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Research in Brief: Engaging and Empowering Diverse and Underserved Families in Schools

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Policymakers recognize the importance of empowering all families to be partners in their children's education, including families from traditionally underserved groups, whose members identify as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous or other people of color, or whose members identify with religious beliefs, sexual orientations, gender identities, or languages that are not prevalent in their communities. Professionals in schools, early childhood and afterschool programs, and other organizations are rethinking programs and practices that have been designed for families, but were not designed with them. District and school leaders are inviting families to join them in true partnerships to design programs that strengthen families' ability to support their children's learning and healthy development.[2]

"Family engagement" has been defined in many ways. For example, the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines family engagement in schools as "parents and school personnel working together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents."[3] The U.S. Department of Education states that family engagement is the participation of families and educators in "regular, two-

[1] The writing team would like to acknowledge and thank Elena Lopez and John Rice for their careful review, input, and feedback on this brief.

[2] Caspe, M., Lopez, E., & Hanebutt, R. (2019). *Family engagement playbook*. Retrieved from https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Family-Engagement-Playbook

[3] Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017). *The Family Engagement Inventory (FEI): A brief cross-disciplinary synthesis*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/synthesis.pdf

way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities."[4] A 2013 study used a dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships to argue that transformative family engagement initiatives must empower and enable participants to be confident, active, knowledgeable, and informed stakeholders in their schools and neighborhoods.[5]

Over the past decade, experts in the field of family and school partnerships have called for a shift from a focus on engagement to a focus on empowerment of parents, guardians, and caregivers to improve education outcomes for historically marginalized students.[6] Although the terms "engage" and "empower" are often used interchangeably in the research, there is a significant difference in terms of practice.[7] Family engagement generally refers to educators inviting families to participate in school-related activities. More than 50 years of research indicates that family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of a child's development, educational attainment, and success in school and life.[8] And the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), continues to emphasize family engagement as a necessary element for improving student outcomes. Family empowerment refers to a more active and involved process that entails not only engaging families to be informed about their children's education but also empowering them with tools, resources, and strategies to actively support their children's learning and healthy development. Family empowerment occurs when educators and schools remove the barriers to and provide opportunities for families to gain agency and influence their schools' communities to bring about positive change in their children's schooling.[9] Empowerment involves a mutually shared effort to reach mutually identified learning goals for an individual child or for all children in a school or district. To support educational equity in terms of both opportunity and outcomes, families must be empowered by schools, districts, and communities to support their children's learning.[10] Findings from a recent

[4] United States Department of Education. (2015). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. United States Department of Education.
[5] Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships. SEDL.
[6] Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., Chu, A., & Weiss, H. B. (2011). *Teaching the teachers: Preparing educators to engage families for student achievement*. Harvard Family Research Project; Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Bryan, J. (2010). Advocacy and empowerment in parent consultation: Implications for theory and practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 88*(3), 259–268.
[7] Although much of the research cited in this brief uses the term *engagement*, we attempt to highlight aspects of engagement strategies that can empower families to take a more active role in their children's education.
[8] Caspe, M., Lopez, E., & Hanebutt, R. (2019). *Family engagement playbook*. Retrieved from https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Family-Engagement-Playbook; Hall, C. M. (2020). The impact of family engagement on student achievement. *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research, 22*(2). https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1327
[9] Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., Chu, A., & Weiss, H. B. (2011). *Teaching the teachers: Preparing educators to engage families for student achievement*. Harvard Family Research Project; Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Bryan, J. (2010). Advocacy and empowerment in parent consultation: Implications for theory and practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 88*(3), 259–268.
[10] Ibid.

study suggests that family empowerment can improve academic outcomes for children who are typically underserved and whose backgrounds are under-represented in the schooling process.[11]

This brief, requested by the Arizona Department of Education, presents a narrative synthesis and is based on a partial review of the relevant literature on strategies for engaging and, more recently, empowering families to support their children's learning and development.[12] The brief also reviews and summarizes lessons learned from this research, and offers recommendations for how local education agencies can engage and empower families.

Research on Family Engagement

Why is it important to engage families[13] in their children's education? Research has found that children achieve more academically when their families are positively engaged in the schools they attend.[14] Compared to students whose families are not regularly engaged in their schooling, students who had regular family engagement earned higher grades and test scores, enrolled in advanced courses at higher rates, attended school more regularly, had higher graduation rates, had better social skills, and showed improved behavior.[15] Research suggests that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and/or racial and ethnic minority backgrounds tend to benefit the most from having parents involved in their schooling.[16] Studies found that engaging low-income and underserved families may reduce barriers to children's learning, especially when schools initiate communication and design strategies to work side-by-side with them to support student learning.[17] For example, family–school partnerships can use data on student absenteeism and grades to co-create culturally appropriate action steps to improve student outcomes.

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[11] Diversity can take many forms: race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and language. Banks, J. A. (2015). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. Routledge.

[12] This narrative synthesis is based on selected literature published within the last 10 years on the topic of family engagement. The literature was identified by using a designated set of key words and search strings in ERIC, Google Scholar, and PsychInfo. Some literature that was developed more than 10 years ago is included if it was a seminal piece or especially germane to this brief.

[13] The term "families" refers to parents, grandparents, guardians, foster parents, or caretakers with whom the children live and who are responsible for their well-being.

[14] Hall, C. M. (2020) The impact of family engagement on student achievement. *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research, 22*(2). https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1327

[15] Newman, N., Northcutt, A., Farmer, A., & Black, B. (2019). Epstein's model of parental involvement: Parent perceptions in urban schools. *Language Teaching and Educational Research (LATER), 2*(2), 81–100. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35207/later.559732

[16] Crosnoe, R. (2015). Continuities and consistencies across home and school systems. In S. M. Sheridan & E. Moorman Kim (Eds.), *Processes and pathways of family-school partnerships across development* (pp. 61–80). Springer, Cham.

[17] Lawson, M. A., & Alameda-Lawson, T. (2012). A case study of school-linked collective parent engagement. *American Educational Research Journal, 49*(4), 651–684; Smith, S., Robbins, T., Stagman, S., & Mathur, D. (2014). *Parent engagement from preschool through grade 3: A guide for policymakers*. National Center for Children in Poverty.

School Programs that Support Family Engagement

Many families want to support their children's success but lack meaningful and relevant information and guidance about the best practices associated with positive student outcomes. Accordingly, schools can take an active role in designing family engagement activities in areas such as checking homework and shared reading.[18] For example, structured reading programs that offer reading strategies to families have shown favorable results compared to instances in which families voluntarily read to their children at home without any support or guidance from school.[19]

A meta-analysis of family engagement programs conducted through the Harvard Family Research Project showed the importance of "school-initiated" programs and the positive impact of educators providing guidance and support to structure family engagement activities.[20] The meta-analysis found that four school-initiated family engagement programs had statistically significant, positive effects on student achievement. The four programs included one that encouraged families and their children to read together, one that was designed to help families and teachers collaborate with one another as equal partners in improving children's academic outcomes, one that encouraged families to make daily checks on their children's completion of homework, and one that increased teacher-family communication. Among the factors that were common to the successful efforts of these programs, one variable that clearly stood out was the emphasis on partnerships between families and teachers.[21] Another study examined the long-term effects of an intervention designed to help families convey the importance of STEM courses to their teenage children. The study found that the intervention resulted in an average increase of 12 percentile points on mathematics and science standardized test scores for the high school students and higher rates of STEM career pursuit five years after the study.[22]

[18] Jeynes, W. H. (2012). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students. *Urban Education, 47*(4), 706–742.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Jeynes, W. H. (2012). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students. *Urban Education, 47*(4), 706–742.
[22] Rozek, C. S., Svoboda, R. C., Harackiewicz, J. M., Hulleman, C. S., & Hyde, J. S. (2017). Utility-value intervention with parents increases students' STEM preparation and career pursuit. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114*(5), 909–914.

Barriers to Engaging All Families

Though U.S. classrooms are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse,[23] historically underserved families often have lower rates of engagement with their children's schools due to feeling isolated, ignored, and unwelcome in the school community.[24] For many families from historically underserved groups, their personal and communal experiences have shaped their perceptions and interactions with schools.[25] Historically underserved families often have negative school experiences and encounter racism, classism, and rejection in school communities.[26] In addition, they may experience power differences that negatively impact their relationships with school personnel.[27] Families who believe that their knowledge or skills are inadequate or unappreciated may be reluctant to become involved in school. They may avoid attending school meetings or events if they do not view the school as a welcoming place.[28] Furthermore, family members may work long hours or have other family responsibilities that conflict with school or meeting hours.[29] When school staff are unaware of diverse expectations, experiences, and ambitions among families, they may misinterpret a family's lack of involvement as disinterest in its children's academic lives.[30]

Research suggests that Hispanic/Latinx families continue to be the target of deficit thinking in educational settings.[31] There is widespread myth that if families are not actively visible in school activities such as fundraisers, advisory meetings, and field trips, then they are not interested in their child's education.[32] This assumption ignores some of the culturally specific ways in which Hispanic/Latinx families engage in their children's education outside of school, such as cultivating agency in their children or modeling academic excellence at home. Given the link between how families are perceived and engaged by school communities, Hispanic/Latinx families may receive fewer invitations to engage with teachers and less communication related

[23] García, E., Arias, M. B., Harris Murri, N. J., & Serna, C. (2010). Developing responsive teachers: A challenge for a demographic reality. *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*(1-2), 132–142.
[24] Child Trends. (2013). *Parental involvement in schools*. https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-involvement-in-schools
[25] Reynolds, A. D., Crea, T. M., Medina, J., Degnan, E., & Mcroy, R. (2014). A mixed-methods case study of parent involvement in an urban high school serving minority students. *Urban Education, 50*, 750–775. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914534272
[26] Capps, R., Fix, M., Ost, J., Reardon-Anderson, J., & Passel, J. (2004). *The health and well-being of young children of immigrants*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Christianakis, M. (2011, Fall). Parents as "help labor": Inner-city teachers' narratives of parent involvement. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 38*, 157–178.
[30] Snell, A. (2018). Parent-school engagement in a public elementary school in Southern Arizona: Immigrant and refugee parent perspectives. *School Community Journal*, *28*(2), 113.
[31] Valencia, R. R. (Ed.). (2012). The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice. Routledge.
[32] Liou, D. D., Ambroso, E. P., & Antrop-González, R. (2018). Latinx parental expectations in the home: Educación and the assets of religiosity, family, and community. In W. Jeynes (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook*

to supporting their children's academic work.[33] In Arizona, which has one of the largest and fastest growing Hispanic/Latinx student populations in the U.S., this phenomenon is especially problematic.[34]

Immigrant Families

Immigrant families have many cultural and social assets. For example, employment rates for immigrant parents are high, and immigrant children are more likely to live in two-parent families than children of U.S.-born parents.[35] In addition, many immigrant families place a high value on education and have high educational aspirations for their children.[36] Yet, research indicates that immigrant families tend to be less active in school-engagement activities.[37] There are several possible barriers to engaging and empowering immigrant families, including families' limited English proficiency, lack of bilingual skills on the part of teachers and school staff, and families' unfamiliarity with the U.S. public school system.[38, 39] Although most children of immigrants are fluent English speakers, approximately 58 percent have at least one parent with limited English proficiency, which could make it difficult for these parents to communicate with teachers or school staff.[40]

Some families who have immigrated to the United States also have "to cope with the physical and emotional stress of living in a culture that welcomes their labor but rejects, openly or covertly, their presence."[41] Families who are trying to adjust to life in a country whose language and customs are foreign to them may need teachers to reach out to them and welcome them as partners in their children's education. Invitations from teachers to engage in their children's education empowers immigrant families because they confirm that their participation is

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[33] Nava, P. E. (2012). *Sin sacrificio no hay recompensa: Apoyo as (im)migrant parental engagement in farmworking families of the California Central Valley.* University of California, Los Angeles.
[34] *AP News*. (February 29, 2020). Arizona teachers significantly less diverse than students. Retrieved from https://apnews.com/article/f6562bb29688978f75d0ecf7a86541b3
[35] Hernandez, D., & Cervantes, W. (2011). *Children in immigrant families: Ensuring opportunity for every child in America*. Washington, DC: First Focus.
[36] Sibley, E., & Dearing, E. (2014). Family educational involvement and child achievement in early elementary school for American-born and immigrant families. *Psychology in the Schools, 51*(8), 814–831.
[37] Child Trends. (2013). *Parental involvement in schools*. https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-involvement-in-schools
[38] Soutullo, O. R., Smith-Bonahue, T., Sanders-Smith, S., & Navia, L. E. (2016). Discouraging partnerships? Teachers' perspectives on immigration-related barriers to family-school collaboration. *School Psychology Quarterly, 31*(2), 226–240.
[39] Sibley, E., & Dearing, E. (2014). Family educational involvement and child achievement in early elementary school for American-born and immigrant families. *Psychology in the Schools, 51*(8), 814–831.
[40] Capps, R., Fix, M., Ost, J., Reardon-Anderson, J., & Passel, J. (2004). *The health and well-being of young children of immigrants*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
[41] Yoshikawa, H. (2011). Immigrants raising citizens: Undocumented parents and their young. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

welcome, valuable, and expected by the school community.[42] In addition, the existing literature indicates that although schools often try to involve immigrant families, they do not always succeed in giving them equal power as decision-makers.[43] A child's teacher may be the only contact that families have with their child's school and the teacher may make the difference in whether a family has a successful school-family relationship.

Strategies to Increase Empowerment Among Diverse Groups of Families

Education policies at the federal, state, and local levels reflect the importance of family engagement in schools. For example, the U.S. Department of Education requires all Title I schools (i.e., schools serving a high proportion of low-income students) to have a parent involvement policy and a plan for how schools and parents will collaborate to promote student achievement. However, too often, families are brought into schools only when a problem arises, limiting the school–home relationship to emergencies and disciplinary issues.

The right kinds of school–family connections—those relationships built on listening, welcoming, and shared decision-making—can empower parents to become more involved and can produce multiple benefits for students.[44] When schools invite a diverse set of families into the classroom, share strategies for helping their children succeed academically, and provide multiple opportunities for families to participate as decision-makers in their child's learning, they empower them to support their children's learning. Research indicates that fostering family engagement and empowerment is effective in improving academic outcomes for students whose families have been traditionally underserved or under-represented in public school systems.[45]

Despite an abundance of literature on the topic of family engagement strategies, school administrators and teachers are often unaware of strategies they can implement to encourage transformative parental involvement. Below is a list of family engagement strategies from the existing literature at the individual, relational, and organizational levels.

[42] Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal, 106*(2), 105–130.
[43] Yoshikawa, H. (2011). *Immigrants raising citizens: Undocumented parents and their young*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
[44] Wood, L., & Bauman, E. (2017). *How family, school, and community engagement can improve student achievement and influence school reform: Literature review*. Nellie Mae Education Foundation.
[45] Ibid.

Individual: These strategies strengthen individual capacities, self-confidence, and cognition of educators and families.

- **Start with self-reflection about personal biases.** The beginning point in educators' communication with families is self-reflection about their own biases. Being aware of, and able to overcome, biases enables educators to listen deeply to families and to communicate with empathy, respect, and humility.[46]
- **Demonstrate sensitivity to family values, cultural differences, and characteristics.** Teachers who have an asset-based view toward families focus on each student's strengths, want to learn about the family and the community in which they live, and believe that all families want the best for their children.[47] One way to demonstrate cultural awareness is for teachers to conduct home visits so that they becomes more familiar with the cultural diversity at their school. Schools can also send out a family survey to learn about families' cultures and school experiences.[48] Providing opportunities for families to share about their educational experiences is another powerful way to begin to understand family perspectives on schooling.[49]
- **Hold yourself accountable.** Districts and schools should identify their family engagement goals and collect data to understand their progress and need for improvements. At the individual level, district and school leaders have to be transparent and accountable to families and the community.[50]

Relational: These strategies support family empowerment and strengthen family-school partnerships.

- **Initiate ongoing two-way communication.** Communication is critical to empowering parents in their partnership with schools. It is important to have "two-way" communication in which educators do not do all the talking.[51] Building relationships takes time and perseverance, and it is important for school leaders and staff to listen

[46] Sanders-Smith, S. C., Smith-Bonahue, T. M., Cordoba, T. E., & Soutullo, O. R. (2019). Shifting perspectives: Preservice teacher preparation in family engagement. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 40*(3), 221-237.
[47] Weiss, H. B., Bouffard, S. M., Bridglall, B. L., & Gordon, E. W. (2009). *Reframing family involvement in education: Supporting families to support educational equity* (Equity Matters, Research Review No. 5). Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University.
[48] Finello, K. M., Zadouri, N., Terteryan, A., & Hampton, P. (2014, June). *The California Home Visiting Program external evaluation: Family focus groups in 2014*. Sacramento, CA: WestEd; Larocque, M., Kleiman, I., & Darling, S. M. (2011). Parental involvement: The missing link in school achievement. *Preventing School Failure, 55*(3), 115–122.
[49] Global Family Research Project. (2020). *Family engagement storytelling project stands at the 'intersection of media and educational justice.'*
[50] Westmoreland, H., Lopez, E., & Rosenberg, H. (2009). How to develop a logic model for districtwide family engagement strategies. *Harvard Family Research Project, 10*.
[51] Kraft, M. A., & Dougherty, S. M. (2013). The effect of teacher–family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 6*(3), 199–222.

with empathy, respect, and humility so they can learn from historically underserved families and understand their perspectives about school. Teachers who empower families whose members have been historically underserved or who are under-represented in the community establish trust by learning about their culture; seeking to understand their experience with the education system, both past and present; and learning about their hopes and dreams for their children.[52] Regular and responsive communication from teachers to families is important because it lays the foundation for strong partnerships and all forms of family engagement.[53]

- **Employ dual capacity-building strategies to support family–school partnerships.** Partnerships between home and school are most successful when they build the capacity of both families and educators to interact with each other. The Partners in Education Dual Capacity-Building Framework, for example, uses a research-based partnership model and reinforces the importance of educators being proactive in creating opportunities for themselves and families to collaboratively develop skills needed for effective partnership.[54] As outlined by this framework, effective partnerships are built by strengthening the capabilities (knowledge and skills), connections (social networks within and beyond the school community), cognition (beliefs and values), and confidence (self-efficacy) of families and educators.
- **Create opportunities for social networks of support.** Families from diverse backgrounds may feel more comfortable talking to and hearing from other families than from teachers or school staff. They also may trust the information more if it is coming from another parent or guardian.[55] Multiple research and evaluation studies have suggested that families often find connecting with other families the most valuable aspect of participating in family–school partnerships.[56]
- **Be proactive in establishing trust.** For historically underserved families, engagement efforts are not likely to be productive until trust is established between the family and their child's school.[57] Trust creates the conditions in which family engagement can

[52] Marschall, M. J., Shah, P. R., & Donato, K. (2012). Parent involvement policy in established and new immigrant destinations. *Social Science Quarterly, 93*, 130–151. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2011.00833.x

[53] Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E., Kreider, H., & Chatman-Nelson, C. (2014). *Preparing educators to engage families: Case studies using an ecological systems framework* (3rd ed.). Sage.

[54] Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). *Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family–school partnerships*. SEDL. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf

[55] Yoder, N., Darling-Churchill, K., Colombi, G. D., Ruddy, S., Neiman, S., Chagnon, E., & Mayo, R. (2017). *Reference manual on making school climate improvements* (School climate improvement resource package). National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

[56] Community Science. (2018). *Evaluation of the Kindred Program final report*; Rangel, D. E., Shoji, M. N., & Gamoran, A. (2020). The development and sustainability of school-based parent networks in low-income Latinx communities: A mixed-methods investigation. *American Educational Research Journal, 57*(6), 2450–2484.

[57] Partners in education: A dual-capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (SEDL, 2013).

flourish. In establishing contact with families, especially those who are historically underserved, teachers bear the responsibility of reaching out and initiating communication. Families that are in regular contact with teachers about student goals are likely to develop trust and have positive feelings about their role in their children's education.[58] In turn, those families are more likely to engage in home-school partnership efforts and, eventually, become empowered to take larger roles in decision-making.

Organizational: These strategies are related to school and district-level policies that support family empowerment.

- **Offer professional development to school administrators, teachers, and staff on family engagement.** Research indicates that schools with stronger ties between educators, families, and the community were characterized by teacher actions such as initiating conversations and personally inviting families to participate in school events.[59] School districts should build the capacity of all staff to carry out these sorts of actions to engage with families.
- **Adapt school practices to ensure access and agency for all families.** To ensure all families feel welcome and empowered to communicate with school employees, schools must consider families' needs, including accommodating families' schedules when planning events and bridging language barriers when communicating with families.[60] Partnering with families to ensure student attendance can also give them access and promote agency. Evidence-based strategies to improve student attendance include communicating with families via text about the importance of attendance, alerting families when students are absent, and sending personalized messages to families when students struggle with chronic absence.[61]
- **Support families to guide their children's learning from preschool to high school.** Families, schools, and communities can never start too early in supporting children's positive development. This engagement can begin in early childhood education,

[58] Wood, L., & Bauman, E. (2017). How family, school, and community engagement can improve student achievement and influence school reform: Literature review. Nellie Mae Education Foundation.
Zhang, C., Du, J., Sun, L., & Ding, Y. (2018). Extending face-to-face interactions: Understanding and developing an online teacher and family community. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 46*(3), 331–341.
[59] Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010) *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, Il. University of Chicago Press.
[60] Lowenhaupt, R., & Montgomery, N. (2018). Family engagement practices as sites of possibility: Supporting immigrant families through a district-university partnership. *Theory Into Practice, 57*(2), 99–108.
[61] Heppen, J.B., Kurki, A., & Brown, S. (2020). *Can texting parents improve attendance in elementary school? A test of an adaptive messaging strategy* (NCEE 2020–006). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

including birth-to-five interventions. Educators can help empower parents to see that providing a child additional enrichment throughout their life enhances brain development and parents can play an important role in that.[62] Effective family-school connections are important in supporting students as they transition through their school years. For example, a study of the transition from middle to high school found that students were less likely to struggle in their first year of high school if their high schools were engaged in regular communication with their families.[63]

- **Link family and community engagement efforts to student learning.** In order to be effective in supporting student learning, parental involvement must extend beyond mere family participation in school-related activities. Actions that support student learning at home and in the community are likely to positively impact academic outcomes.[64] Research indicates that schools with stronger relationships between educators, families, and the community had higher levels of student achievement than schools with weaker relationships.[65] Teachers can play a key role in fostering relationships with families by spending time in the community, trying to understand local issues, and embracing family members as partners.[66]

Parent Advisory Councils for Empowering Diverse Groups of Families

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law in 1965, defined the roles of parents and communities in U.S. public education.[67] Five years later, new federal regulations required each local education agency sponsoring Title I funded programs to establish a districtwide parent advisory council (PAC) to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. The provisions also mandated the local development of family engagement plans and provided strategies for building families' capacity for using effective practices to improve their children's academic achievement.[68] PACs are still mandated by federal regulations today.

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[62] Duckenfield, M., & Reynolds, B. (2013). School climate and dropout prevention. In T. Dary & T. Pickeral (Eds.), *School climate practices for implementation and sustainability* (School Climate Practice Brief No. 1, pp. 43–46). National School Climate Center.

[63] Mac Iver, M. A., Epstein, J. L., Sheldon, S. B., & Fonseca, E. (2015). Engaging families to support students' transition to high school: Evidence from the field. *The High School Journal, 99*(1), 27–45.

[64] Grace, R. A., & Harrington, S. Y. (2015). Our children, our schools: Seeking solutions for improving the climate in urban public schools. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership, 2*, 1–14.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

[67] U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. (1978). *Title 1 ESEA: How it works. A guide for parents & parent advisory councils*.

[68] Title I, Part A Parent Involvement Report, 2016-2017, Houston Independent School District.

PACs engage in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of school programs. They bring together parents, legal guardians, teachers, staff, administrators, and community stakeholders to leverage their skills and ideas to expand and strengthen academic programs. They can also link families to support and resources that enable their children to succeed in school. A PAC, through its elected officers, may advise policymakers and school administrators on matters related to the education of the students and the school.

PACs offer districts and schools a unique opportunity to strengthen ties between communities and schools by educating families about the educational programs available to their children; empowering families to have more of a voice in making decisions about their children's academics; and increasing communication between families, schools, and the community. PACs are particularly effective at empowering diverse communities, such as migrant families[69] and Spanish-speaking families.[70] PACs communicate with families in their community by disseminating information on issues of importance regarding their school. PAC communication may also be done through newsletters, telephone, video conference, email, and websites so that all parents have the opportunity for input. In addition, PACs work in a consultative role to advise districts and schools. In this role, PACs offer opportunities to foster family engagement and empower families to form partnerships with schools and other community stakeholders.

Considerations for Working with Parent Advisory Councils

Establishing and working with a PAC can create opportunities for schools to build meaningful connections with families and empower them as equal partners in their children's learning.[71] However, there are many considerations for districts and schools working with PACs. Parent groups have pointed out that participation in formal school activities may not be the preferred form of engagement among many families in underserved communities.[72] Accordingly, districts need to work hard and invest substantial time and resources to make PACs meaningful enough for parents and families to choose to participate.

District and school personnel may want to consider the following questions in order to prepare themselves to work effectively with PACs (the questions and considerations below are informed

[69] United States Office of Migrant Education. (2018). *Parent Advisory Councils*. Migrant Education Program. https://results.ed.gov/sdp-toolkit/article/f-1-parent-advisory-councils/state-and-local-mep-parent-advisory-councils-inclusion-in-sdp

[70] Alves, A. J. (2016). *The Parent Advisory Council for Spanish-speaking parents: A program evaluation* (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago).

[71] Jennings, W. B. (1989). How to organize successful parent advisory committees. *Educational Leadership, 47*(2), 42–45. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Parent+Advisory+Councils&pr=on&id=EJ397740

[72] Auerbach, S. (2007). Visioning parent engagement in urban schools. *Journal of School Leadership, 17*(6), 699–734.

by “lessons learned” from the experiences of district and school personnel and are not based on empirical research findings):

- **What can districts and schools learn from families participating in the PAC?** In partnerships with PACs, it is important for districts and schools to learn from families. This learning can shape how PACs are organized to co-design the processes and practices that can increase student achievement.
- **Is the PAC representative of cultural diversity in the student body?** A PAC that is made up only of families of academically high-performing students or of one race or ethnic group may fail to address issues that enable all students to succeed.
- **How can the cultural diversity of the PAC be increased?** Communication from districts and schools should address the establishment, membership, and operation of the PAC in languages and modes that are accessible to all families.
- **What training can be offered to the PAC?** Information, training, and technical assistance can help build the capacity of PAC members to effectively serve in their roles.
- **Are PAC meetings accessible?** Flexible scheduling, childcare, transportation, and translators are all important logistics to consider.
- **Does the PAC engage community members?** Inviting community members other than families to join the council provides different perspectives on increasing student achievement.
- **How can the PAC use data to inform its decisions?** Decisions should be informed by high-quality data. Gather and review data from a diverse set of families to identify strengths and challenges of existing family engagement strategies and to inform PAC decisions.[73] At least once a year, assess the PAC’s performance to determine if it is accomplishing its goals.[74]

Conclusion

As policymakers design educational programs to improve academic outcomes for students, many have recognized the potential of empowering families in their children’s education. District and school leaders are encouraged to facilitate partnerships with families to strengthen their capacity to support their children’s learning. This is especially true for families that are historically underserved, whose members identify as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous or other people of color, or whose members identify with under-represented religious beliefs, sexual

[73] California Department of Education. (2017). *Family engagement toolkit: Continuous improvement through an equity lens*. Sacramento, CA: Author.
[74] Jennings, W. B. (1989). How to organize successful parent advisory committees. *Educational Leadership, 47*(2), 42–45. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Parent+Advisory+Councils&pr=on&id=EJ397740

orientations, gender identities, or languages. There are a number of strategies at the individual, relational, and organizational levels that can increase empowerment among diverse families. PACs are another means for bringing together parents, legal guardians, teachers, staff, administrators, and community stakeholders to leverage their skills and ideas to expand and strengthen academic programs.

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