



Strategies to Engage Parents and Guardians at School Districts

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

District administrators and staff should focus parental engagement initiatives on positive relationship building. District administrators should listen to the needs of and work together with parents to cultivate partnerships to support student success.¹ Effective parental engagement strategies consistently involve parents' input and share decision-making power across the parent-district partnership. District administrators must demonstrate their commitment to parental engagement by establishing policies to promote positive, early communication about students' developments in the classroom and by including parents' perspectives, concerns, and expertise throughout the district's decision-making processes.

To meaningfully develop relationships between the district and parents, administrators should engage in culturally-responsive parent engagement strategies that embrace cultural differences in parent perspectives and support two-way communication and knowledge sharing between parents and administrators. Traditional parental involvement activities often do not account for power, language, and class differentiators between parent groups, and these activities were historically implemented with middle-class, two-parent households in mind.² District administrators should work to create an inclusive parent engagement strategy that accounts for and respects different perspectives and knowledge that parents bring to district-parent partnerships.

To promote an effective parental engagement framework, district leadership must increase administrators' and teachers' capacity for building relationships across differing family backgrounds in order to innovate parental engagement strategies. Many educators feel unprepared to foster relationships with families from other cultures or backgrounds and lack the support needed to cultivate true partnerships with underrepresented parents and families. District administrators should invest in professional development opportunities for district staff to learn about families in the district, their challenges, circumstances, and needs. Developing a deeper understanding of the communities the district serves helps staff develop deeper empathy for families and students.³

District administrators should disseminate parent surveys to learn about preferred engagement and communication strategies. District administrators should create a parent survey that includes questions related to communication from a child's school and district, preferred communication modalities, barriers to communication and engagement, quality of communications and engagement initiatives across the district, and prevalence of two-way communication between parents and educators. Administrators should consider creating a survey committee made of parents and community members to create and disseminate the survey to underscore the district's commitment to parental engagement.

1) Larry Ferlazzo, "Involvement or Engagement?" *Educational Leadership* vol. 68, no. 8 (May 2011) Pages 10-14.
2) Ann Ishimaru and Joe Lott, *Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project*, University of Washington College of Education, (2015), page 7
3) *Ibid*, page 47

2) Cultivating Meaningful Parental Engagement

Defining Engagement

Throughout this report, the term “parents” refers to any adult guardian of a child, including custodial grandparents, step-parents, foster parents, custodial siblings, and traditional parents.

Focus on Parental Engagement to Promote Trusting, Communicative Relationships with Parents

Meaningful, trusting parent-educator partnerships consistently emerge as top factors in long-term student success, including higher grade point averages and test scores and improved behavior in the classroom.⁴ Recent discussions of parental engagement with educational systems shift the conversation from parental involvement to parental engagement. While district administrators primarily lead parental involvement efforts, parental engagement initiatives involve listening to the needs of and working together with parents to cultivate partnerships to support student success.⁵

Parental involvement and parental engagement should not be misconstrued as mutually exclusive, and many district administrators strive to implement both involvement and engagement strategies.⁶ Administrators should recognize that parental engagement initiatives require deep investment in relationship building to move beyond basic involvement and promote true district-parent partnerships.

Defining Parental Involvement and Parental Engagement⁷



Parental involvement

Parental participation in activities **dictated and driven by school administrators and teachers**, like parent-teacher conferences, parenting skills training, or school-wide open houses. Parental involvement strategies can help administrators approach parental engagement but should not be the only strategies administrators employ.



Parental engagement

District personnel and parents co-develop activities and training that support parental capacity-building to maximize impact and cultivate meaningful parent-district partnerships. Parental engagement strategies consistently involve parents’ input and **share decision-making power** across the parent-district partnership.

Launch Parent Engagement Efforts with Positive, Proactive Communication

Many parents from underrepresented families seek to make meaningful connections with district personnel but do not feel as though they can develop these partnerships due to power dynamics and educators’ overreliance on deficit-focused conversations as engagement activities.⁸ Teachers and administrators too often approach parent communications with a deficit-oriented mindset (i.e., district personnel assume parents and students lack the skills to promote student success and therefore schools must “teach” parents how to support their students)⁹. These deficit-focused conversations often cause parents to not feel valued or respected, and they therefore

4) Larry Ferlazzo, “Involvement or Engagement?” *Educational Leadership* vol. 68, no. 8 (May 2011) Pages 10-14.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

7) Michigan Department of Education, “Collaborating for Success Parent Engagement Toolkit,” (2011), page 60

8) Ishimaru and Lott, *Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project*, page 8

9) Ibid, page 46

may not engage with the teacher or district.¹⁰ Deficit-focused conversations occur when teachers and administrators engage parents only when their child or the parent fails to behave or participate as expected by the district.

District administrators and staff should instead focus parental engagement initiatives on positive relationship building. Parent engagement strategies should aim to limit deficit-focused communications and increase strengths-based, proactive parental engagement strategies to support student learning. Parent-district partnerships can only be effective if both district staff and families understand how to cultivate meaningful relationships and receive opportunities to engage in relationship-building.¹¹

Characteristics of Positive Communication and Deficit-focused Conversations



Strengths-focused Communications

- Parents and teachers interact frequently about positive developments in their child's learning.
- Parents feel comfortable with sharing their perspectives and knowledge with district staff.
- Teachers work with parents to develop cooperative strategies to address poor student performance.
- District staff respect and acknowledge the unique knowledge and perspectives parents bring to partnerships.



Deficit-focused Conversations

- Teachers only contact parents when child misbehaves or performs poorly.
- Parents do not feel their perspectives and knowledge is respected in parent-district relationship.
- Teachers consistently tell the parent how to discipline their child instead of creating a plan together to address student behavior.
- District staff do not accommodate programming based on parents' needs or input.

District Administrators Should Lead Parent Engagement Initiatives to Embed Engagement into School Culture

Alexandria City Public Schools specifically included family engagement in their [2020 strategic plan](#) by dedicating a district goal to Family and Community Engagement.

District administrators can embed parent engagement initiatives into school culture by promoting inclusive engagement practices in all aspects of district decision-making, from district-wide decisions to classroom activities. Including parental engagement in the district's strategic plan helps position parental engagement as a shared responsibility for all district staff and can help funnel resources towards expanding parental engagement.¹²

District administrators must demonstrate their commitment to parental engagement by establishing policies to promote positive, early communication about students' developments in the classroom and by including parents' perspectives, concerns, and expertise throughout the district's decision-making processes.

¹⁰Ibid, page 39

¹¹Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner, *Partners In Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*, SEDL (2013), page 13

¹²Ishimaru and Lott, *Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project*, page 47

Promote Strengths-Based Parental Engagement Through Dual Capacity-Building Framework

The Department of Education’s **Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships** offers an approach for promoting positive, strengths-based parental engagement initiatives to create strong partnerships between parents and administrators. Often, parents and district staff lack the skills to facilitate and support parent-district partnerships to promote student success. This framework supports both district staff and parental capacity-building (i.e., opportunities to develop the skills, confidence, knowledge, and belief systems necessary to cultivate parent-district partnerships¹³) to support meaningful relationship building.

Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships¹⁴

The Challenge: Ineffective Family-School Partnerships

School staff and parents lack skill-building opportunities to understand how to cultivate district-parent partnerships.

Characteristics of Effective Partnership-Building Opportunities and Trainings

- Collaborative
- Interactive
- Linked to students’ learning
- Culturally-relevant
- Development versus service orientated
- Offered across the district to all staff and parents
- Integrated across the district’s grades, programs, and professional development
- Sustained with appropriate resources and infrastructure

Proposed Goals of Parental Engagement Policies and Programs

To increase staff and parents’ capacity in four areas:



Capabilities
(i.e., skills and knowledge)



Connections
(i.e., networks)



Cognition
(i.e., beliefs, values)



Confidence
(i.e., self-efficacy)

The Outcome of Dual Capacity-Building Initiatives for Staff and Parents: Effective Family-School Partnerships that Support Student Achievement and School Improvement

Outcomes for Staff

- Honor and recognize families’ knowledge
- Connect family engagement to student learning
- Create welcoming, inviting cultures

Outcomes for Families

- Parents can navigate multiple roles, including:
 - Supporters
 - Encouragers
 - Monitors
 - Advocates
 - Decision makers
 - Collaborators

13) Mapp and Kuttner, Partners In Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, page 5
14) Ibid, page 10

Culturally-Responsive Engagement

According to Grant and Ray (2016), culturally responsive parental engagement “involves practices that **respect and acknowledge** the cultural uniqueness, life experiences, and viewpoints of classroom families and draw on those experiences to enrich and energize the classroom curriculum and teaching activities, **leading to respectful partnerships** with students’ families.”

Develop Culturally-Responsive Engagement Strategies to Cultivate Meaningful Partnerships with Parents

Even as demographic shifts occur in school districts across the country, many administrators’ parental involvement efforts largely remain unchanged and do not reflect the increasingly diverse population of parents and families.¹⁵ Parent-teacher conferences, parent teacher associations (PTAs), parenting skills trainings, and other forms of traditional parental involvement initiatives often fail to recognize the unique experiences and leadership qualities of nontraditional (i.e., single parents and custodial grandparents) and/or diverse (i.e., parents from underrepresented backgrounds) parents and families. Traditional parental involvement activities frequently do not account for power, language, and class differentiators between parent groups, as these activities were historically implemented with middle-class, two-parent households in mind.¹⁶

Additionally, typical parental involvement initiatives can appear to minimize decision-making power and collective input from nontraditional and/or diverse parents, limiting parents’ ability to influence their child’s learning and school environment.¹⁷ Parents who do not feel like administrations seriously consider their opinions, input, and feedback often choose not to engage with teachers or the district at all. When nontraditional and/or diverse parents choose not to participate in traditional parental involvement activities, administrators often dismiss these parents as disengaged in their child’s learning and the district.¹⁸

However, research suggests that all parents, regardless of race and class background, care about their child’s education, and administrators should not assume parents are disengaged or disinterested.¹⁹ To meaningfully develop relationships between the district and parents, administrators should engage in culturally-responsive parent engagement strategies that embrace differences in parent perspectives and cultures by supporting two-way communication and knowledge sharing between parents and administrators.

The [Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education](#) from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory, and Department of Education’s [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) suggest that the first step towards meaningful parental engagement is to build a shared understanding of engagement through culturally-responsive practices. Developing a shared understanding of parental involvement remains an important step to cultivating meaningful partnerships and engagement strategies.

15) Mapp and Kuttner, *Partners In Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*, page 6

16) Ishimaru and Lott, *Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project*, page 7

17) Kathryn Torres, et.al., *Building Relationships, Bridging Cultures*, University of Washington College of Education (2015), page 1

18) Ishimaru and Lott, *Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project*, page 7

19) *Ibid*, page 8

Culturally-Responsive Engagement Strategies

<p>1 Promote a culture of learning, awareness, and sharing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators and teachers should prioritize listening to and observing the experiences and perspectives of families from diverse backgrounds to better understand cultural differences that may complicate relationship-building and engagement.²⁰ By inviting families to share their knowledge and perspectives, administrators promote a school environment that supports open communication and thoughtful listening to the input of others. 	<p>Recommended Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore cultural influences on perspectives of education and parental involvement through facilitated discussions with parents.²¹ Invite families to work with educators to define both parents' and educators' roles in engagement and opportunities for collaboration.²²
<p>2 Recognize and promote existing knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All parents and families bring knowledge and expertise in various areas. Recognizing the validity and value in families' knowledge in the school environment can be crucial to creating an inclusive and welcoming school environment. Administrators and teachers should learn what parents and families care about and encourage them to share their knowledge with others in the school community to demonstrate a commitment to including diverse perspectives in collective decision-making and engagement. 	<p>Recommended Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite families whose primary language is not English to teach or share their language and culture to others at the school. Ask culturally diverse families to help choose books for classrooms and libraries.²³ Collaborate with families to identify the unique family and community strengths that influence children's education.²⁴
<p>3 Build communicative relationships and be present in students' communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and administrators should discuss students' learning with parents frequently through conversations in the school environment and the community. Teachers and administrators should also consider attending events or visiting families' communities to better understand the environments from which families bring expertise and experience to the school setting.²⁵ 	<p>Recommended Practices²⁵</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers walk through student neighborhoods to discover families' environments. Teachers or administrators visit students' homes to meet with parents directly. District staff attend street fairs and events at community centers and organizations to learn more about their families' communities.
<p>4 Identify engagement strategies that work for families' cultures and perspectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with families to discuss perspectives on parental involvement in a child's education and how families from diverse backgrounds seek to be involved with the school and district. District administrators can also administer a communication preferences and family engagement survey to learn how families would like to participate in school events and their child's learning. District administrators should collaborate with families to create events or programs that suit cultural preferences.²⁷ 	<p>Recommended Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-create with families a school-based family event or a home-based family activity.²⁸ Collaborate with families to develop a communication preferences survey or focus group.

20) Jessica Lavorgna, "Culturally Responsive Family Engagement Practices," Education Development Center, accessed April 7, 2019. <http://td.edc.org/culturally-resp-family-engagement>

21) Garcia, et.al., "Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 1: Building an Understanding of Family and Community Engagement," National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory (September 2016), pages 12-33

22) Garcia, et.al., "Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 2: Building a Cultural Bridge," National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory (September 2016), pages 11-17

23) Lavorgna, "Culturally Responsive Family Engagement Practices."

24) Garcia, et.al., "Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 2: Building a Cultural Bridge," pages 7-17

25) Lavorgna, "Culturally Responsive Family Engagement Practices."

26) Ibid.

27) Lavorgna, "Culturally Responsive Family Engagement Practices."

28) Ibid.

5 Foster community through family networking






Recommended Practices²⁹

- Families from diverse backgrounds often lack connections to other families and administrators that promote a sense of school community and commitment to all students' achievement.
 - Providing opportunities for families to meet one another in a low-stakes setting helps parents establish connections across schools, grades, and cultures.³⁰
- Host networking events focused on relationship-building and knowledge-sharing on the district's campus or off-site at a local community organization to maximize networking potential.

Consider Aligning the District's Parental Engagement Initiatives with Research-Based Principles

The University of Washington's Equitable Parent-School Collaboration research proposes five principles of equitable collaboration, which promote inclusive and culturally-responsive parent engagement initiatives to improve student learning.³¹ Administrators can use these principles to guide parental engagement initiatives or to help develop a parental engagement framework specific to their district.

University of Washington's Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Principles of Equitable Collaboration³²

 Community capacity	Strengthen individual and collective capacity to improve schools.
 Authentic relationships	Build relationships among families and between families and educators.
 Families as experts	Center family experiences and stories as sources of knowledge, expertise, and solutions.
 Balanced power	Attend to power imbalances and plan for equal voice and influence.
 Family-driven goals	Begin with and prioritize family goals and concerns.

29) Lavorgna, "Culturally Responsive Family Engagement Practices."

30) Ibid.

31) "Equitable Parent-School Collaboration: Principles of Equitable Collaboration," University of Washington, accessed April 7, 2019, <http://www.education.uw.edu/epsc/>

32) Ibid.

Identify Cultural Brokers to Better Engage Underrepresented Families

Cultural brokers, or individuals familiar with two or more cultures present in school communities (e.g., traditionally white, middle class school culture and any other social or ethnic culture), can be crucial to further cultivating relationships with families from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds. Cultural brokers serve as bridges between two or more groups of families and administrators, introducing new families to the school's culture and facilitating consistent communication between families and the district.³³

Characteristics and Roles of Cultural Brokers³⁴

Who are cultural brokers?

- Parents, district staff, or community members
- Employed as staff, community-based personnel, or volunteers
- Deeply connected with their communities and a recognized leader amongst community members

What role cultural brokers play?

- Educate parents to support the district's goals for student success
- Connect parents to information, resources, and district staff
- Advocate for and with parents to promote change or mediate conflict between parents and the district

Administrators should identify parents, district staff, or community members that stand out as leaders in the community and maintain extensive community connections.³⁵ Administrators should leverage cultural brokers' ability to connect with their community to promote deeper engagement among parents of all backgrounds, but administrators should not consider cultural brokers as representatives of an entire parent population. Administrators should collaborate with cultural brokers to learn about the school community, identify effective engagement strategies, and drive school improvement efforts.³⁶

Establish Parent Engagement Committees to Understand Parents' Needs and Perspectives

Parent engagement committees can help district administrators connect with parents from varying backgrounds to learn about the distinct needs and perspectives of parents across the district. These committees can help ensure that families from across the district participate in identifying culturally-relevant engagement strategies. Parent engagement committees also help to integrate effective parental engagement strategies into all district initiatives and programs and can advocate for underrepresented families' needs in engagement programming.³⁷

Qualities of Effective Parent Engagement Committees



Parent members represent diverse backgrounds of families (e.g., low-income families, custodial grandparents, families from underrepresented cultures).



Administrators and teachers represent a variety of departments and programs (e.g., special education, English language learner services, counseling, teachers from various grades and schools).



Committees should meet often to craft parent engagement strategies, discuss the parent engagement policy, and offer recommendations to district leaders.

33) Torres, et.al, *Building Relationships, Bridging Cultures*

34) Ibid, page 2

35) Ibid, page 5

36) Ibid.

37) Nancy Bodenhausen and Margit Birge, *Family Engagement Toolkit: Continuous Improvement through an Equity Lens*, California Department of Education (2017), page 10

Establish a Community Committee to Guide District Engagement Policy Creation and Implementation

Administrators at **Arlington Public Schools** convened a Family and Community Engagement (FACE) working group of parents and community members to examine the district's parental engagement policy as described in [this memorandum](#). FACE, made of 17 parents and community members, met 10 times across 2013-2014 to develop a set of recommendations for the school board to consider regarding family engagement.

FACE worked to establish a shared understanding of family engagement, identified effective engagement policies at peer districts to shape their recommendations, and selected Department of Education's **Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships** framework for their parent engagement policy. FACE also committed to creating a three-year implementation plan for the new family engagement policy. You can learn more about FACE and the family engagement policy in [this report](#) from Arlington Public Schools.

Professional Development

Provide Professional Development for All District Personnel on Culturally-Responsive, Effective Parent Engagement Strategies

To promote an effective parental engagement framework, district leadership must increase administrators' and teachers' capacity for building relationships across differing family backgrounds. Traditional parental engagement initiatives tend to focus on providing information to parents and neglect to invite parents to share feedback and information with administrators and teachers to improve student learning, communication, and the school system.³⁸ Culturally-responsive engagement strategies account for, respect, and highlight different perspectives and knowledge that parents bring to district-parent partnerships.

Many educators feel unprepared to foster relationships with families from other cultures or backgrounds and lack the support needed to cultivate true partnerships with underrepresented parents and families. To change the parental engagement framework and culture within a school district, administrators must provide learning opportunities for teachers and staff centered around culturally-responsive parental engagement.

District administrators should invest in professional development opportunities for district staff to learn about families in the district, their challenges, circumstances, and needs. Developing a deeper understanding of the communities the district serves helps staff develop deeper empathy for families and students.³⁹

38) Ishimaru and Lott, *Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project*, page 39

39) Ibid, page 47

Effective Professional Development for Culturally-Responsive Parent Engagement Should Turn Educators into Learners³⁷

Administrators should prioritize professional development opportunities that turn educators into learners about families' and parents' needs and experiences. Researchers at **University of Washington** recommend administrators organize professional development that provides interactive opportunities to learn about the backgrounds of families in the district, through home visits, neighborhood walks, or equity and inclusion training. These professional development opportunities can help expand teachers' and administrators' understanding of issues in power, class, race, and culture that influence how families interact with the school system and their child's learning. Supporting educators' increased understanding of these issues can improve their efforts to build relationships with parents and families across the district.

Parental engagement initiatives focused on cultivating partnerships between parents and school personnel should include training opportunities on culturally-responsive engagement strategies that reinforce the validity of underrepresented families' backgrounds, knowledge, and perspectives. The process of becoming culturally-responsive as individuals and as an institution requires a commitment to self-reflection and practice in learning about and appreciating differing cultures.

Professional Development Topics to Support Culturally-Responsive Parent Engagement



Understanding the families the district serves by analyzing demographic data⁴⁰



Building teachers' and administrators' awareness of families' cultures to support culturally-responsive engagement⁴¹



Reflecting on personal beliefs and assumptions about underrepresented or nontraditional families and understanding the complexities of how culture influences beliefs and actions⁴²



Acknowledging cultural differences between educators and families and reinforcing the validity of different perspectives of parental engagement and students' learning⁴³



Reflecting on aspects of trust that influence family engagement and relationships with parents⁴⁴



Understanding existing district-wide communications strategies and identifying culturally-responsive communication strategies⁴⁵

Collecting and analyzing demographic data about families can help administrators understand the cultures, perspectives, and challenges prevalent throughout the district. The **University of Washington's Equitable Data Inquiry framework** promotes inclusive and culturally-responsive data collection practices that empower families to engage with administrators to support student success. Promoting an equitable data inquiry process helps to establish trust with families and demonstrate the district's commitment to meaningful family-educator partnerships.⁴³

40) Garcia, et.al, "Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 1: Building an Understanding of Family and Community Engagement," pages 15-18

41) Ibid, pages 20-25

42) Ibid, pages 8-14

43) Ibid, pages 27-33

44) Garcia, et.al., "Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 3: Building Trusting Relationships with Families and the Community through Effective Communication," National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory (September 2016), pages 8-11

45) Ibid, pages 12-15

46) Ann Ishimaru and Joe Lott, *User's Guide for Road Map Family Engagement Survey: Data Inquiry for Equitable Collaboration*, University of Washington College of Education, (2015), page 5-6

Offer District Personnel Professional Development for Engaging Custodial Grandparents

More grandparents assumed custodial care of their grandchildren in 2015 than in 2005 (2.9 million versus 2.5 million), in large part due to the opioid crisis around the nation.⁴⁷ Custodial grandparents, like other parents of diverse backgrounds, demonstrate complex and unique characteristics that force administrators to alter parental engagement strategies to maximize relationship building for student success.

Administrators and teachers may hold biases and misconceptions about custodial grandparents that inhibit the effective cultivation of district-family relationships. Social norms create biases and stereotypes about custodial grandparents and nontraditional family structures that may cause district personnel to view grandparents as cognitively and physically impaired, uncommunicative or combative, and incompetent.⁴⁸ To dismantle stereotypes and address biases, administrators should create professional development opportunities that specifically address the complexities of nontraditional households, parenting as a grandparent, and student and grandparent engagement with the school system.

Dolbin-MacNab (2015) suggests that professionals who interact with custodial grandparents often should critically reflect on how they view and work with custodial grandparents, what systems or biases reduce the effectiveness of their work, and how they can better serve custodial grandparents.

Example Critical Self-Reflection Questions for School Personnel that Work with Custodial Grandparents⁴⁹

- 1** Why do grandparents become guardians of their grandchildren?
 - To what extent are grandparents responsible for their situations?
 - What experiences in your life contributes to these views?
 - How might you be intentionally or unintentionally communicating these views to guardian grandparents and students?
- 2** What strengths do guardian grandparents possess?
 - In what ways do you facilitate (or block) guardian grandparents from recognizing and utilizing their strengths?
- 3** What challenges do nontraditional families experience, and how do those challenges develop?
 - How are your views of these challenges informed by your social identity or larger social narratives?
 - How do you perpetuate or combat these challenges in district-family relationships and district policies?
- 4** What are your opinions about grandparents' parenting skills?
 - What experiences in your life contributes to these opinions?
- 5** What biases or blind spots do you have in relation to guardian grandparents and their students?
 - What biases do you recognize in larger social structures and norms?
 - How do your views of guardian grandparents reflect issues of intersectionality and power differentials?

47) Teresa Wiltz, "Why More Grandparents are Raising Children," Pew Charitable Trusts, last modified November 2, 2016, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2016/11/02/why-more-grandparents-are-raising-children>

48) Megan Dolbin-MacNab, "Critical Self-Reflection Questions for Professionals Who Work with Grandfamilies," *GrandFamilies* 2, no. 1, article 6 (2015), page 140

49) *Ibid*, pages 146-149

Administrators should create a series of professional development and learning opportunities around these self-reflection questions for all district personnel. A better understanding of personal views and biases about custodial grandparents can reduce friction between grandparents and district personnel and ultimately promote engagement and student success.

Ensure Professional Development Is Interactive and Skills-Based to Promote Engagement

To create relevant and impactful professional learning opportunities related to effective parent and family engagement, administrators should consider creating interactive and skill-oriented professional development. Informative professional learning can help staff establish baseline knowledge about a topic and should be used to introduce new strategies and topics.

However, teachers and staff will likely struggle to make thorough changes to their parent engagement practices without concrete strategies that they can practice and enact with confidence. Through technology, partnerships, and creative approaches, district administrators can create engaging professional development opportunities on effective parent engagement strategies for teachers and staff.

Interactive and Engaging Professional Development Strategies

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Collaborative inquiry | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Panel discussions | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Book studies |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Case studies | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Self-reflection and discussion | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participative online training |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Simulations | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Off-site workshops | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Round tables |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Group dialogue and discussion | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Peer-led workshops | |

3) Parent Engagement and Communication Preferences Surveys

Survey Administration

Disseminate Survey to Learn About Parent Preferences

District administrators should disseminate parent surveys to learn about preferred engagement and communication strategies. District administrators typically include questions about communication preferences in annual parent engagement and demographic surveys. Some administrators, however, distribute a separate communication preferences survey to parents. Regardless, administrators either design a survey in-house or hire an outside survey vendor to gather data on communication preferences. Surveys should be confidential, comprehensive, and accessible to all families (e.g., translated into primary languages of families, available through web-based and mobile platforms).

Examples of Parent Engagement and Communication Preferences Survey Options

Survey Designed and Administered In-House	
Example Platform Options	Google Forms, Survey Monkey , Qualtrics
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total control over survey questions, dissemination, and analytics • Less costly than vendor-designed and administered surveys • Can be quick to re-administer when administrators desire up-to-date data
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time-consuming and challenging for administrators to create, disseminate, and analyze surveys • Difficulty maintaining confidentiality of survey results
Vendor Designed and Administered Survey	
Example Vendor Options	Panorama Education , National School Public Relations Association’s (NSPRA) Communication Review , School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCoPE) , K12 Insight
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-designed surveys tailored to the needs of the district • Consultant support in creating, disseminating, and analyzing surveys • Often provides comprehensive data and analysis through final reports and data visualization • Can be faster to implement than in-house surveys due to consultant support throughout the process • Easy to maintain confidentiality of survey results
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be costly to districts to administer surveys, especially recurring surveys • May exclude topics or questions of interest to administrators

Surveys on communication preferences typically include questions related to communication from a child’s school and district, preferred communication modalities, barriers to communication, quality of communications across the district, and prevalence of two-way communication between parents and educators. Most survey vendors allow administrators to choose types of questions or topics to include in the survey based on the district’s goals.

Parent Engagement and Communication Preferences Topics from Example Surveys

University of Washington's Family Engagement Survey and Family-Education Communication Indicators⁵⁰

- Parent demographics
- Parent and family knowledge
- School climate, parental influence and decision-making
- Current ways teachers and administrators contact parents
- Current ways teachers and administrators contact parents
- Preferred contact methods
- Language spoken in the home
- Accommodations made by the district to address language differences
- Teacher/parent relationship perceptions

Wayne County Public Schools' Self-Designed Parent Involvement Survey⁵¹

- Child's school and grade level
- Parent and household demographics
- Perceptions of parent/teacher meetings
- Participation and effectiveness of parenting skills workshops
- Effectiveness of language accommodations
- Effectiveness of district communications
- Preferred communication modalities
- Frequency of district and teacher communication
- Participation in parent involvement opportunities
- Perception of community education programs

School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCoPE)⁵²

- Parent and student demographics
- Effectiveness and frequency of teacher, school, and district communications
- Quality of communication related to student learning (e.g., homework, student conduct policies, district initiatives)
- Perception of two-way communication and personalized communication

Most district leaders administer surveys online through websites or mobile applications. Administrators should provide ample communication about the purpose of the survey, the importance of parents' participation in the survey, and how the results will be analyzed and communicated back to the community.

Considerations for Administering and Disseminating Surveys

- Anticipate a low overall response rate, so target a broad audience to gather representative data.
- Remember that survey respondents are a self-selected group within your target audience.
- Aim to use multiple choice or ranking formats for easy analysis. Not every respondent responds in the format you anticipate, which makes coding open response results difficult.
- Clearly state the survey's purpose and length, along with any incentives for parents to take the survey, in the email or social media post that contains the survey link.
- Follow-up to promote completion with emails, phone calls, and social media posts two weeks and one week prior to survey closure.

50) Ishimaru and Lott, *User's Guide for Road Map Family Engagement Survey: Data Inquiry for Equitable Collaboration*, pages 20-26

51) Wayne County Public Schools, "Parent Involvement Survey", accessed April, 2019. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/JHWN57P>

52) "Summary Report of SCoPe Survey Results: Worcester County Public Schools," SCoPE, 2018.

http://worcesterk12.org/departments/public_relations_special_programs/surveys/communications_survey

Promoting Survey Completion

Use Cultural Brokers and Parent Leaders to Reach Families from All Backgrounds

In order to reach as many parents as possible during the data collection phase of parental engagement and communication preferences surveys, administrators should employ cultural brokers and other parent leaders to reach parents of all backgrounds. Cultural brokers can be crucial proponents of parent engagement and communication preferences surveys, as they can describe the survey details and importance of parents' feedback to hesitant families who may distrust surveys or district administrators. Cultural brokers and other parent leaders can use their extensive networks to reach parents who typically do not engage with the district to increase representative response rates.⁵³

Develop a Survey Committee or Dissemination Team to Create Outreach Plan

Cultural brokers and parent leaders should be part of a larger survey committee charged with promoting completion of the engagement or communication survey to parents through the district. Made of teachers, administrators, parents, and students, the survey committee should develop communication strategies and outreach plans to reach as many parents from as many backgrounds as possible.⁵⁴

Outreach Strategies to Promote Survey Completion⁵⁵



Host a survey completion event on school grounds with parent leaders and cultural brokers present to address parents' concerns and challenges when completing the survey.



Integrate survey completion opportunities into existing parent programming, like parent-teacher conferences and PTA meetings.



Disseminate information about the survey in families' communities, including posting flyers or hosting information sessions at community-based organizations, housing developments, and libraries.



Follow-up with parents with personal calls and emails from principals, district administrators, PTA leaders, or cultural brokers.

⁵³Ishimaru and Lott, *User's Guide for Road Map Family Engagement Survey: Data Inquiry for Equitable Collaboration*, page 11

⁵⁴"2019 NYC School Survey: How to Increase Family Engagement with the Survey," New York City Department of Education (2019), page 1

⁵⁵Ibid, page 2

4) District-Wide Communications Plans

Structure and Dissemination

Create an Effective District Communications Plan to Promote Parental Engagement

Public school districts across the U.S. increasingly need a strategy to better communicate with their stakeholders, including staff, teachers, parents, students, and the wider community. Providing more information to parents about events and activities at their child's school and better signaling the impacts of district-wide initiatives on the community are both equally important elements of developing a district's reputation, image, and reliability in the eyes of the public and parents.

The goal of a formal communications plan is to ensure cohesive, effective messaging from all parts of the district to community stakeholders. EAB's toolkit [Creating an Effective District Communications Plan](#) helps districts identify and align communication goals with institutional priorities. The toolkit then maps these goals to various communication channels, serving as the foundation for a formal communications strategic plan.

At **Colton School District**, administrators included "guiding principles" that serve as a framework for the district's [2017 – 2019 communication plan](#). The three core principles—truthfulness, transparency, and continuous improvement—capture the essence of effective communications plans. The [communication plan](#) at **Manheim Township School District** includes statistics and preferences from a recent parent engagement and communication preferences survey to demonstrate administrators' commitment to addressing parents' feedback.

Structure and Topics of District Communications Plans⁵⁶

- 1 District's Mission Statement
- 2 District-Wide Strategic Priorities and Goals
- 3 Target Audiences
- 4 Communication Channels and Frequency
- 5 Communication Goals
- 6 Strategies to Meet Communication Goals (Implementation Plans)
- 7 Evaluation and Measurement of Goals

Widely Share the Completed Plan to Demonstrate Commitment to Improved Communications

Some school districts, like [Manheim Township School District](#) and [Grain Valley Schools](#), integrate their district communication plan into their website by creating a separate webpage for the plan. Integrating the communication plan into the website helps maintain clarity and accountability for the implementation of the plan, as all allows families to easily access the plan. Administrators should share the district-wide communication plan to parents through newsletters, school board meetings, PTA meetings, and student take-home flyers.

56) Brenham Independent School District, *Communications Plan: 2017-2018*, accessed April 7, 2019. Hanover School District, *Communications Plan: 2017-2022*, accessed April 7, 2019.

6) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at the member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

1. What literature exists on how districts engage nontraditional parents?
2. According to existing literature, how can teachers foster meaningful relationships with parents and guardians of cultures different than their own?
3. What are evidence-supported best practices to create and disseminate parent engagement surveys to gauge parents' communication preferences?
 - a. What is the best structure for parent surveys?
 - b. How do districts promote completion of the survey?
4. According to existing literature, what are best practices to create district-wide communications plans?
 - a. How do districts structure their communication plan?
 - b. How is the plan disseminated to the school community?
 - c. What role does the school community play in the development of the communication plan?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

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