The Education Trust

HOW **STUDENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT** IMPACTS STUDENTS' SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT (SEAD)

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What Is Student, Family, and Community Engagement?

To create emotionally supportive and culturally affirming environments for all students, schools must adopt policies that support student, family, and community engagement. Authentic student, family, and community engagement helps to create safe and inclusive learning environments in schools that support students' long-term social, emotional, and academic development. The National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement defines family and community engagement as "a shared responsibility involving schools and other community agencies engaging families in meaningful ways to support the learning and development of children."[1]

A child's education extends far beyond the classroom, and family and community engagement is crucial to ensuring a student's growth and development. While there are many ways schools can ensure that students, families, and communities remain engaged, including home visits or community walks, systemic professional development opportunities, culturally infused classroom curriculums, and more, meaningful engagement, at its core, is about building personal relationships, trust, and mutual respect between students, educators, families, and communities.

The Impact of Student, Family, and Community Engagement

When families and communities are engaged and invested in a student's social, emotional, and academic success, the impacts are powerful. Extensive research demonstrates that when families are engaged in their children's academic growth and development, students are more likely to succeed academically. Students not only perform better academically, but are more likely to graduate and pursue a postsecondary education when there is a shared sense of responsibility in which educators meaningfully listen to families and collaborate with them, and families commit to prioritizing their child's education.[2] For example, research shows that students of involved parents score better on standardized tests and have better attendance records and higher career aspirations.[3] In fact, family engagement in early grades is a stronger indicator for literacy development than family income, maternal level of education, and ethnicity.[4] Research also demonstrates that when schools employ strong engagement practices, all students have higher academic outcomes across the board.[5]

Furthermore, students whose families and communities are more engaged are less likely to develop mental health issues or drop out of school. When educators engage with the communities they serve, they gain a deeper understanding of their students — including students' strengths, identities, and needs — and develop stronger relationships with students, which leads to more positive social and emotional development, and greater student academic success. Community engagement also greatly benefits educators, districts, and communities. Strong relationships between educators and families help to create a positive and inclusive school climate, which, in turn, helps improve educator retention rates and decrease discriminatory discipline practices.[6]

Disparities in Student, Family, and Community Engagement

Despite the significant benefits of parental and community involvement, several barriers can hinder meaningful student, family, and community engagement. Perhaps the most significant and common barrier to meaningful engagement is a lack of trust between educators and families.[7] Whether because of their own biases, negative perceptions about parental involvement, or insufficient training on how to engage with families, educators may be reluctant to reach out to families of students and build a relationship with them. Parents may also harbor feelings of mistrust or be hesitant to engage with their child's teachers due to their own negative experiences as students in the classroom. A lack of mutual trust leads to a lack of meaningful engagement and communication with one another. Another common barrier to student, family, and community engagement is a lack of funding within districts.[8] Schools, particularly those serving low-income communities, may have some funds available to facilitate parental engagement through advocacy or leadership development, but those funds often fall well short in meeting demand.

Underserved families often face additional hurdles to meaningful engagement, including a lack of cultural competency among school staff.[9] Educators who are unaware of the history of the community they serve, or of the strengths and assets of diverse ethnic and racial groups within a community, may struggle to build productive relationships and trust with students and families.[10] For educators to build strong, positive engagement with students and families, they must see themselves as members of the community in which they teach, and they must embrace and respect families' unique experiences, needs, strengths, and preferences.[11]

Linguistically diverse families face unique challenges in an English-dominated education system. Since 1979, the percentage of school children who speak a language other than English at home has steadily risen from less than 8% in 1979 to nearly 21% in 2021.[12] Furthermore, according to recent research, levels of linguistic integration, or the percentage of dependent children whose parents are fluent in English, is less than 80% in seven highly populous states — Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, and Texas.[13] While these families and their students bring myriad strengths to the table, including diverse perspectives and experiences, in addition to the cognitive benefits of learning multiple languages, the families of English learners are less likely than English-only families to attend parent teacher conferences, volunteer, or serve on school committees, which suggests that school staff struggle to connect with these parents.[14] Interpreters and other language services are crucial resources for parents who speak languages other than English to communicate effectively with their child's teachers and participate in school activities. Unfortunately, funding for interpretation services and resources that educators and linguistically diverse families need to communicate effectively with each other is often insufficient.

Families of students with disabilities also face additional challenges, as their children often require greater and more specialized support and a greater degree of parental involvement and advocacy.[15] For example, schools may be providing insufficient information to families regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, which can result in a lack of trust and meaningful parental engagement. Additionally, other barriers, such as stigmatization of students with disabilities, can discourage the families of those students — who often must play a major supporting role in their children's education and can provide crucial insights to educators on their children's specific needs — from meaningfully engaging.[16]

Families from low-income backgrounds — who are disproportionately people of color — likewise face myriad hardships due to poverty, which can make it harder for them to be actively involved in their children's schooling. Families living in poverty not only experience higher levels of emotional and mental strain, which can impact their capacity to engage, but they may also have financial and logistical constraints that limit their ability to participate in their child's education, including transportation barriers, a lack of schedule flexibility and paid sick time, and more.[17] These barriers, and many more, present unique challenges for underserved families and the schools serving their children.

Engaging Students, Families, and Communities Engagement Beyond COVID

Despite our nation's return to pre-pandemic operations, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health and academic well-being remain severe. The experience of losing a family member or friend to COVID-19, and the disruptions to relationships, schedules, and learning environments that resulted from months-long quarantines, have left many students feeling anxious, isolated, lonely, and stressed. As the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results demonstrate, students have suffered some of the most significant declines in learning in the half-century since the assessment was implemented.[18] The challenges facing students and their families are significant, and the need for meaningful, intentional student, family, and community engagement has never been greater. When school buildings shut down across the country and education became entirely virtual, educators relied on families to support their children's learning at home.[19] That shift highlighted the importance of family and community engagement and how crucial it is to student success and helping students recover from the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools must not only ensure meaningful engagement between communities, educators, and families, but schools must also train and equip educators with evidence-based approaches that focus on supporting students' holistic development and creating safe, healthy, and inclusive learning environments.

The Federal Government's Role in Student, Family, and Community Engagement

While federal, state, district, school, and classroom policies all impact student, family, and community engagement, the federal government plays a key role in supporting the social, emotional, and academic needs of our nation's students. Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and other federal entities can help state and district leaders to meaningfully and equitably engage students, families, and communities in a variety of ways:

1. Support and expand programs that equip and train educators with the tools necessary to build upon student and family strengths and address communication barriers between educators, students, and families.

• Programs, such as those under Title II Part A (II-A) of the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), provide important professional development and training opportunities for educators to address implicit biases, increase cultural competency, overcome language barriers, and enhance educator capacity to effectively engage with students and their families.

• ESSA can further fund efforts to help train educators on how to implement evidence-based practices to address student mental health challenges and support relationship-building, such as culturally responsive teaching, restorative justice interventions, and more.

2. Prioritize and invest in programs, like those below, that are designed to help create a racially and culturally diverse teacher workforce, which would be a powerful tool to strengthen student, family, and community engagement within schools and help students of color perform better academically and feel more connected.

• The Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence were established under the Higher Education Act (HEA) to improve educator preparation and diversity, specifically by strengthening programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, tribal colleges and universities, and other minority-serving institutions.

• Grow Your Own (GYO) programs and Registered Teacher Apprenticeship (RTAP) programs, both community-based efforts to recruit and train teachers within communities, can be effective ways to increase the racial and cultural diversity of the teacher workforce. GYOs and RTAPs can be eligible for federal funding, including through programs authorized by ESSA and HEA, in addition to workforce initiatives administered by the Department of Labor.

3. Expand the reach and scope of the funding streams and programs below, which are designed to support family and community engagement.

- Under Title I of ESSA, school districts must include in their education plan a written parent and family engagement policy designed to strengthen partnerships between families, schools, and the community to improve student outcomes; schools must meet annually with parents to evaluate and, if necessary, revise the content and effectiveness of these policies. Furthermore, under Title I of ESSA, local education agencies (LEAs) whose total Title I allocation exceeds $500,000 are required to reserve at least 1% of their allocation for school activities designed to engage parents and families. Not only should Congress significantly increase Title I funding overall, but it should also increase this specific percentage during the next reauthorization of ESSA, as well as look to include important oversight protections to ensure that these funds are spent on activities that have proven to be effective at increasing and enhancing authentic family engagement.

- Statewide Family Engagement Centers offer training and technical assistance to districts and organizations to promote family engagement initiatives and assist parents in participating effectively in their children's education. Despite the importance of these centers, they are active in less than a quarter of states across the country.

- Create a permanent Office of Family Engagement within the Department of Education with established authority, purpose, and reach across the department to provide guidance and support to states and districts on using the funds available to them for effective family engagement strategies.

4. Support, grow, and increase funding for evidence-based structures that support student, family, and community engagement.

- The Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) program provides important support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools. FSCS integrate a wide range of academic, social, and health services for students and families, including high-quality early learning programs, mentoring and youth development, job training and career counseling, nutrition services, and much more. The FSCS model can be a powerful way to promote student, family, and community engagement and improve education outcomes for students by supporting programs focused on parental involvement, parent leadership, family literacy, and parent education programs. Recognizing the importance of this program, the federal government increased its funding in the FY23 omnibus spending package by $75 million, bringing the total funding to $150 million.

- Parent Training and Information Centers via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) award grants to parent organizations to provide training and information to parents of children with disabilities. These centers can help ensure that parents of students with disabilities have the capacity and support to engage with school and district staff as strong advocates and education partners for their children.

- Incorporate family engagement into nearly all federal grants that fund K-12 education, with special attention paid to integrating family engagement in areas where it is still highly relevant but less often considered (e.g., programs for older students like dual enrollment or college advising), where understanding and mitigating family barriers to program uptake would be extremely beneficial.

- Incentivize family engagement strategies that evidence has shown to be most effective by incorporating only evidence-based programs in allowable uses and grant activities or giving priority or points to grant applicants that demonstrate the research basis behind their proposed activities.

Is Your State Prioritizing Student, Family, and Community Engagement?

States also play a major role in facilitating student, family, and community engagement. State leaders can have a strong influence in how districts engage with students, families, and communities by:

- Creating clear goals

- Adopting evidence-based guidance and policies

- Publicly reporting data related to student, family, and community engagement

Building on The Education Trust's 2020 seminal report titled, "Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens,"[20] EdTrust released in 2022, in partnership with CASEL, "Is Your State Prioritizing Social, Emotional, and Academic Development,"[21] a web tool to analyzes state policies in the following key areas:

- Student, family, and community engagement

- Discipline

- Professional development

- Rigorous and culturally sustaining curriculum

- Wraparound services

Educators, advocates, and policymakers at all levels of government can use this 50-state scan to evaluate and compare state policies on student, family, and community engagement, and push for improvements. This tool highlights 10 key criteria for positive approaches to student, family, and community engagement:

10 Ways States Can Improve Student, Family, and Community Engagement

State leaders who want to build a healthier, safer, and more inclusive school environment for students, particularly students of color, students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and students from low-income backgrounds, should prioritize these **10** criteria:

1	Include student, family, and community engagement as part of a state's strategic or ESSA plan. Example: District of Columbia[22]
2	Create within the state department of education an office of student, family, and community engagement that carries out multiple activities, such as professional development for school and district staff, home-based programs, information dissemination, or collaboration with community organizations. Example: Arizona[23]
3	Offer ongoing professional development to educators on fostering student, family, and community engagement and integrate engagement into teacher evaluation rubrics. Example: District of Columbia[24]
4	Establish evidence-based guidance on student, family, and community engagement at all levels of the P-12 system that includes information on funding and how schools and districts should engage with the students, families, and communities who are most often underserved, including populations that are most often left out of family engagement initiatives (e.g., families speaking multiple languages, Native families, families experiencing homelessness, families impacted by the criminal justice system, rural communities). Example: California[25]
5	Provide guidance on leveraging community organizations to accelerate learning (e.g., afterschool programs, tutoring, extended learning time, and other best practices). Example: Wisconsin[26]
6	Elevate student voice in its office of family and community engagement, State Board of Education, or student advisory council. Example: Iowa[27]
7	Intentionally incorporate family and community voices in decision-making, such as by including family and community representatives in decision-making groups, or by creating a parent advisory council, or other state-level group. Example: Maryland[28]
8	Require teacher training in student, family, and community engagement as a requirement for certification and include engagement practices in teacher standards. Example: Kentucky[29]
9	Require school leader training in student, family, and community engagement as a requirement for certification and include engagement practices in school leader standards. While EdTrust's 50-state scan did not yield any states with requirements for training in student, family, and community engagement for school leader certification, some states have established similar standards for school leaders. Connecticut has set performance expectations based on four key indicators of family, student, and community engagement[30]
10	Publicly report information about student, family, and community engagement (e.g., student and family survey and satisfaction data, school climate data) and ensure this data is disaggregated by demographics. Example: District of Columbia[31]

Supporting Student, Family, and Community Engagement at the Local Level

While federal and state leaders can facilitate conditions for student, family, and community engagement in various ways, the root of successful engagement is building trust between communities and schools. Educators and school and district leaders are crucial players in building the relationships and effective partnerships that foster students' social, emotional, and academic development. District leaders, school leaders, and educators must take the time to develop their ability to authentically partner with students, families, and communities in a way is collaborative, empowering, and equity-focused.[32] Family engagement should be a strategy to strengthen and unify communities — not divide them — for the success of all students. Exclusionary and political 'parents' rights' narratives that pit families against each other or use families as watchdogs against educators instead of as partners, or force educators to exclude students from families in underserved communities, "misrepresent"[33] family engagement.

Authentic engagement with students, families, and communities will require districts to create family engagement policies and opportunities, support educators with evidence-based practices, and measure engagement efforts. Districts can also help foster positive engagement by training educators to adopt asset-based mindsets about diverse students and be cognizant of the myriad strengths students and their families bring to the table.

For actionable guidance on equitable family engagement, district leaders can look to a series of guidebooks created by the Alliance for Resource Equity (ARE)[34] — a partnership between The Education Trust and Education Resource Strategies — which outline ways to create a more equitable student experience, along with ARE's diagnostic tool,[35] which identifies potential areas for growth in district policies and practices. District leaders may also refer to the ARE guidebook on creating a positive and inviting school climate,[36] which shows how district leaders who are committed to supporting student, family, and community engagement can foster a healthier, safer, and more inclusive school environment for students, particularly students of color, students from low-income communities, and students with disabilities. District leaders should pay particular attention to the following key questions in the ARE diagnostic tool and guidebook:

Does each student have positive relationships with staff and other students?

Does each student attend a school that actively and meaningfully engages families?

Does each student who needs targeted family support receive it?

The ARE guidebooks are designed to help district leaders identify the root causes of inequities in their school systems and offer a full list of actions that districts can take to improve engagement. They can also serve as a starting point for district leaders to engage with students, families, and communities on improving educational experiences and outcomes for students. By collaborating with students and families to establish a clear, collective, and comprehensive vision for positive and inviting school climates that prioritize meaningful relationships; ensuring all staff have the time, expertise, and cultural competence to effectively develop positive relationships with students and families; and consistently prioritizing meaningful engagement and collaboration, district leaders can accelerate student learning.

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