the writing of parent engagement plans, and in the evaluation of those engagement plans. While schools can certainly go beyond these mandated activities, compliance with recent legislation establishes a useful floor for more authentic types of engagement.

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The Partnership for Public Education (PPE) is inspired by a vision of excellence and equity in public education for Delaware's children and families. Our work is grounded in the belief that research, practice, family, and community are all needed in the systematic improvement of educational opportunities. This goal is most effectively achieved through collaboration and cooperation.

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