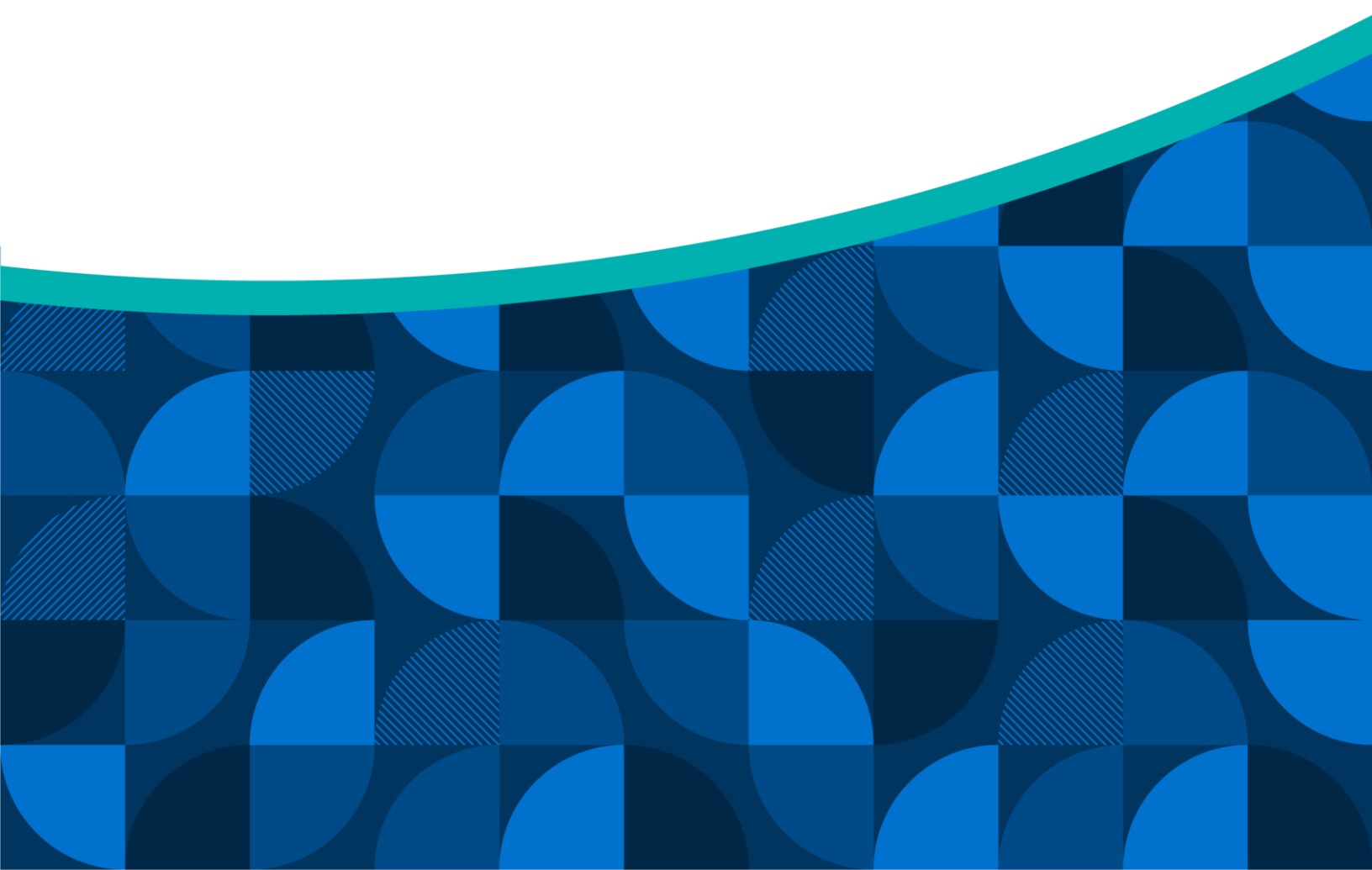




DISTRICT LEADERSHIP FORUM

# **Engaging Hard-to-Reach Families: Strategies for the Post-Pandemic Era**

December 2023



# District Leadership Forum

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# Research Methodology

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Our research team spent eight weeks conducting research interviews with family engagement specialists across the country, and reviewing the literature regarding parent engagement best practices. The goal of this report is to provide research around the most effective ways of engaging “hard-to-reach” parents (e.g., parents of English language learners (ELLs), low-income families), and how school districts can effectively implement successful parent and family engagement initiatives. Our research team uses the term “family engagement” rather than “parent engagement” throughout this report, as our team found this expression most accurately conveys the relationship between a family system (parents, guardians, etc.), a student, and an educational institution. If you have any questions about the research itself or our methodology, please reach out to your dedicated advisor.

# Executive Summary

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## Key Observations

Based on our research, we summarize our key observations below:

**During the COVID 19 pandemic, families who already had inadequate access to technology fell even more behind while districts systems adapted to increased use of technology, making hard-to-reach families even harder to reach.** The pandemic, subsequent economic downturns, and the rise of digital learning all in such a short span of time made it more difficult for some families (including low-income families and rural families, among others) to keep up with the new tech changes districts were implementing alongside virtual learning. As such, these families, who were often already hard-to-reach, became less familiar with the district systems and processes meant to keep them up-to-date with student progress.

**Both profiled districts base their family engagement efforts on culturally relevant content tailored specifically for their local community.** District A follows the six types of family engagement created by Dr. Joyce Epstein as the foundation for their family engagement center. This framework aims to comprehensively address students' needs both at home and within the community. To achieve this, District A offers a range of services including parenting classes, assistance with basic needs such as clothing and food, and various academic and mental health support services. District B uses a similar approach to family engagement, prioritizing cultural responsiveness in all aspects of their operations. For instance, they keep cultural needs of diverse students in the district top of mind when initiating and completing various community outreach initiatives and family engagement activities. By integrating family engagement across all facets of a student's life, District A and District B underscore the benefits of culturally relevant engagement practices.

**Consistency is key when developing a family engagement initiative and fostering familial involvement in student progress.** Our contacts at District B employ a steadfast approach to family engagement which instills confidence and trust among families, highlighting the district's commitment to sustained engagement. When families perceive a consistent effort from teachers and the administration, it reinforces the fact that the family's involvement is an integral aspect of the overall educational experience. This sense of continuity fosters a positive relationship between families and administrators, creating a foundation of trust and reliability. Moreover, a consistent approach in providing opportunities for involvement underscores the district's dedication to nurturing a collaborative environment where families are active partners in their child's progress.

**Creating a welcoming environment for families at the classroom level is the foundation of successful family engagement programs.** The core belief of our contacts at District B is that if families feel welcome and experience consistent follow-through from administrators and teachers, it contributes to fostering a school-wide culture of engagement. Professional development plays a pivotal role in empowering educators to understand and implement effective family engagement strategies. Our contacts at District B emphasize the importance of making professional development manageable and positive for teachers, through encouraging simple actions like positive phone calls to parents. The overall goal is to establish a culture and leadership style that expects and encourages robust family engagement throughout the entire school community.

# 1. Understanding the State of Family Engagement

## Family Engagement is Crucial to Student Success

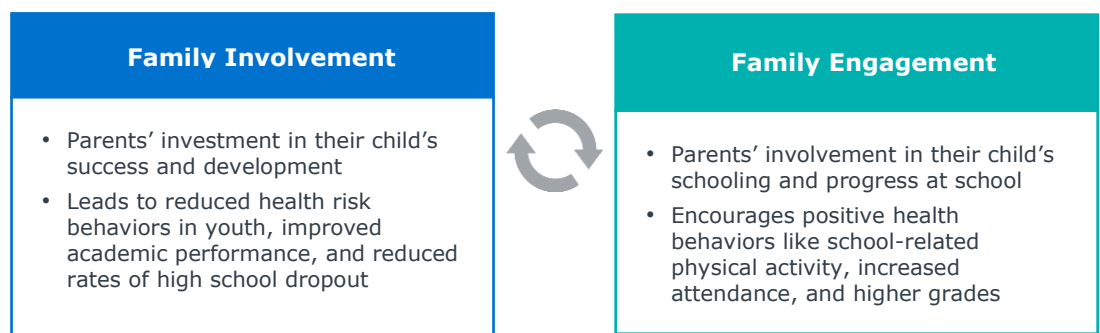
### Successful Family Engagement Requires a Baseline of Familial Involvement

Familial involvement and family engagement, while often used synonymously, are not the same. Familial involvement is a broad, multidimensional term that refers to parental attitudes, expectations, and behaviors related to their child's learning and healthy development.<sup>1</sup> It describes the investment the parent, guardian, or family member has directly put into their child success (e.g., helping a child with homework, asking about their day, providing them with extracurricular activities).

Family engagement, on the other hand, is conducted at the district level, and involves relationship-building with students' parents and families. Family involvement is a parent-child relationship that effects students positively at school, whereas family engagement is spearheaded by districts, and may include services or programs to build a closer relationship with parents, resulting in better student outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

A comprehensive review of the literature on family engagement in early childhood affirms the positive effects of how family involvement and family engagement reinforce one another.<sup>3</sup> Familial involvement is associated with yielding positive benefits such as improved academic performance and reduced rates of high school dropout.<sup>4</sup> Active familial involvement is also linked to reduced health risk behaviors in youth, including smoking, drinking, early pregnancy, sexual activity, and weapon-carrying. Moreover, family engagement encourages positive health behaviors like school-related physical activity, increased attendance, and higher grades.<sup>5</sup>

### Family Engagement and Family Involvement Reinforce Each Other



### Both Family Involvement and Engagement are Crucial Aspects of Children's Academic Performance and Overall Development

Family engagement connects two important parts of a child's early development: home and school. Parents function as a bridge between these two main worlds and provide critical support to children's learning and development. For instance, if

1) <sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia of Social Work. Oxford University Press eBooks, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001.0001>.  
2) <sup>2</sup> "Parent Engagement in Schools," Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018, [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent\\_engagement.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent_engagement.htm).  
3) <sup>3</sup> Van Voorhis Frances L, "The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8: A Focus on Literacy and Math Achievement Outcomes and Social-Emotional Skills," n.d., <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED545474>.  
4) <sup>4</sup> Karen Bogenschneider, Carol Johnson, and University of Wisconsin-Madison, "Family Involvement in Education: How Important Is It? What Can Legislators Do?," *Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars*, February 2004.  
5) <sup>5</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Parental Involvement in Your Child's Education," December 16, 2022, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/parental-involvement-is-key-to-student-success-research-shows>.

parents know what the teacher wants their child to learn, they might incorporate similar lessons at home.<sup>6</sup> Parents who apply the same rules from school at home reinforce student learning and positive behavior. An extensive body of research shows that parental involvement at home helps children do better in school.

Children tend to do better in school when their parents are more involved compared to those whose parents are less engaged. Research suggests that interactions between parents and children, particularly practices like stimulating and responsive parenting, play a significant role in a child's academic development. Examining parenting behaviors, like family engagement, and grasping their influence on academic performance can inform the development of programs aimed at improving a child's academic success.<sup>7</sup>

## **Family Engagement with their Children's School Fosters a Continuous Environment of Learning at Home**

Research has demonstrated that meaningful family engagement has positive effects on youth outcomes across various areas. While familial involvement in education has been extensively studied, recent attention has shifted to examining involvement in other systems that serve children and youth. Studies highlight the crucial roles families can play in supporting their children's development and success across diverse backgrounds.

Family engagement in schools correlates with positive student outcomes, including enhanced academic achievement, reduced disciplinary issues, improved relationships between parents, teachers, and students, and a better school environment.<sup>8</sup> Family engagement also contributes to increased emotional and behavioral stability in children and youth.<sup>9</sup> While this report focuses on family engagement and students' academic progress, the importance of family engagement for social-emotional development and behavioral improvement is closely tied to academic outcomes.

## **Elevating Family Engagement: Federal Policy's Shift from Standardized Testing to Prioritizing Parental Involvement in Student Progress**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 was a bipartisan effort to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)'s longstanding commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for all students.<sup>10</sup> ESEA is seen as a precursor to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, which had a large role in highlighting the educational needs students regardless race, income, zip code, disability, home language, or background. However, the use of standardized testing to measure these outcomes became controversial over time.

The 2015 signing of the ESSA signaled to districts that the priority for the new administration went beyond standardized testing, and instead focused on how to engage families in student progress. The law emphasized the importance of providing essential information to educators, families, students, and communities through annual statewide assessments, and measuring progress toward these high standards.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the law maintained an expectation of accountability and

6) <sup>6</sup> Nermeen E. El Nokali, Heather J. Bachman, and Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal, "Parent Involvement and Children's Academic and Social Development in Elementary School," *Child Development* 81, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 988–1005, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01447.x>.

7) <sup>7</sup> David R. Topor et al., "Parent Involvement and Student Academic Performance: A Multiple Mediation Analysis," *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 38, no. 3 (June 30, 2010): 183–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2010.486297>.

8) <sup>8</sup> "Impact of Family Engagement | Youth.Gov," n.d., <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/impact-family-engagement>.

9) <sup>9</sup> Yan Wang et al., "The Effect of Two Elementary School-Based Prevention Interventions on Being Offered Tobacco and the Transition to Smoking," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 120, no. 1–3 (January 1, 2012): 202–8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2011.07.022>.

10) <sup>10</sup> "Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) | U.S. Department of Education," n.d., <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>.

11) <sup>11</sup> Andrew M.I. Lee JD, "What Is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?," *Understood*, November 22, 2023, <https://www.understood.org/articles/every-student-succeeds-act-essa-what-you-need-to-know>.

action to bring about positive change in the lowest-performing schools, particularly those where groups of students were not progressing, and graduation rates were consistently low. ESSA also provided grants and incentives to institutions who submitted data showing how district programming was linked to improved student outcomes. Many districts used those grants to help fund parent and family engagement initiatives.

## Impact of COVID-19 on Family Engagement

### The COVID-19 Pandemic Made Communicating with Hard-to-Reach Parents Even More Difficult

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant and lasting disruptions to K-12 education. In the absence of traditional schooling due to closures, families found themselves taking on a new role in the education of their children. Formerly educational collaborators with schools, families transitioned to assuming the roles of teachers and learning facilitators. Case studies on these evolving relationships underscored the diverse needs and challenges faced, including economic disparities, limited internet access, insufficient digital skills, and the inability of families to provide curriculum support.<sup>12</sup> Schools were forced to establish dual relationships with families, who now functioned as proxy teachers, to sustain the teaching-learning processes. Simultaneously, families had to strengthen internal relationships with their children to prevent severe learning loss.

The transition to virtual learning created stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, blurring the lines between homes and educational institutions. Students' motivation to study was further challenged by the dual role of parents as teachers and the need to rapidly acquire technological skills for remote education.<sup>13</sup> As learning at home became increasingly important, and supporting children's learning became the responsibility of parents at a much higher rate, equity gaps between parents with and without time, formal schooling, and resources became increasingly clear.<sup>14</sup>

For more information on why parents see less value in in-person attendance than before the pandemic, see EAB's [Supporting Chronically Absent Students in Returning to School](#) presentation.

Our contacts at District B discussed the findings of a pre-COVID survey conducted in 2019, identifying flyers, text messaging, and face-to-face communication as the most effective ways to engage with families.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the linguistic diversity in their district, with more than half of the population not speaking English as their first language, our contacts found face-to-face communication using interpretation services or native speakers especially important to avoid potential misinterpretation of translated documents.

The post-COVID era has introduced both additional benefits and drawbacks to family engagement. The drawbacks include an increase in the number of academically struggling students, schools having to deliver reports of poor grades and low attendance, and a noticeable decline in parental investment in ensuring their children regularly attend school. However, for families who prior to the pandemic had adequate access to technology and related resources, the pandemic brought forth certain benefits, as many of these parents and students are now more adept with online tools than ever before, creating a potential avenue for enhanced

12) José Juan Carrión-Martínez et al., "Family and School Relationship during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 11710 (November 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111710>.

13) "Overcoming COVID-19 Learning Loss," *Education Week*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/overcoming-covid-19-learning-loss/2020/08>.

14) UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, "Parental Engagement in Children's Learning: Insights for Remote Learning Response during COVID-19," UNICEF-IRC, n.d., <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1091-parental-engagement-in-childrens-learning.html>.

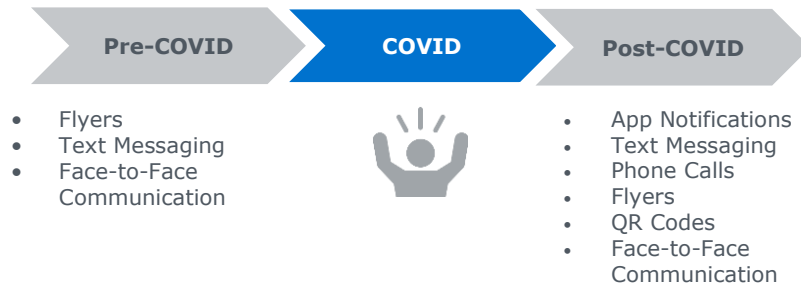
15) EAB interviews and Analysis



communication and collaboration between schools and these parents in the post-COVID educational landscape.<sup>16</sup>

## Most Effective Ways to Engage with Families Pre- and Post-COVID

From our contacts at District B



## Avoiding Barriers to Family Engagement

### Understand District Demographics to Provide Culturally Responsive Engagement

To truly provide equitable family engagement resources to all parents in your district, administrators need to become familiar with the demographics, cultures, and traditions of families who make up the district. Equitable engagement is the key to creating lasting relationships with students' families. Our contacts at District B and District A both discussed the impact of family engagement on student academic outcomes, emphasizing the role of building and sustaining genuine relationships with district families.<sup>17</sup>

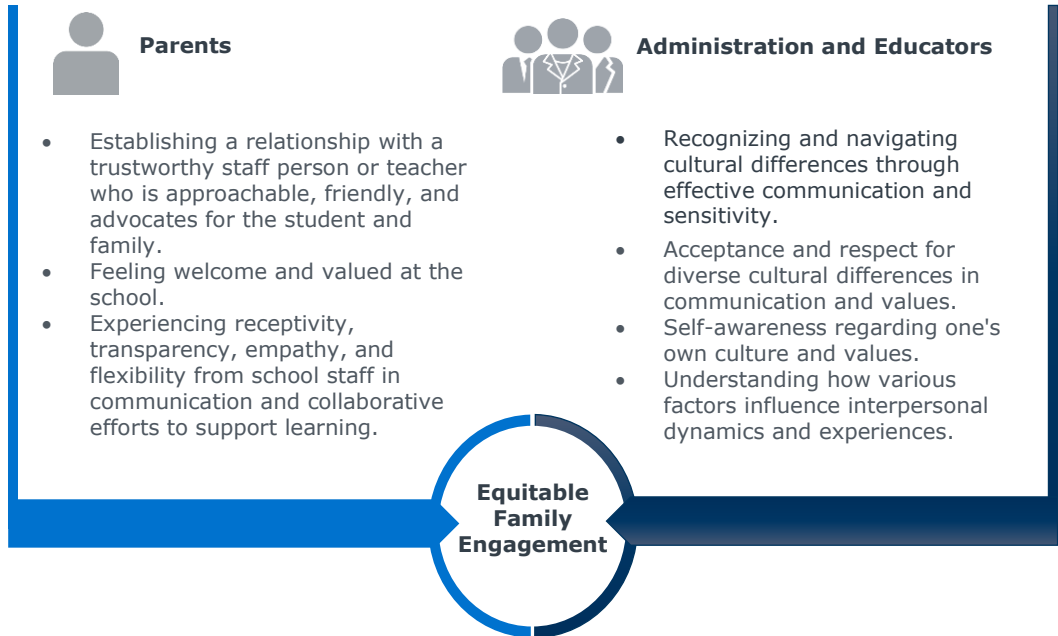
Equitable family engagement involves practices and approaches that align with the values of diverse families, coupled with systems supporting tailored assistance, adaptable engagement options, and collaboration between families and schools. Many schools prioritize equitable family engagement with a special focus on minority, disabled, immigrant, or refugee families, as these families are often harder to reach through traditional family engagement methods.<sup>18</sup>

16) <sup>16</sup> Eliana Maria Osorio-Saez, Nurullah Eryilmaz, and Andrés Sandoval-Hernández, "Parents' Acceptance of Educational Technology: Lessons from around the World," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (August 30, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.719430>.

17) <sup>17</sup> EAB Interviews and Analysis

18) <sup>18</sup> Catherine Jacques and Alma Villegas, "Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement," *State Support Network* (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), December 2018).

## Family vs. Administration Expectations for Equitable Family Engagement



Exploring the barriers to family engagement can help change the way districts think about parent participation in schools.<sup>19</sup> To better understand equitable family engagement, researchers from the Brookings Institution compiled information from discussions with both families and school staff to understand how they perceive barriers to family involvement and what changes could improve engagement. They identified five common themes:<sup>20</sup>

### How Successful Family Engagement Opportunities Avoid Common Engagement Barriers

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Create a space for involvement</li> <li>✓ Enhance communication between parents and administrators</li> <li>✓ Make families feel welcome at the school</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Are mindful and accommodating of parents' schedules</li> <li>✓ Assist in shifting from mere involvement to more comprehensive engagement</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

While many parents exert commendable efforts to participate in school functions and support educators working with their children, certain parents face obstacles (both real and perceived) to engagement in school-related activities. The literature suggests that these barriers include language difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, financial and work-related constraints, an unwelcoming atmosphere, judgmental attitudes, inconvenient scheduling, and a shortage of resources in terms of time and money.<sup>21</sup>

Creating a culture of high expectations is one of the most impactful steps both parents and schools can take to close the [college access gap](#).

Families actively involved in their children's education typically have higher expectations, encourage their children to participate in activities, and observe improved academic performance in the school environment. To ensure as many students receive these benefits as possible, educators must be aware of the family

19) <sup>19</sup> "Identifying Barriers: Creating Solutions to Improve Family Engagement," *School Community Journal* 26, no. 2 (2016).  
 20) <sup>20</sup> Adam Barton, Mahsa Ershadi, and Rebecca Winthrop, "Understanding the Connection Between Family School Engagement and Education System Transformation: A Review of Concepts and Evidence," *Www.Brookings.Edu/Familyengagement*, 2021, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Understanding\\_The\\_Connection\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Understanding_The_Connection_FINAL.pdf).  
 21) <sup>21</sup> University of Wisconsin-Stout and Lindsay J. Horvatin, "Perceived Barriers to Parental Involvement in Schools," *School Counseling*, 2011.

engagement barriers that affect their district, whether technical difficulties, language barriers, or other issues.

## Consider Lack of Access to Technology and Tailor Outreach to Parents Accordingly

Adapting to the digital age, online grading systems are now part of nearly every district's repertoire. These platforms offer a convenient and accessible way for parents to obtain information about their students. Many of these programs have evolved since their initial adoption, and now include more advanced features (e.g., teachers being able to share class-discussion notes and school policy updates).<sup>22</sup> Despite providing parents with a comprehensive view of their child's performance, accessibility can still prove to be an issue for some underprivileged families.

Research has confirmed the concerns that the 2020 school closures have disproportionately affected the most disadvantaged children, exacerbating their already limited access to technology, and therefore, continuous learning opportunities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 weekly Household Pulse Survey, approximately 1 in 10 of the poorest children in the U.S. face challenges in accessing technology for learning.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, 12.2 percent of respondents from households earning less than \$25,000 a year reported that a digital device was rarely or never available for a child to use for learning, and 9.8 percent expressed the same regarding internet access. The overwhelming data on equity gaps as they relate to technology and educational resources highlights the urgent need to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their socio-economic status.<sup>24</sup>

Our contacts at District B cite that they use PowerSchool as their parent portal of choice and that they have purchased the software in English as well as Spanish. Our contacts explain that to use PowerSchool effectively, parents need an accessible e-mail address to create an account and have access to their students' grades. Many lower income ELL and minority families do not necessarily have access to technology in the form of a computer, making PowerSchool more difficult to use.

To combat this, our contacts at District B use alternative software in addition to PowerSchool to provide text alerts directly to parents' phones.<sup>25</sup> They also rely on multiple routes when it comes to notifying parents about student progress, such as phone calls, waiting outside to speak with a parent at school dismissal, text messages, and phone alerts through the Parent Square app (which we expand on in later sections).

In today's digital era, educators should remain cognizant of discrepancies in access to technology. Our contacts at District B and District A both suggested that, when attempting parent outreach across diverse communities, educators remain mindful of gaps in tech availability and familiarity. Many parents might not have a personal or household computer and only have access to a smartphone. To that end, receiving phone calls, text messages, and/or app alerts from a school family engagement app would be an effective way to communicate with certain hard-to-reach parents.

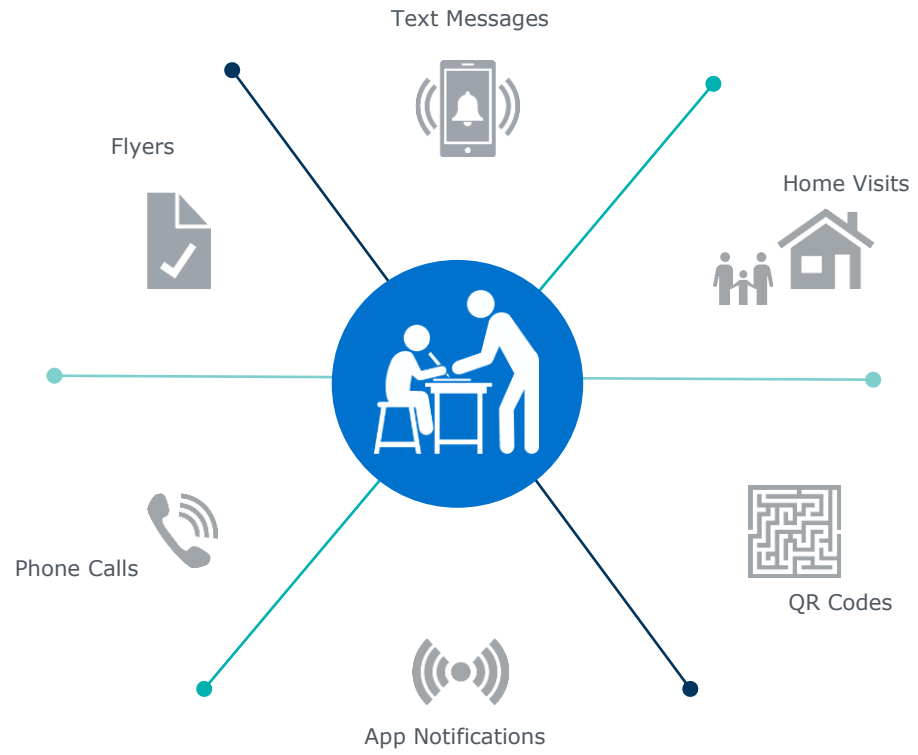
22) Sarah Chaves, "Parent Diplomacy Is Overwhelming Teachers," *The Atlantic*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/09/teacher-parent-relationships-diplomacy-discussions/675362/>.

23) "Unequally Disconnected: Access to Online Learning in the US | Brookings," Brookings Institution, March 9, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unequally-disconnected-access-to-online-learning-in-the-us/>.

24) Alyvia Bruce, "Bridging the Technological Divide in Education," *Harvard Political Review*, November 2020, <https://harvardpolitics.com/education-tech-gaps/>.

25) EAB Interviews and Analysis

## Effective Methods of Family Engagement Outreach



## 2. Conducting Comprehensive Parent Outreach

### The Importance of Meeting Parents Halfway

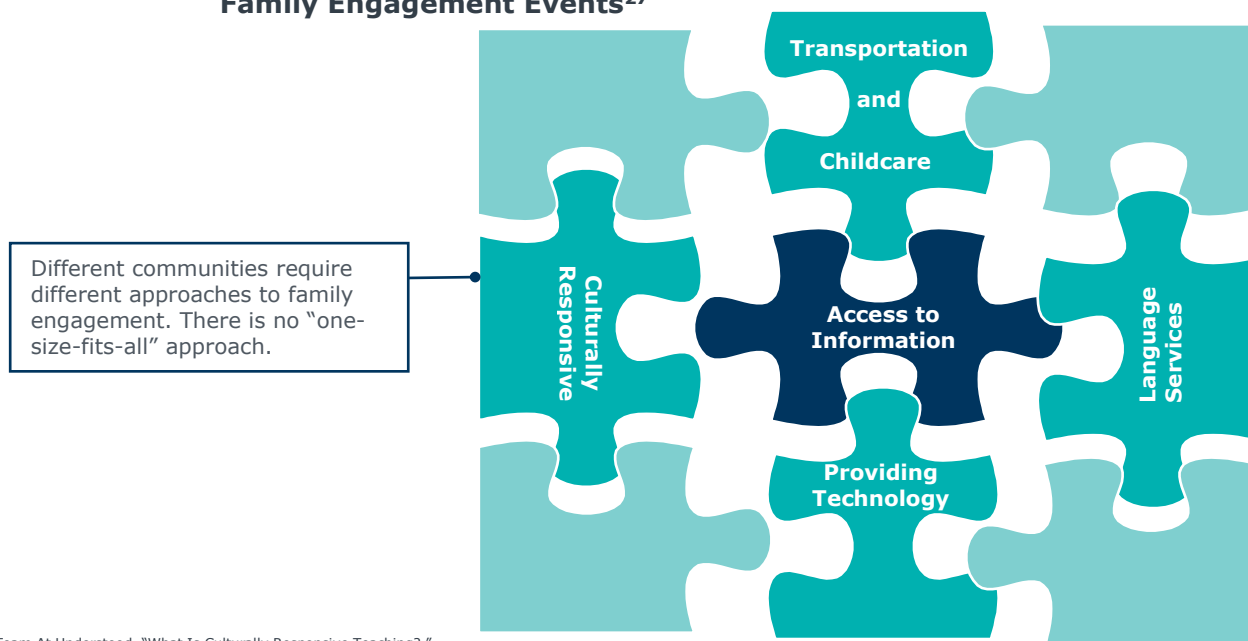
#### Approach All Family Engagement Activities Through a Culturally Responsive Lens to Promote Inclusivity

Culturally responsive teaching is an evidence-based teaching approach that integrates students' cultures, languages, and life experiences into the learning process. This method establishes meaningful connections to enable students to engage with challenging curricula and enhance their proficiency in advanced academic skills.<sup>26</sup> Our contacts at District B keep this approach in mind, focusing heavily on applying a lens of equity when holding family engagement events. They seek to provide culturally appropriate materials, engaging both parents and students simultaneously with the use of translators and other necessary support staff.

Logistics, including childcare and transportation, are considered regular barriers to parent participation, and are actively addressed by District B when holding family engagement events. The district provides necessary childcare, transportation, food and drink, and language services to help parents feel welcomed, valued, and supported.

For example, District B has a large Ethiopian population, some of whom struggle with substance abuse issues. When attempting to hold a parent academy devoted to addressing substance abuse interventions, acknowledging cultural diversity was imperative. Our contacts emphasize adapting strategies based on cultural nuances and language barriers. A recent substance abuse initiative (held in Amharic) with parents, administrators, and law enforcement speakers required a unique approach due to cultural stigma around mental health and addiction. Knowing this, District B employed Amharic native speakers to help translate and share perspectives with parents, which played a crucial role in the intervention.

#### Provide Support and Resources to Make it Easy for Parents to Attend Family Engagement Events<sup>27</sup>



26)<sup>26</sup> Educators Team At Understood, "What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?," Understood, November 20, 2023, <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-culturally-responsive-teaching>.

27)<sup>27</sup> Madeline WillIleana Najarro, "What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?," *Education Week*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/culturally-responsive-teaching-culturally-responsive-pedagogy/2022/04>.

## Open a Dedicated Family Engagement Center to Serve as a Central Location for all Engagement Programs

Both profiled districts have dedicated centers for family engagement. These centers serve as dedicated physical spaces for family engagement programs, including events. These centers also offer support and resources for families with questions or needs. Both centers are located within schools at the district. District B's center is located within an elementary school, while District A's center is located within a high school.

Having dedicated physical spaces for parent engagement provides another avenue for families to connect with their children's school. At District B, while most engagement events are held in individual school buildings, parents can come to the family engagement center to get answers to their questions. Having physical engagement centers may be especially important in districts where families are struggling to engage due to lack of technological ability.

## Building Lasting Relationships with District Families

### Prioritize Building and Maintaining Relationships as the Backbone of Any Parent Engagement Effort

When seeking to engage parents and families, districts must be intentional and consistent when it comes to relationship building.<sup>28</sup> In addition to performing community outreach and using digital means to engage and collaborate with families, District B also hires district parents as ambassadors to assist in building trust and understanding within communities. Our contacts claim this enables effective communication and participation.

Our contacts at District B noted that their approach to parent engagement was rooted in collaboration, co-creation, and adapting strategies to deliver a responsive approach to community needs. This approach seeks to empower parents and guardians as active contributors to district success.

District A's parent and family engagement center's core philosophy is based on the six types of family engagement by Dr. Joyce Epstein. Sometimes called the "School-Family-Community Partnership Model," the six types of family engagement are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.<sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup>

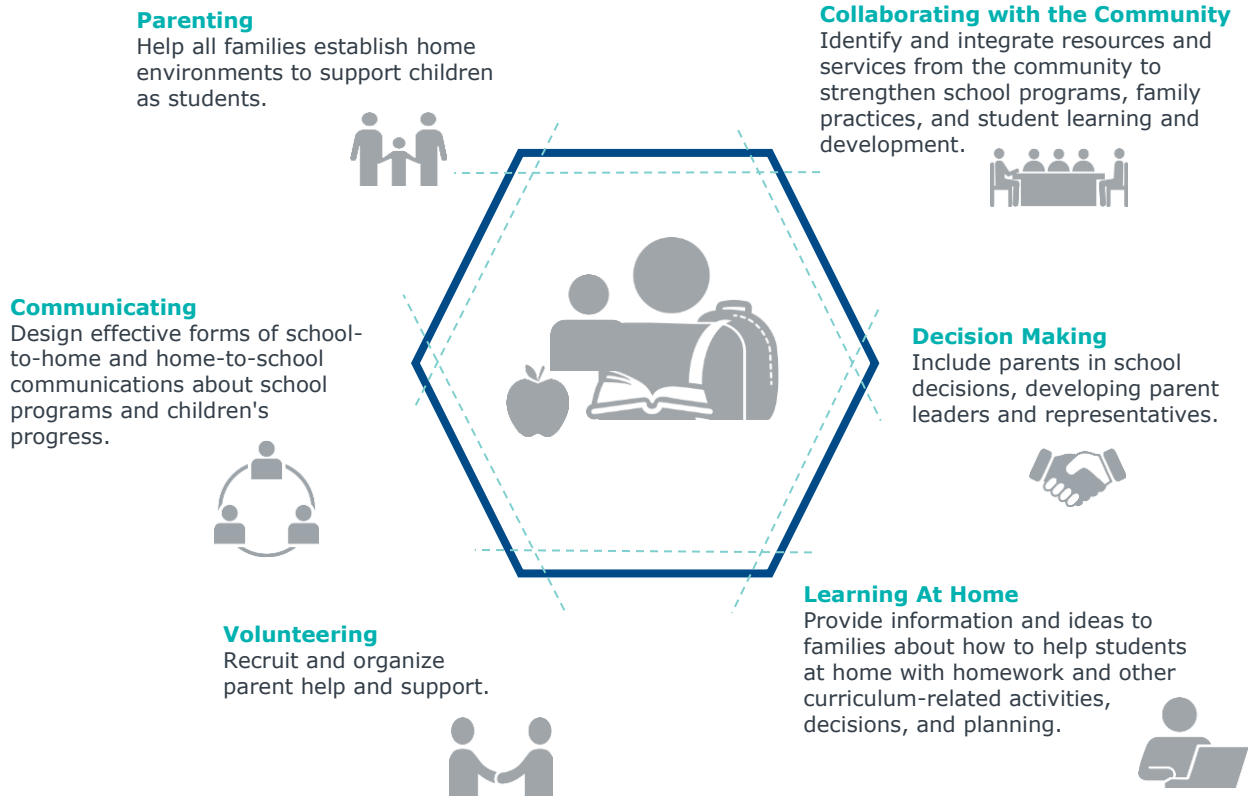
Each of these forms of family engagement can serve as a building block to the next. Based on this framework, District A provides holistic support to its families, aiming to strengthen the necessary parent-child relationship through school interventions.

28) <sup>28</sup> Cynthia Perez, "10 Evidence Based Family Engagement Programs | Families in Schools," Families in Schools, April 19, 2021, <https://www.familiesinschools.org/10-evidence-based-family-engagement-programs/>.

29) <sup>29</sup> San Diego State University, "Parent Involvement | Epstein's 6 Types of Involvement Framework and Sample Practices," n.d., <https://newscenter.sdsu.edu/education/parent/involve.aspx#:~:text=Epstein%27s%206%20Types%20of%20Involvement%20Framework%20and%20Sample,pre-school%2C%20elementary%2C%20middle%2C%20and%20high%20school.%20More%20items>.

30) <sup>30</sup> Joyce L. Epstein et al., *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 2nd ed. (Corwin Press, 2002).

## Dr. Joyce Epstein's Six Types of Family Engagement



According to both our contact districts, building genuine relationships with families fosters a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter, and allows districts to better respond to family's needs as they evolve.

## Involving Community Members and Having a Dedicated Family Liaison Can Help Bridge the Gap Between Parents and District Initiatives

To help build strong parent and family relationships, some districts rely on their existing community network. Tapping community members for in-person outreach can aid in engaging historically disenfranchised parents, while the presence of a dedicated family liaison or community outreach specialist serves to bridge the gap between parents and district initiatives.

In District B, approximately 80 percent of families possess an educational background not surpassing the fourth grade. These families heavily rely on school-provided subsidized programs. To engage these parents, a group of community mothers serve as promoters, employing various communication methods such as postcards, personal phone calls, Parent Square platform usage, and community flyers. This multifaceted approach, complemented by personal invitations and insights from mothers in the community, provides a comprehensive outreach strategy tailored to the community's specific needs.

Further, our contacts at District B emphasize home visiting as a successful strategy for fostering connections between teachers, students, and parents. They underscore the significance of linking families to essential services, especially in areas like special education where there may be stigma. The approach addresses potential reluctance among parents and helps make parents feel more valued by districts.

### 3. Grade Reporting and Accessibility

#### Fostering Interest in Student Grades and Milestones

##### The Importance of Keeping Parents Up-To-Date with Student Progress

It is crucial for parents to be informed about their student’s academic progress and overall well-being in school for several reasons. Firstly, as previously discussed, active involvement significantly enhances a student’s educational outcomes. Families who are aware of their child’s school activities are better equipped to support learning at home, and more aware of what interventions or additional support their child may need.

Additionally, it is especially crucial for districts to convey student progress to parents as students are increasingly behind due to post-pandemic learning loss. Research has shown that despite widespread nature of learning loss, American parents still tend to think that their own child is doing fine in school, even when that is not the case.<sup>31</sup> This means families may be caught off guard and resistant when educators begin to suggest interventions like additional tutoring or summer learning.

##### Parent Perception Gap

*American parents overwhelmingly believe that their own children are exceptions to the rule: that most children are behind<sup>32</sup>*



**“Parents aren’t taking advantage of these tutoring programs precisely because of this reality gap.** They don’t understand that their children are so far behind. And, for me, this is true parental empowerment. We have lots of sort of crazy, disruptive debates about what parental empowerment means in our country.

I think what it really means is knowing honestly where your child is, and advocating for your child to get where they need to go.”

- Arne Duncan, Former United States Secretary of Education, 2023

Our contacts at District A noted that their district does have standardized processes for alerting parents to students grades and transitions, but that the burden of parent contact primarily falls to teachers. At District A, teachers are the main point of contact for parents regarding their child’s progress. When teachers are unable to get in contact with parents, they contact the school’s parent engagement team, who takes over the job of contacting these hard-to-reach parents. This approach allows the parent engagement team to focus on the truly difficult-to-reach parents, freeing up teacher time while still ensuring parents are aware of student progress. This practice also aligns with research demonstrating that parents prefer to hear progress updates from teachers rather than from principals or administrators.<sup>33</sup>

Regular updates in the form of progress reports allow families to identify and address any potential issues early on, whether they are academic challenges, social struggles,

31) <sup>31</sup> Caitlynn Peetz, “Why Aren’t Parents More Worried about Declines in Student Achievement?,” *Education Week*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-arent-parents-more-worried-about-declines-in-student-achievement/2022/11>.

32) <sup>32</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/study-shows-parents-overestimate-their-students-academic-progress>

33) <sup>33</sup> Amelia Harper, “New Data Reveals Parents’ School Communication Preferences,” *K-12 Dive*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/new-data-reveals-parents-school-communication-preferences/506783/#:~:text=New%20data%20released%20from%20the%20Speak%20Up%20Research,on%20social%20media%20and%20websites%2C%20eSchool%20News%20reports>.



or emotional concerns.<sup>34</sup> Taking a proactive approach can lead to timely interventions that prevent minor academic or social problems from escalating. Additionally, districts who intentionally keep families aware of student progress help foster a stronger partnership between the school and the family. This collaboration creates a cohesive home and educational environment that promotes student success. Overall, properly informed parents can advocate for their child's needs more effectively.

## Providing User-Friendly Report Cards and Software to Parents

### To Ensure All Parents Have Access to Student Grades, Be Mindful of How Accessible Your Grade Reporting Software is to ELL and Disenfranchised Parents

Several factors contribute to the challenges faced by hard-to-reach families in utilizing parent portal software. Firstly, a lack of training on how to navigate such software may hinder parents' ability to engage with it effectively. Even further, some parents may lack access to the necessary technology required for using the software, complicating their involvement in their child's education. Issues related to language or unfamiliarity with technological terminology may also impede a parent's understanding of the software's purpose and abilities.

Recognizing these barriers, districts must incorporate an extra layer of intentionality when reaching out to hard-to-reach families. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure inclusivity and effective communication between schools and parents in diverse communities.

In addition to delivering grades to families through both the English and Spanish versions of PowerSchool, our contacts at District B also give parents the option to receive report cards in print. District B teachers volunteer to help guide parents through accessing PowerSchool if they are ever in need of assistance.

### Use Alternative Report Card Templates When Delivering Grades to Help Parents Understand Student Progress

For examples of accessible report cards, see the Appendix.

Report cards play a crucial role as tools for parents and families to gauge the progress of their children throughout the academic year, offering insights into positive or negative academic and behavioral growth. However, historically, accessibility has posed a challenge, primarily due to language barriers and difficulties in accessing report cards through digital means. This dual nature of report cards, being essential for monitoring academic advancement yet hindered by accessibility issues, underscores the importance of addressing barriers to ensure effective communication between schools and parents regarding student progress.

Policymakers and experts emphasize that report cards must be succinct, presented in a clear and standardized format accessible to the public. The updated report card requirements under ESSA provide an opportunity for states to reassess their approach and turn report cards into a more visual experience using diagrams and pictures. Implementing report cards with predominantly visual components can prove helpful for some hard-to-reach parents with a limited schooling, cognitive delays, or those whose primary language is not English.

34) <sup>34</sup> Michele Molnar, "Harvard Offers Tips for Sharing Data with Families," *Education Week*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/technology/harvard-offers-tips-for-sharing-data-with-families/2013/04>.

## Use Software that Contains Features that Meet the Needs of All Parents

For districts to prioritize accessibility for parents and families, they must invest in vendors who can provide a positive impact and meet unmet needs. Along with the use of an online grading system or parent portal, our contacts at both District B and District A have begun using family engagement-specific apps and services to strengthen their family engagement outreach initiatives.

For example, post-COVID-19, District B invested in a program called Parent Square. District B highlights the success of Parent Square in enhancing communication between parents and teachers. Our contacts noted that Parent Square helped them better foster a two-way communication channel, greatly improving their parent engagement. They also found that parents now better understand homework instructions. Overall, our contacts at District B felt that the Parent Square app has been a transformative tool for overcoming language barriers and enhancing meaningful interaction between parents and the school community.<sup>35</sup> **Please note that EAB does not vet or endorse specific vendors**, including any vendors mentioned or recommended by our contact districts.

<sup>35</sup> ParentSquare, "About ParentSquare - School and Parent Communication App," November 3, 2023, <https://www.parentsquare.com/about/>.

## 4. Teachers' Impact on Family Engagement Efforts

### Preparing Teachers to Better Engage Families on Student Progress

#### Teachers are an Integral Part of Family Engagement

Research suggests that parents prefer to hear communications about their child directly from teachers rather than from principals or administrators.<sup>36</sup> Because parents respond more positively to outreach that comes from their child's teacher, teachers are a crucial part of any district's parent engagement efforts.

It is imperative for those who are facilitating family engagement to understand how perceived engagement barriers can ultimately affect students. If educators create engagement mechanisms that are inaccessible to parents for whatever reason (e.g., lack of technology, language barriers), the parents who need these supports the most become the least likely to actually access these services and experience their benefits.

To that end, teachers must familiarize themselves with the families in the community, using approaches that involve families in their child's education while accommodating their individual needs. For instance, teachers can offer flexible meeting times or virtual communication methods when confronted with families experiencing transportation issues or hectic work schedules.<sup>37</sup>

#### Provide Professional Development for Teachers Related to Family Engagement

To maximize their impact and help them feel prepared to reach out to hard-to-reach families, districts should provide teachers with regular professional development regarding culturally responsive outreach. Professional development opportunities for teachers and family engagement liaisons should focus on cultivating inclusive classrooms, recognizing implicit biases, and developing strategies to accommodate involvement.<sup>38</sup>

#### Case Study: Albuquerque Public Schools (NM)<sup>39</sup>

Albuquerque Public Schools' "School Training for Engagement Planning (STEP)" workshops are one-day professional development sessions designed for school staff members spearheading family engagement initiatives. During these sessions, teams are educated on effective family engagement strategies and best practices. Additionally, they receive guidance in crafting a comprehensive Family Engagement Action Plan based on research and data. Schools also benefit from ongoing coaching and technical support to guarantee the successful implementation of their plans and the attainment of desired outcomes. This professional development supports teachers, so they can then support parents.

36) <sup>36</sup> Amelia Harper, "New Data Reveals Parents' School Communication Preferences," K-12 Dive, October 9, 2017, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/new-data-reveals-parents-school-communication-preferences/506783/#:~:text=New%20data%20released%20from%20the%20Speak%20Up%20Research,on%20social%20media%20and%20websites%2C%20eSchool%20News%20reports.>

37) <sup>37</sup> EAB Interviews and Analysis

38) <sup>38</sup> Albuquerque Public Schools. "Family Engagement Best Practices Rubric and Assessment," September 2015.

39) <sup>39</sup> "Family Engagement Unit," Albuquerque Public Schools, n.d., <https://www.aps.edu/ordinated-school-health/family-and-community-engagement-programs>.

Our contacts at both District B and District A affirm the importance of professional development for teachers, particularly focusing on family engagement strategies. District B recently introduced their family engagement plans involving staff, parents, and the community. These plans include assessment tools and propose activities to enhance parental involvement and collaboration within schools. While their initiative is too recent to make any claims, our contacts noted that the initiatives' goal is to integrate family engagement seamlessly into school activities, treating it as a fundamental part of school like lunch or math.

District B' family engagement department also conducts professional development sessions for teachers. These sessions focus on promoting active listening and culturally responsive education. When organizing family engagement events or parent academies, the school system involves teachers in designing sessions relevant to the topic and compensates them for their additional effort. Depending on the number of students involved, multiple teachers are recruited as facilitators and chaperones.

Facilitators emphasize careful and strategic planning in the development of family engagement activities, recognizing that engagement is an ongoing process beyond the event itself. When done correctly, professional development in family engagement can have a profound impact by supplying educators with the knowledge and skills needed to establish meaningful connections with parents and fostering collaborative partnerships that positively influence students' academic and social development.

# 5. Measuring Family Engagement Program Impact

## Using Surveys and Assessments to Guide Engagement Efforts

### Family Engagement is Difficult to Quantify

Due to the nature of parent and family engagement, it is difficult to definitively measure the impact it may have on student success. However, some states have attempted to begin to gather and monitor family engagement data. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in California mandates school districts show progress in ten state priority areas, with Parent Engagement being the third. To fulfill this requirement, districts utilize the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) to outline how they allocate resources and plan services aligned with these priorities. The state, in turn, uses the California School Dashboard to report district performance across these priority areas.<sup>40</sup>

Districts are expected to show efforts in seeking parent input in decision-making and promoting parent participation in programs for minority subgroups. This is measured through a "local indicator," allowing districts to choose their own metrics and self-report their performance. Parent Engagement is just one of several local indicators, with the Dashboard also including "state indicators" that are standardized statewide. Districts are asked to reflect on their current stage of family engagement practices in three domains: building relationships, building partnerships for student outcomes, and seeking input for decision-making.

Our contacts at both District B and District A acknowledge the challenge of quantifying the impact of family engagement on academic scores, citing the qualitative nature of family engagement. While expressing the need for a comprehensive, scientific approach over an extended period, they highlight the complexity of determining academic success, linking it to various factors like the community-school relationship and parental support.

Our contacts at District A mentioned the idea of conducting a longitudinal study on the relationship between positive academic outcomes and family engagement initiatives but cite the amount of time and resources that it could potentially take as a hindrance to moving forward.<sup>41</sup> Currently, districts lack sufficient consistent monitoring and evaluation tools regarding family engagement. However, there are some tools districts can use to get a rough sense of family engagement efforts, which we describe below.

### Use Surveys and Assessment Tools to Monitor Engagement Over Time

While accurately measuring parental engagement can pose a challenge for educators, it is possible to obtain a picture of improvement over time. Research exists surrounding measuring school-based family engagement and evaluating parents' perceptions of their engagement with schools, as well as the barriers limiting their involvement. In one paper on measuring family engagement, the authors implemented a survey design process, merging academic theory with empirical findings from parent respondents.<sup>42</sup> This approach resulted in three survey tools: an

40) Families In Schools, "Measuring Parent Engagement: Early Lessons Learned from the California School Dashboard," Press release, July 2019, <https://www.familiesinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Measuring-Parent-Engagement-Policy-Brief-by-Families-In-Schools.pdf>.

41) EAB Interviews and Analysis

42) Beth E. Schueler, James McIntyre, and Hunter Gehlbach, "Measuring Parent Perceptions of Family-School Engagement: The Development of New Survey Tools," *School Community Journal* 27, no. 2 (October 1, 2016): 275-301, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1165635.pdf>.

engagement scale, a school invitational barriers sub-scale, and a composite measure for non-school barriers. However, the authors recommend that similar tools be developed at the state level, due to the intensity of resources and staff required to support these measures. However, some districts have taken a less thorough but more practical approach to monitoring family engagement data.

For example, Albuquerque Public Schools (NM) has created qualitative family engagement assessment measurements.<sup>43</sup> Albuquerque Public Schools uses qualitative indicators such as “strengthening relationships and capacity with families, teachers, school and district administrators and community partners” and “cultivating equitable and effective systems” to measure family engagement across their schools. This data is meant to monitor the effectiveness of a current family engagement initiative and can help administrators pivot as needed if engagement outcomes are not being met.

43) <sup>43</sup> Albuquerque Public Schools, “Family Engagement Best Practices Rubric and Assessment,” September 2015.

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## Communicating with Families

To create successful family partnerships districts must prioritize clear communication. EAB's report [Strategies to Engage Parents and Guardians at School Districts](#) (which you may already be familiar with) discusses methods to cultivate meaningful parent engagement using a culturally responsive framework which can be used a foundation for formal family partnerships. Specifically, pages 5-15 discuss how district administrators and staff should 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. Parental engagement strategies should consistently involve parents' input and share decision-making power across the parent-district partnership.

The Colorado Department of Education also offers a [School-Family-Community Partnerships Survey](#) resource on its website. The survey assesses personnel and family perceptions of district outreach efforts and community engagement and benchmarks district's performances against the National Standards for Family-School partnerships. Leadership can use the results of these surveys to improve partnerships between families and schools. Scroll to the bottom of the page for links to the individual parent and teacher surveys.

The Nebraska Department of Education created a compilation of [Family Engagement Surveys](#) for districts to use when monitoring family engagement initiatives.

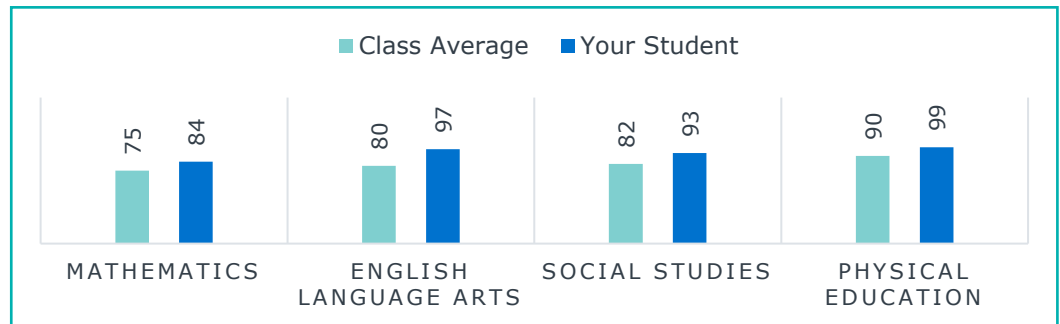
EAB's [Creating an Effective District Communications Plan](#). This toolkit provides step-by-step instructions on how to create a strategic communications plan along with other communication strategy considerations, like aligning communication goals with institutional priorities. We highlight the following key insights from each of the toolkit's three sections:

1. **Build a Communications Strategic Plan:** Use the strategic plan to first SDF consider how to communicate district goals and explain how they connect to your district's mission and strategic priorities (pages 6-11).
2. **Establish Consistent District Branding:** Branding considerations may help you standardize communications. Consistent branding reinforces perceptions of professionalism and bolsters district credibility (pages 19-25).
3. **Effectively Communicate via Email:** The toolkit highlights strategies to enhance the impact of email communications. See the column "Major Project Initiation Announcements" on page 27 as well as our rules for writing effective emails (pages 29-30).

See the State Support Network's [Needs Assessment Guidebook](#) for more information on how to conduct a needs assessment related to gaps in overall student performance. The goal of a needs assessment is to help educators identify, understand, and prioritize the needs that districts and schools must address to improve outcomes. Identifying priority needs is the first in a series of closely tied steps that also include understanding root causes that contribute to the areas of need, selecting evidence-based strategies that address those areas, preparing for and implementing selected strategies, and evaluating whether those strategies are addressing improvement needs and achieving desired results.

## Grade Reporting

### Example of Visual Representation in End-of-Year Report Card



Above is an example of how districts can incorporate a more visual representation of student grades into report cards using inspiration from the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#). While this is not a comprehensive review of every subject or every topic that may be covered in a report card, this diagram serves as an example of what kind of visual components can be implemented in creating a more diagram-like report card.

For another visual example of a report card, please see this guide on [Daily Behavior Report Cards \(DBRCs\)](#). DBRCs can be a very easy, efficient, and helpful way of motivating students as well as informally monitoring behavioral improvement with intervention. Teacher behavior report cards can be designed to accomplish the following:

- Point out the students' behaviors that they need to learn (skill deficit).
- Provide a schedule of teacher attention/feedback for positive behaviors.
- Motivate students through reinforcing positive behavior that teachers want to increase, and providing consequences (e.g., a sad face) for negative behaviors they want to decrease.
- Increase home-school communication (increase accountability with additional opportunities for positive or negative consequences for behavior).
- Evaluate whether the intervention is working or not when used with other measures.

Finally, see San Francisco Unified School District's (CA) [website](#) for sample standards-based report cards for grades K-5. San Francisco Unified School District provides report cards in seven languages that reflect the linguistic diversity of the district. The website also includes "Family Guides" to provide tips to support children's learning at home and information on interacting with teachers in parent-teacher conferences.