

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: Evidence-Informed Practice Brief

WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Family Engagement refers to collaboration between families and school personnel that aims to foster positive outcomes for student learning, health, and development.³ To encourage family engagement, school personnel should strive to ensure that all families feel invited, welcomed, and valued at their child's school. It is also important to prioritize sustainable family engagement efforts—meaning that these efforts will be maintained regardless of changes in staffing or administration. A variety of opportunities should be provided for school personnel and families to build meaningful relationships. These can reinforce student learning and physical, psychological, and emotional health.³

Multiple organizations have published recommendations for promoting family engagement.^{2,5,6} In addition, federal initiatives such as Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require districts and schools to develop effective programs that promote sustained family-school partnerships.^{7,10} To promote equity in schools and foster connections with families, it is beneficial to create an inviting and welcoming school environment, with input from families, that includes welcoming, culturally and linguistically representative staff (e.g., teachers, main office staff); artwork and messages around the school, including activities and events, that represents the diversity of the school community; distribution of information that is easily accessed by all families; and frequent and accessible communication with families about school events and initiatives.^{5,16} Schools can engage with families by involving them in school health activities, mentoring or tutoring programs, or participation on interdisciplinary teams.¹⁶ In addition, schools can educate families about their role in helping to promote school and home environments that support student health and overall well-being.⁵ To sustain family engagement throughout the school year, school personnel can establish a team with roles and responsibilities for family engagement initiatives, including family members who appropriately represent the school's demographics.⁵



WHY IS IT RELEVANT TO CHILD OUTCOMES?

Physical Health Outcomes

Given that families hold a great deal of influence on child obesity and other health behaviors,²⁶ fostering family engagement in student health promotion is essential for positive physical health outcomes. Environmental factors and family behaviors at home, such as access to healthy foods, family habits in physical activity, and other health behaviors are associated with child nutrition and physical activity.²⁶ Family involvement in school-based health promotion programs has also been associated with increased physical fitness; healthier body fat and blood sugar levels; increased fruit and vegetable consumption; reduced saturated fat consumption; and increased awareness of how to prevent diabetes and obesity.^{1,23,24,27} Overall, school-based weight-related interventions for children and adolescents that involve families have demonstrated greater effectiveness than interventions without a family involvement component.^{17,19}

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Health Outcomes

Family engagement in school is associated with better student social, emotional, and behavioral well-being.^{18,20,21} Increased family involvement is related to improved positive social skills and decreased problem behaviors for children.^{18,20} Family involvement can significantly improve child outcomes on measures of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.⁸ Family attendance at school activities and events is related to positive mental, social, and emotional health outcomes in adolescents.²⁸ For example, family involvement in school activities (in a way that does not interfere with their child's independence) can serve as a protective factor against depression for high school students.²⁸ In addition, positive relationships and communication between teachers and family members may positively impact adolescents' sense of school belonging.²⁵

Academic Outcomes

Family engagement has been positively associated with student academic achievement, with children generally experiencing higher levels of academic success when their families are more involved.^{4,21} For example, family attendance at school events and family discussion of school issues have been identified as predictors of academic achievement among adolescents.^{4,21} In addition, family engagement at home (e.g., communicating about current events and academic topics, discussions about school and school-based events) appears to be the strongest family behavior that supports adolescent academic outcomes.⁴ For children in middle and high school, family engagement can be beneficial for academic achievement when families demonstrate high expectations and praise effort and academic performance.⁴ For elementary-aged children, active family involvement (e.g., participating in educational activities at school, visiting the school, reading at home),⁴ adult supervision at home, and connections between home and school have a positive relationship with learning outcomes.¹⁴



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: EVIDENCE IN ACTION

The strategies provided here summarize a review of available evidence and best practice recommendations in this domain. * Strategies are grouped by anticipated resource demand (e.g., funding, time, space, training, materials).

Level 1: Low resource demand

Engage ongoing communication between schools and families

- Regular contact with families from school staff is associated with better student attendance and achievement.¹⁵
- Schools and families can use two-way communication (e.g., school-to-home and home-to-school) to share important information about educational programs, health-related screenings and follow-up services, and student health needs.¹⁸ Examples include home-school notes and meetings in which families visit their child's school to collaborate on supports for the child across settings.^{18,20,21}

Evaluate existing family engagement initiatives

- Families may have different communication preferences or needs, so schools should employ a variety of methods (e.g., mailings, phone calls, digital/electronic communication) and evaluate the effectiveness of those methods.^{12,13} Work schedules, responsibilities, commitments, and cultural expectations also impact when and how families can participate.¹² Schools should evaluate policies and practices around the what (e.g., volunteering, decision-making, collaborating), when (i.e., before, during, or after school), and how (e.g., in person, virtually) of family engagement.^{9,12} Schools should seek input from families when evaluating existing initiatives, such as through a family survey.

Level 2: Moderate resource demand

Provide opportunities for ongoing family engagement

- School-based interventions that seek to promote ongoing family engagement are associated with improvements in student mental health, behavior, and academic achievement over time.^{18,21}
- Schools can implement universal interventions accessible to all (e.g., school-based family resource centers),²² and consultation-based family-engagement interventions that can improve family attitudes towards school, home-based practices that support learning and positive behavior, and relationships between teachers and families.²⁰

Strengthen family access and inclusion within the school environment

- Schools can collaborate with families to disseminate effective strategies for involvement at school (e.g., volunteering, communicating with school staff, attending school events) and at home (e.g., providing appropriate supervision, promoting reading by having books available).^{9,14}
- Schools should provide communications (e.g., announcements, resources, materials) to families in their native or preferred language and mode of communication (e.g., emails, home notes, phone calls).^{7,10,12}
- Schools can promote an inviting and welcoming physical school environment (e.g., artwork in the halls that reflects diversity in the community) in partnership with families.

Level 3: High resource demand

Prioritize family engagement in district and building level initiatives

- Family engagement initiatives—such as developing partnerships with families, increasing the number of families who are consistently involved in the school system, and establishing a culture that considers family-school partnerships as integral to school or district practices—can improve student learning outcomes.¹⁴
- Schools can prioritize family engagement in mission statements, policies, and practices (e.g., learning/ wellness objectives, team meetings, events) to build capacity at all levels of the school system.¹⁴
- Districts and schools can prioritize hiring culturally and linguistically diverse staff to reflect diversity in the school community and provide staff with ongoing professional development on evidence-based, culturally responsive family engagement.^{5,21}

Empower families to take meaningful leadership roles in school and community

- Offer events that facilitate empowering families through knowledge and skill development in topics such as child and adolescent development, parenting skills, and navigating educational and social service systems can support development of leadership and decision-making abilities among families.¹⁴
- Schools can build upon family capacity for leadership roles by fostering these knowledge and skills and providing opportunities to become actively involved in decision-making that impacts the school and community.^{14,18} For example, educators can seek out the expertise of families as part of developing a new policy.¹¹

*For more information about the systematic review process we used to identify evidence-based practices, please refer to our overview brief which can be found [here](#).



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Note: The [WellSAT WSCC](#) allows users to evaluate district policy alignment with 'best practices' in policy associated with Family Engagement and other WSCC model domains.

Center on Innovation & Improvement

[Handbook on Family and Community Engagement](#)

This 2011 document provides ideas for promoting family and community engagement and linking family engagement to wellness initiatives.

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

[Parent Training Modules](#)

These modules are designed to educate parents about different aspects of child social, emotional, and behavioral development. Materials are available in English and Spanish.

Child Welfare Information Gateway

[Family Engagement Inventory](#)

This website provides links to organizations and websites that offer additional information about family engagement strategies and programs.

Hanover Research

[Effective Family and Community Engagement Strategies](#)

This 2014 report provides recommendations for building family and community partnerships, along with case studies of school districts across the U.S. that demonstrate the link between family and community engagement and student outcomes.

National Education Association (NEA)

[Family Support](#)

This webpage includes a downloadable report with a menu of actions schools can take to support and involve families.

Ohio Department of Education

[Sample Best Practices for Parent Involvement in Schools](#)

This webpage provides sample policies and best practices for building and sustaining family involvement in school

Organizing Engagement

[Equitable Collaboration Framework](#)

This website provides a framework, information, and strategies for creating equitable family-school-community partnerships.

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) & U.S. Department of Education (USDE)

[Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#)

This 2013 document provides a framework for building school capacity for family engagement through successful family-school partnerships.

U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary & Secondary Education

[Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement](#)

This webpage includes a document that provides an overview of evidence-based strategies for promoting equitable family engagement practices in districts and schools.



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