

**LEARNING
HEROES**

**UNLOCKING
THE "HOW"**

**DESIGNING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES
THAT LEAD TO SCHOOL SUCCESS**

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WRITTEN BY
Dr. Eyal Bergman



A LETTER FROM LEARNING HEROES FOUNDER & PRESIDENT

After more than two years of pandemic schooling, we continue to hear reports of contention between families and schools. Going beyond the headlines, however, Learning Heroes has uncovered a more hopeful story.

Our 2021 national survey of K-12 parents, teachers, and principals surfaced strong alignment in their educational priorities, with safety, emotional well-being, and academic progress topping the list. Providing families with a clear picture of their child's achievement ranked as one of the most important actions for school communications.

Prioritizing family-educator relationships grounded in trust and teamwork is a fundamental strategy in the equitable delivery of a high-quality education.

In fact, most parents (87%) report wanting direct and truthful communication about their child's performance, even if things aren't going well. Yet more than half of teachers (52%) say it is not easy to communicate about difficult academic or behavioral issues and almost half (43%) say it's not easy to "establish strong relationships with families."

With educators acknowledging how hard it is to have tough conversations and establish strong relationships with families, it's no wonder a

significant disconnect exists between what parents think and what teachers know about student performance. More parents than ever (92%) believe their child is at or above grade level, while only 44% of teachers believe most of their students are prepared for grade-level work this year, aligning with the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data.

Despite these challenges, parents and educators cite "trust" and "teamwork" as the connection they would like to have with each other. Prioritizing family-educator relationships grounded in trust and teamwork is a fundamental strategy in the equitable delivery of a high-quality education. We see this as a clear call to action, and integral to recovery efforts. We hope you will join us in supporting families and educators as they team up on behalf of all children.



BIBB HUBBARD

Introduction

Learning Heroes' 2021 national surveys of parents, teachers, and principals found that educators overwhelmingly see the benefits of family engagement for student success. But in practice, many schools fall short of building authentic relationships with families, and very few actively [co-design](#) students' educational experiences with families.¹

The question is not “whether” to do family engagement but “how.”

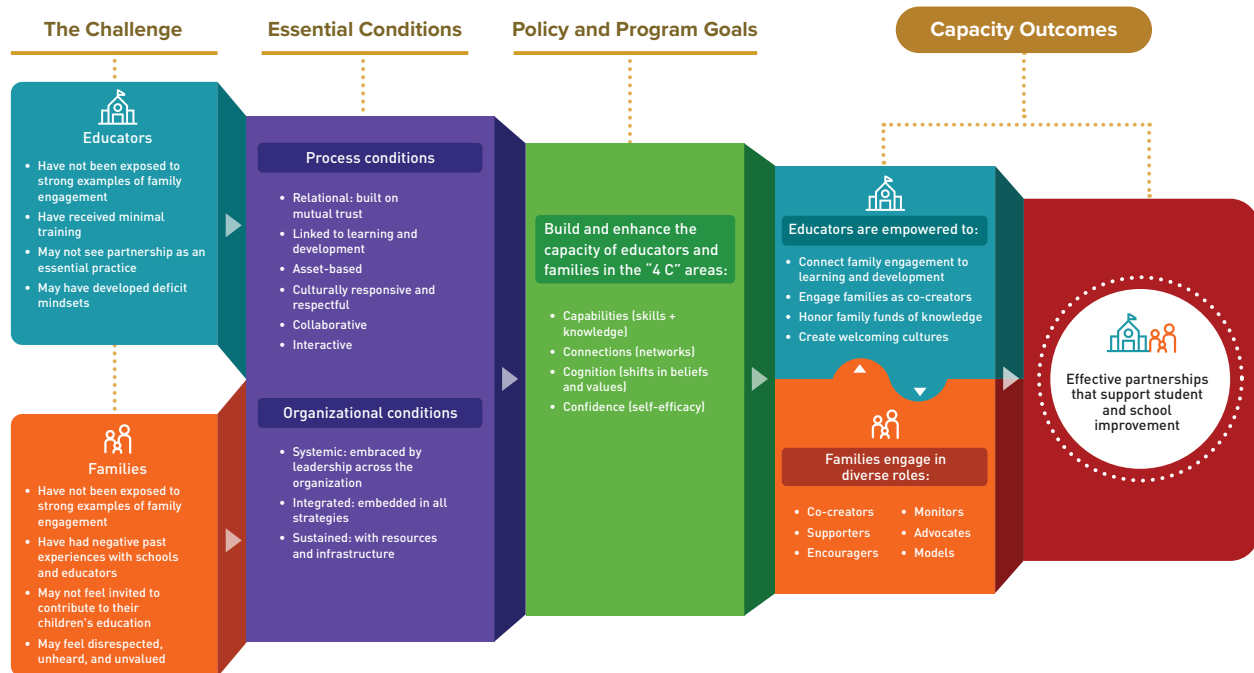
The pandemic has underscored the central role that parents play in their child's education, while raising new tensions between home and school. Despite media coverage of fights over schools' COVID-19 policies or approaches to teaching about race and history, our 2021 national surveys found strong common ground among parents, teachers, and principals. All three groups prioritize the same things: safety of students and staff, students' academic progress, and addressing students' emotional health

and well-being this school year. Most educators (85%) and parents (93%) reported an intention to be more or equally engaged in 2021 as compared to 2020, thereby surpassing previously unprecedented levels of home-school contact. This common ground offers a pathway for strategic family engagement practices that lead to substantial improvements in student learning and well-being at a time when school systems have more funding available than ever to support this work. The question is not “whether” to do family engagement but “how.”

The recommendations in this report are rooted in insights from Learning Heroes' six years of data about parents' hopes, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences with their child's education, as well as our experience leading this work in schools, and what we know from research about what it takes to develop a strong family engagement practice.

1 Ishimaru, A.M., Bang, M., Valladares, M.R., Nolan, C.M., Tavares, H., Rajendran, A., and Chang, K. (2019). Recasting Families and Communities as Co-Designers of Education in Tumultuous Times. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved from: nepc.colorado.edu/publication/family-leadership.

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2)



In particular, we want to acknowledge the research-based [*Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships \(Version 2\)*](#), which many schools use to help improve their family engagement practices, and the 2021 report, [*Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*](#), which synthesizes the research on family engagement and offers a series of policy recommendations for preK-12 leaders who want to elevate family engagement as an equity strategy.² This report leans heavily on the lessons from these publications.

2 Mapp, K. L., and Bergman, E. (2019). Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2). Retrieved from: dualcapacity.org.
Mapp, K.L., and Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

We believe that each community needs to root its strategies in its own context, while also addressing certain core components of any strong family engagement practice. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework divides these “essential conditions” into: 1) the day-to-day process conditions of effective practice; and 2) the organizational conditions that provide the infrastructure for any good strategy to flourish over time.

In this report, we suggest three pillars of an effective strategy that brings together these essential conditions with insights from our 2021 annual surveys:

- 1. Place trust and teamwork at the center of the home-school relationship**
- 2. Anchor family engagement strategies in student learning and well-being**
- 3. Invest in building systems and structures that enable this work**

Behind each pillar, we suggest actionable strategies for school and district leaders to get started, with examples from schools and districts across the country. But leaders cannot plug and play and expect to see meaningful change. The three pillars are indispensable parts of a whole. They work together as key pieces of a comprehensive district strategy.

At a time of low morale and potentially historic resignations among educators, we should remember that relationships are what have always kept schools going.

Education during the pandemic has been exhausting for families and educators. To educators doing the hard work in classrooms every day and to families supporting their child tirelessly at home: We see you. We hear you. The purpose of this report is not to add one more thing to your plate. Our goal is to make the home-school relationship more meaningful and to offer schools a few concrete steps for how to do so.

Educators who have strong relationships with families say it makes their jobs easier and more fulfilling. At a time of low morale and potentially historic resignations among educators, we should remember that relationships are what have always kept schools going. It’s the connections we have with those we care about – usually our students and colleagues – that give us the energy we need. We hope this moment offers an opening to include more families in that intimate circle, so that we can all heal and grow together on behalf of our children.

TRUST

Place Trust and Teamwork at the Center
of the Home-School Relationship



When we asked parents, teachers, and principals to select which terms represented their goals for family engagement, “trust” and “teamwork” rose to the top. This shared preference reinforces [seminal research](#) by Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara L. Schneider in their book, *Trust in Schools*, on the indispensable role that “relational trust” plays in driving school improvement.³

Unfortunately, most parent-teacher interactions in schools today are brief, infrequent, and/or negative, which means even well-meaning efforts fail because they arrive on a foundation of low trust. That’s why trust is the first essential condition in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, and why family engagement strategies must start with deliberate efforts to build trust in order to improve student outcomes.

Since actions speak louder than words, *Embracing a New Normal* offers a series of questions that educators can ask themselves to critically examine what they are doing to demonstrate trustworthiness. The questions are based on the four components of relational trust identified in Bryk and Schneider’s research:

- *Am I seeking input from, and do I listen to and value, what all families have to say? (Respect)*
- *Am I demonstrating to all families that I see them as competent and valuable caretakers? (Competence)*
- *Do I keep my word with families? (Integrity)*
- *Do I show families that I value and care about them as people? (Personal Regard)⁴*

At the same time, beliefs also matter. Given that most schools do not encourage or expect teachers to collaborate closely with their students' families, it is not surprising that nearly half (43%) of teachers say establishing strong relationships with families is not easy. A lack of positive and ongoing connections can lead to mistrust and deficit-based views about low-income families and families of color. This includes the pervasive stereotype that families of color do not value education. Many educators (33%) believe “some families are just not interested in supporting their child’s education.” Yet an overwhelming majority of Black (78%) and Hispanic (87%) parents consistently and overwhelmingly think it is “absolutely essential” or “very important” that their child goes to college.

We all have a sense of what others think of us. If a parent perceives that school staff don’t think they are doing a good job as caretakers, why would they trust the school? Certainly, there are many factors that contribute to a lack of trust between educators and families: the volume of day-to-day responsibilities, lack of time, language differences, etc. But bias also plays a big role in creating mistrust between home and

3 Bryk, A.S., and Schneider, B.L. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

4 Mapp and Bergman. *Embracing a New Normal*. P. 12.

school. Most educators (79%) agree that “more support is needed to help staff members identify and work through biases they may have when trying to communicate with families,” and an overwhelming majority of parents of all races (76%) share this sentiment.

Schools that excel in building (and restoring) trust invest the time in asking questions and unearthing family wisdom. They approach families from an asset-based lens. They view families’ “funds of knowledge” as critical and indispensable sources of learning material for their students.⁵ Such schools view time with families as useful and fulfilling for everyone involved. When educators reach out, they express an earnest desire to partner with families on behalf of their child. In this type of environment, teachers understand they have a lot to learn about their students from families, and the administration supports, promotes, and expects this type of approach.

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For trust to be a “team” activity, the whole staff should engage in strengthening relationships with families. This resonates with school leaders: 85% of principals in our survey agree that all staff have a role to play when it comes to family engagement. The key is to conceptualize the role of support staff as complementary to the core relationship between teachers and parents, since these two groups usually know the child best.

Schools across the country deploy many types of strategies to build trust with families. Here we offer a number of examples, from home visits to Zoom visits, local navigators, and creative school-wide initiatives to track (and change) who does most of the talking and who does most of the listening.

5 González, N., Moll, L.C., and Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. New York, NY: Routledge.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PILLAR IN ACTION

Prioritizing Listening

The Learning Community Charter School in Central Falls, Rhode Island, collected data comparing the amount of time that educators spoke with the amount of time that families spoke during family-teacher conferences. Educators compared the data over time and developed strategies to promote more listening. Today, every student's family has a one-on-one meeting at the start of the year with their child's teacher to share their hopes and dreams, along with details about their child's upbringing and experiences in school. Every conference starts with families talking first. To help start the conversation, teachers can use a series of questions chosen in collaboration with families, such as: How do you think school is going? Is your child happy coming to school? Do you have observations or advice for us? Teachers mostly listen, and when it comes time, they reiterate the school's values, including the importance of family voice.

This emphasis on listening is not a one-off. The school reinforces it in countless ways. At back-to-school night, families are asked to write or draw their hopes and dreams for the year. Teachers then place these testimonies outside classroom doors so that children and teachers walk past families' hopes for their child every time they walk into class. Given this inclusive vision, it is no surprise that the Learning Community has nearly 100% attendance at both back-to-school nights and family-teacher conferences. It also explains how families from the school community, most of whom live in poverty, came together during the pandemic to donate their stimulus checks to a family crisis fund that the school had established years ago. In this school community, people look out for each other. They see themselves as part of a team. And it's not just a feel-good story: students at the Learning Community far outperform their counterparts on all state measures.⁶



⁶ To learn more about how the Learning Community prioritized family engagement and how it has impacted student outcomes, see the complete case study in *Embracing a New Normal*.

Meeting Parents Where They Are - Literally

Parent-teacher home visits are a widely used approach to jump-start trusting relationships with families. The Sacramento, California-based nonprofit **Parent Teacher Home Visits** has trained teachers in more than 700 communities in 28 states and the District of Columbia on how to do this well. The organization emphasizes personalized outreach in which educators ask about parents' aspirations for their child in a deliberate effort to build trust. When these visits take place outside of the school building, it has the added benefit of shifting traditional power imbalances. Educators usually engage with families in places that are more comfortable for them and on topics more familiar to them, which places a burden on families to go beyond their comfort zone to connect with educators. Flipping this dynamic encourages families to [open up and collaborate](#) because they often want to reciprocate teachers' special efforts to build a different type of relationship.

[Research from Washington, D.C.](#) shows that students whose parents received a home visit experienced a 24% drop in absences and were 1.55 times more likely to score proficient in reading comprehension on the state test, even when controlling for prior attendance and comprehension scores.⁷ Qualitative [research](#) showed that families felt more comfortable and confident engaging with school staff after a home visit, and teachers who hadn't previously ventured into the community recognized deficit-based assumptions they had about students and families.

Everyone has biases. It is part of being human. What these experiences show is that we are more likely to examine them critically through real-life experiences that touch on the people we care about most – in this case, our students.

Even Light-Touch Outreach Can Make a Difference

During the pandemic, visiting students inside their homes became unfeasible. Yet many districts understood that even small attempts to build trust prior to the school year were more

⁷ Sheldon, S.B., and Jung, S.B. (2015). *The Family Engagement Partnership: Student Outcome Evaluation*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University School of Education, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships.

important than ever. Districts as far apart as **Chelsea, Massachusetts**, and **Port Townsend, Washington**, implemented a similar approach: simple one-on-one conversations between teachers and parents to help them get to know each other before the school year began. Some were called trust visits, others were called family partnership visits. In both cases, teachers reached out and hosted in a variety of ways – through Zoom, sidewalk visits, at high school football games, etc. In middle and high schools, the faculty divided up the student body so that every teacher had a reasonably sized cohort of students and every family had at least one teacher who would reach out. Critically, this effort had institutional support from the superintendents. They ensured that professional learning time was dedicated to training educators on the model and provided time for the visits, either by allocating time through collective bargaining or by paying teachers for additional time.

In **Metro Nashville Public Schools**, the central office developed a comprehensive navigator program to reach out to students during the launch of the 2020-21 school year. Thousands of staff members from across the district volunteered to serve as a navigator, each with a caseload of about six to 15 students. They checked in on kids and families every two weeks and offered support at a time when many students had been disconnected from school following the shutdown the previous spring. The district provided sample scripts and a referral process that navigators could use as they uncovered family needs. This system-wide effort led to almost 90% of the district's 72,000 students receiving regular phone calls or check-ins from an educator focused on building relationships and making sure that students and families felt heard in a time of need.

Proactive and Regular Communication Pays Off

At the start of the pandemic, many districts began surveying families to better understand their experiences and needs. Districts were confronted with the urgent desire to hear from families. They required information to make decisions. Unfortunately, district surveys have a history of being impersonal, clunky, and full of edu-speak. Plus, families are not accustomed to seeing how their responses lead to meaningful change. All this leads to low response rates,

which undermines the utility of the data. In other words, surveys often have a poor track record. So even though some districts experienced improved survey responses during the pandemic, surveys are simply not a substitute for trust and ongoing communication.

Cajon Valley Union School District in El Cajon, California, demonstrates how a [track record of building trust paid off during the pandemic](#). Unlike most districts serving predominantly low-income students, Cajon Valley was able to offer a fully in-person learning option throughout the 2020-21 school year. This stemmed in part from its sustained commitment to engaging with families in [open and transparent ways](#), including home visits, specialized one-on-one meetings to welcome newly arrived immigrant families, and funding for [professional development](#) that helps educators empathize with low-income families. When the pandemic began, Cajon Valley had already built its muscle. It was not relying on unproven methods in a time of crisis. A strong multilingual community liaison team, which existed prior to the pandemic to help build bridges between families and educators, coordinated hundreds of “empathy calls” and numerous public forums to help educators understand what families were going through. This inclined families to trust that schools were taking their views seriously even though sending kids to school felt scary in a community hit hard by the pandemic.



STUDENT LEARNING

Anchor Family Engagement Strategies in Student Learning and Well-Being



Family engagement is not an end in itself. The reason for building a trusting team of families and educators is to work together to deepen each child's learning and well-being. Only then will family engagement lead to meaningful changes for students. Too often, we see schools deploy their limited family engagement time on planning events or creating newsletters. These types of efforts can be helpful, but they tend to cast a wide net and do not address the essential work of student learning and development. During the pandemic, we've seen many schools understandably focus their family engagement efforts on

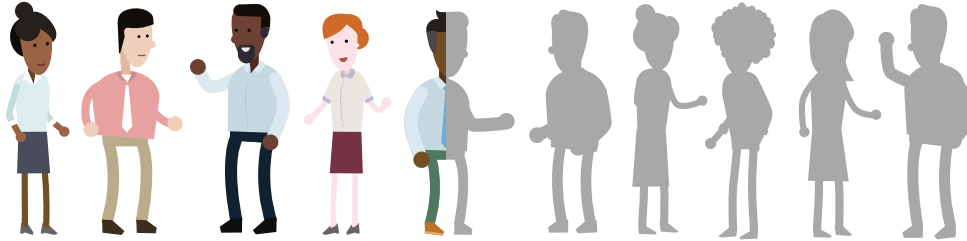
addressing basic needs. Removing barriers that get in the way of student learning and well-being is certainly an essential component of any comprehensive family engagement strategy. Without adequate access to food, internet access, or secure housing, for instance, how can a child engage with their schoolwork? Our focus is making sure that family engagement doesn't stop there.

When we asked parents what matters to them when it comes to their school's engagement efforts, they prioritized an accurate description of their child's performance and hearing the truth about their child's progress, even if it isn't positive. Teachers and principals also prioritize this goal. Yet our data has consistently shown that most parents have an inflated view of their child's performance. Nine out of 10



92%

of parents believe their child is at or above grade level



44%

of teachers believe most of their students are prepared for grade-level work

parents in America – regardless of race, income, or education level – believe their child is at or above grade level in reading and math, largely because they rely on report cards, and the vast majority of parents (84%) report seeing mostly A's and B's. Teachers, however, know the truth about grade-level performance: only 44% reported that most of their students would be prepared for grade-level work this year, which aligns more closely with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data.⁸ Thus, we have in this country a situation where everyone values an accurate picture – but most parents have an inaccurate picture.

When parents have a holistic and accurate understanding and are invited to contribute, they can engage with schools in the most productive ways to meet the specific needs of their child. Parents prioritize their individual children, and teachers prioritize the students in their classroom. Therefore, teachers' time on family engagement is most effective when it involves deliberately building relationships with parents and co-planning for student success.

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⁸ The Nation's Report Card. (2019). Retrieved from: nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/reading/2019 and nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/math/2019.

Student success should focus on the whole child, including their social, emotional, and academic development. Most parents identified developing the whole child (86%) and students' social and emotional skills (85%) as a very important or top priority for this school year. Teachers also strongly agree (68%) that family engagement strengthens the development of the whole child and gives students more support for their social and emotional needs (64%).

In our view, a trusting team includes the primary caretaker, the student's educator(s) and, whenever possible, the student. The team is on the right track when they:

- Have co-created a set of goals and milestones for the student
- Know how the student is progressing throughout the year
- Contribute their part in supporting the student to reach those goals
- Support one another in their efforts on behalf of the student



EXAMPLES OF THIS PILLAR IN ACTION

Joint Goal Setting and Tracking

Some districts are investing in a strategy called [Individual Student Success Planning](#). At the **Unity Point Consolidated School District 140** in rural southern Illinois, this means that essentially every student in the district has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). At the beginning of the year, every student, their teacher, and family meet to build a relationship, set goals, and determine needs based on a holistic view that takes into account student learning, mental health, out-of-school-time opportunities, and anything else that can make a difference for the child. Touch points throughout the year connect to this plan, with staff responsible for responding to needs as they emerge. Ultimately, student learning and development sit at the forefront of the collaboration between families and educators, with every stakeholder kept abreast of developments throughout the year. This strategy of open and consistent communication led to a vastly different pandemic experience than most districts – Unity

Point actually saw increased student enrollment in the 2021-22 school year and experienced minimal resistance to masks or other COVID-19 prevention measures.

Baltimore City Public Schools is attempting a similar approach with its nearly 80,000 students. Its [pandemic recovery plan](#) calls for “Student Learning Plans” for every student in the district, and a board policy from May 2021 lays out new expectations for family engagement that connect outreach efforts to student learning and well-being. For the 2021-22 school year, teachers are expected to co-create these plans with students and their families. As part of the process, teachers meet with families multiple times to build relationships, share data, and elicit families’ views on the way forward for their child.

Partnering with Outside Organizations to Implement Effective Models

To build stronger home-school teams that focus on student learning, many schools have turned to outside partners for a structured approach. **WestEd’s [Academic Parent-Teacher Teams](#)** is a widely used intervention that repurposes existing touch points, such as back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences, and turns them into data-rich experiences in which families and teachers get on the same page regarding student performance. Families and teachers then develop measurable goals, monitor them together over time, and share insights to support each other’s efforts at home and in school. That’s the promise of real teamwork.

Springboard Collaborative’s [Family-Educator Learning Accelerator](#) is a five- to 10-week program in which families and educators partner to achieve a shared reading goal for students. Students receive instruction outside the school day and families participate in workshops and regular communication with the assigned teacher, with an emphasis on active collaboration directed toward the shared reading goal. An [external evaluation](#) found that participating students were more likely than a matched control group to show improvement on reading assessments, with students below grade level achieving a three-month gain during the five-week program.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Invest in Building Systems and Structures That Enable This Work

A comprehensive family engagement strategy – like anything in schools – can only thrive with meaningful institutional support. For leaders who want to steer their ship in the direction we propose, the three organizational conditions of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework can serve as a compass:

- Systemic: Embraced by Leadership across the Organization
- Integrated: Embedded in All Strategies
- Sustained: With Resources and Infrastructure⁹

Ultimately, leaders signal their priorities by how they allocate the resources at their disposal.

This section offers a few specific, actionable recommendations to address these organizational conditions, based on insights from our data. These recommendations can be seen as individual building blocks that support an infrastructure to promote trusting teams focused on student learning at scale. District leaders will recognize these levers as the same ones that they use to address other educational priorities – define expectations, elevate the work, allocate time and training to build staff capacity, and seek partners. On their own, these recommendations do not lead to substantive change. But when brought together, they constitute individual components

⁹ Mapp and Bergman. Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2).

of a cohesive strategy. Ultimately, leaders signal their priorities by how they allocate the resources at their disposal. That is what we propose here. At a time when Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding makes new investments possible, we see an opening to fund new strategies that focus on creating systems and structures that enable long-term change in the home-school relationship.

In general, we approach systems-building from a learning perspective. Most educators have not witnessed excellent family engagement in schools and have not been trained or expected to improve their practice over time. Therefore, they don't necessarily have a clear picture of what this work looks like or how it can make their jobs easier. To build a new mental model, educators need support through a scaffolded learning journey. That's why the recommendations in this section are designed to support adult learning. Ultimately, we hope that any district's efforts to build an infrastructure are intentionally designed to help educators at every level improve and reflect on their growing family engagement practice.

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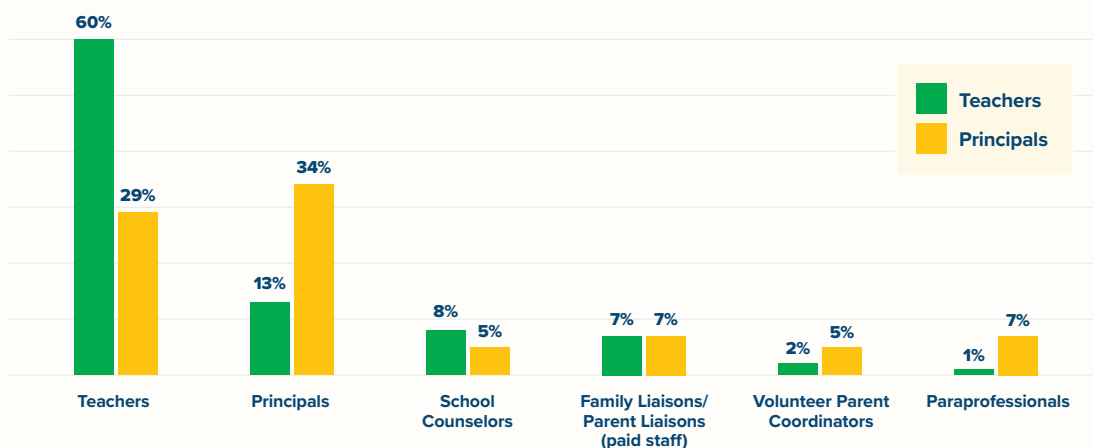
ELEMENTS AND EXAMPLES OF INFRASTRUCTURE IN ACTION

Defining Expectations and Competencies

Most [states have standards](#) for family engagement, but in our experience, few educators know what they are or value them the way they do content standards for what students should learn. Given this absence of clarity, our data reveal wide disagreement between teachers and principals on who owns the primary responsibility for family engagement. We agree with teachers – they are (and should be) primarily responsible for partnering with families because

they work closest with students. All other staff responsibilities should facilitate and support teacher-family relationships. We recommend that schools and districts work with families to define – in plain language – the purpose of effective engagement, what it looks like, and what improvements are expected over time. Ideally these standards connect to the imperative for building trust and teamwork and are incorporated into a district’s human resources decisions.

Who has the primary responsibility for family engagement at your school?



Baltimore City Public Schools has attempted this approach in response to the pandemic. The district’s newly revised and board-adopted [family and community engagement policy](#) states: “Baltimore City Public Schools believes that family and community engagement is a shared responsibility and essential component for improving the academic outcomes of our students.” The policy requires use of an implementation rubric, co-developed with parent leaders from across the city, to improve family engagement practice in each of the city’s 162 schools. District leaders don’t expect perfect implementation in the first year. The policy and rubric offer a structure to build on. Teachers and principals will now have a clear target for their efforts.

Treating It Like a Priority. Bringing It to the C-Suite.

Most districts have a staff member who oversees family engagement work. However, these family engagement leaders often work outside of the top decision-making team. For family engagement to be a priority, it needs to be treated like one. As *Embracing a New Normal* notes, “Schools and systems are complex organizations with many competing priorities, so any issue not funded and designated as a top priority gets relegated to the morass of bureaucratic to-do lists.”¹⁰

Districts such as **Baltimore City**, and **Richmond, Virginia**, provide examples where family engagement leaders sit on the district cabinet. In Baltimore, the family-centered response to the pandemic shows strong cabinet-level leadership for family engagement, which elevates, funds, and integrates this work across the system. The chief in charge of community engagement works closely with all other members of the cabinet to oversee this vision.

In Richmond, the chief engagement officer has intentionally [built the Department of Family and Community Engagement](#) using the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, with a focus on strengthening educator capacity and integrating family engagement strategies into the core work of teaching and learning. For example, the district chose to invest heavily in addressing chronic absenteeism in response to the pandemic. The family and community engagement lead was able to frame absenteeism as a family engagement issue and had the authority to convene a working group, which includes principals’ supervisors, the district’s data-science lead, the technology director, and others. That led to a new comprehensive strategy anchored in a live data dashboard, considerable training and support for principals and their family engagement teams, and a large increase in outreach to families. As a result, some schools have decreased their absenteeism by more than 30%.

10 Mapp and Bergman. *Embracing a New Normal*. P. 22.

Such work looks quite different for the superintendent of the 1,175-student **Port Townsend School District** in Washington. She goes on visits and delivers the professional development herself. But the commitment is similar. She ensures that the district devotes one of two professional development days each summer to planning for community visits, as well as an additional day in the fall to share what they've learned. She allocates time for teachers to collaborate on family engagement during the school day, pays teachers for their time to do visits outside the school day, and has tools to track the work. Regardless of a district's size or composition, leadership has to clear the runway for meaningful family engagement to take off.

Making Time for It

Unsurprisingly, teachers rate time regularly set aside for family engagement as the most helpful resource among a series of school structures and supports included in our survey, but the least likely to be in place. Asking teachers to do more with less simply doesn't work, and it contributes to burnout and resentment toward families. There's no way around it. Schools that excel make a point of allocating enough time for their staff to collaborate with families. Most schools expect teachers to work with families in some capacity, and during the pandemic many schools added time into teachers' schedules for communicating with families. But too often the amount of time devoted to this just is not enough or it gets used for other purposes. If staff are asked to work outside of their contracts, then they should be paid for it. One way or another, districts can always find ways to integrate family engagement as a core component of a teacher's role and responsibility if they see it as a priority.

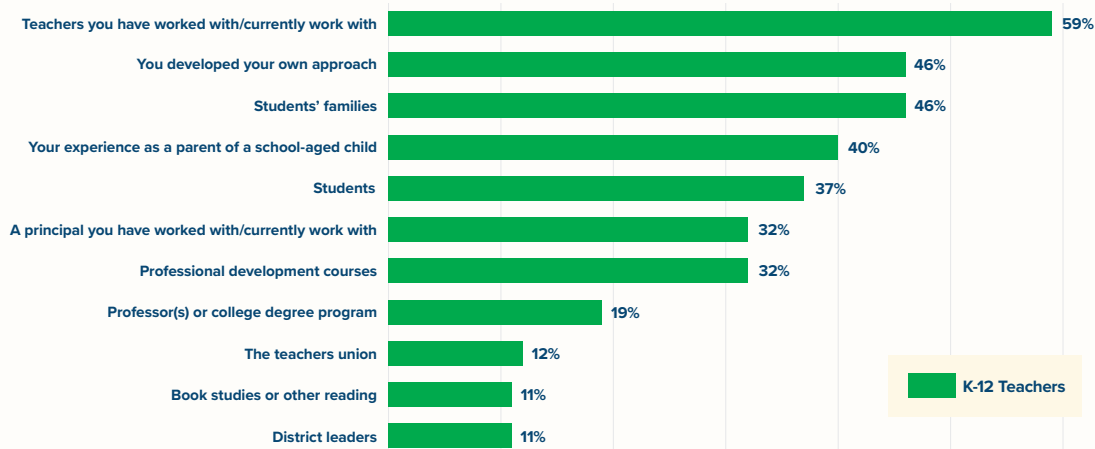
There are many paths to adding and integrating time into daily schedules. For instance, in **St. Paul, Minnesota**, the teachers union brought home visits and Academic Parent-Teacher Teams to the collective bargaining table. Today, the [employment contract](#) stipulates \$336,000 to pay staff for participating in these initiatives, as well as additional stipends and full-time equivalent payments to support implementation. In **Baltimore City**, principals are responsible for ensuring that contractual time already allocated for staff training and collaboration are directed toward developing Student Learning Plans for every child in their school. At the same time, the district has allocated new funding for one staff member at each school to be paid additional time to

serve as a school-level coordinator for Student Learning Plans. The central office trains these individuals and supports implementation at their schools. In both examples, districts found the time and/or brought in additional resources. If the purpose is adult learning, then ensuring sufficient time on task is critical.

Focusing Resources on Staff Development (and Less on Trying to Change Families' Behaviors)

Our data show that teachers primarily rely on informal sources for their training about family engagement, such as other teachers or personal experiences. Fewer than one-fifth (19%) of teachers cite any training on family engagement in their pre-service programs, and fewer than one-third report participation in professional development (32%). Unfortunately, most districts invest in building the capacity of families only, which is why we see so many districts hiring parent liaisons to support families or creating workshops to train them. These initiatives are not bad or wrong – they are certainly part of a comprehensive strategy. But they are incomplete if they constitute the whole strategy because they imply that families are the only ones who need to change or require support. Hence, the word “*dual*” in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework.

Which of the following have influenced your approach to family engagement?



We urge districts to focus on strengthening educators' capacity to team up with families. While professional development sessions with colleagues are important for building foundational knowledge, educators are most likely to develop new family engagement skills when they interact with real families in ways that are fundamentally different from the prevailing methods they are used to. For instance, when educators deliberately listen rather than talk, or cede the agenda to families, or meet with families in the community instead of the school, it flips the traditional dynamics that characterize home-school communication. These can be “aha” moments for educators. In communities of color where the teaching staff is predominantly white, these can become what the scholar Mark Warren calls “seminal experiences,” or catalyzing moments that galvanize white people to embrace racial justice.¹¹ Either way, simply trying different ways of reaching out to families can serve as rich learning experiences for educators, particularly if they are unpacked thoughtfully among colleagues. If properly scaffolded, these experiences can be used to design new family engagement strategies, especially if educators receive ongoing guidance and support from their leaders and content experts.

The Learning Community Charter School in Central Falls, Rhode Island, has an ethos of experimentation and ongoing improvement when it comes to collaborating with families. In its early years, the school did things like hosting IEP meetings in family homes and office hours in the community. The point wasn't just to be accessible, it was to experience family engagement from a novel perspective as a means of engaging in deliberate experimentation that would yield new lessons, which could then be applied to deepen the work over time. These days, families are invited to the staff's summer professional learning sessions to share their experiences and co-design the school's priorities for the year. Teachers sit on interview panels and have a keen sense of the type of asset-based language they want to hear from prospective candidates. There are countless examples of families teaching staff members what works when it comes to community engagement. The key is the deliberate attempt – and allocated resources – to structure learning experiences for staff members, and to see families as the holders of indispensable wisdom for improving the school.

11 Warren, M.R. (2010). *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Seeking Partners

Districts can augment their own family engagement efforts by partnering with community-based organizations with close ties to families. Strong local community groups often have built deeper trust with members of the community and they typically want to collaborate with schools because few things matter to a community more than its schools. Yet partnerships are not always smooth. By sharing resources and making joint decisions, schools and districts can model authentic partnership, which encourages local leaders to prioritize their support for school initiatives.

Each community will have its own set of organizations. From a national perspective, **EdNavigator** partners with businesses and community-based organizations to connect families with personal education advisers or “navigators,” who bring an inside perspective on local schools and stay with the same families year after year. Families can connect with the navigator in person after work or through a mobile app. Navigators help families understand their child’s education needs, address education challenges, find the right school for their child, and generally support the family in navigating their child’s education in whatever way is most important to them. As a result, 93% of users say their navigator is their most trusted source of information and advice about schools. Community-based partners don’t remove districts’ and schools’ responsibility for meaningful family engagement but they can be part of a comprehensive strategy.



Conclusion

Our research affirms what anyone who has ever cared for a child or worked in a school knows intuitively – the home-school relationship matters for kids. Yet family engagement isn't typically treated as a core priority in public education. The pandemic has made that painfully apparent. We hope that the data and insights uncovered in our surveys – which show that overwhelming majorities of parents, teachers, and principals want to work together on behalf of students – can be matched with thoughtful strategies and serious investments that meet our current moment. There is no better way to soothe the pain surrounding schools today than to lean into relationships. It's what we all turn to when times are tough. We stand ready to support and learn alongside those who are invested in designing a new way forward on home-school relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to our colleagues in the districts and organizations cited in this report. Thank you for your tireless work and for helping us understand it. Much appreciation to Dr. Karen L. Mapp and Ron Mirr for their thoughtful reviews, and a special thank you to Lynn Olson for her insightful feedback at every step of the way. This report is much better because of all of you.

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Parents 2021 Survey Methodology



PARENT SURVEY

- ★ Nationwide sample of **1,481 parents and guardians** with children in public school, grades K-12
- ★ Fielded September 7th-27th, 2021
- ★ Offered in both English and Spanish
- ★ Data were weighted to be representative of public school parents in the U.S.



EDUCATOR SURVEY

- ★ Nationwide sample of **305 teachers and 304 principals** in public schools, grades K-12
- ★ Fielded September 8th-28th, 2021
- ★ Data were weighted to be representative of public school teachers and principals in the U.S.

For more information on survey results and methodology, please visit
www.bealearninghero.org/research

How We Support Our Partners

Learning Heroes works with states, districts, schools, and organizations that want to strengthen their family engagement practice. Our goal is to improve student learning and well-being, and to facilitate home-school connections as an engine for equity in schools.



SUPPORTING STATES, SCHOOLS, AND DISTRICTS

- ★ **Leadership Training Institute:** A cohort-based community of practice for school and district leaders. Through a problem of practice and one-on-one coaching, participants learn to design and execute a more effective family engagement strategy.
- ★ **Professional Learning for Educators:** A customized four-part series with real-world video exemplars on how to team up with families – focused on trust building and a shared understanding of student progress and development.
- ★ **Customized Communications:** We build and customize research-based parent- and educator-facing communications.
- ★ **Research with Parents and Educators:** Modeled after our national research, we conduct focus groups and surveys at the state and local level to gain insights on attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and actions.

Learning Heroes Tools and Resources

EDUCATOR RESOURCES

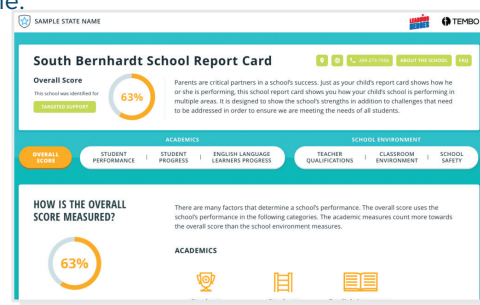
Building Connections with Families

- ★ **Parent-Teacher Planning Tool (and Teacher Guide)** – Designed to maximize existing touchpoints like parent-teacher conferences, this simple tool helps teachers elicit parent and student observations and share data with families to co-create a learning plan.
- ★ **A Principal's Guide to Leading in the Time of a Pandemic** – Developed in partnership with the National

Association of Elementary School Principals and National PTA, and customized for the Leadership Academy, this guide has strategies and resources to help school leaders and educators form strong school-home partnerships.

Parent-Friendly Reporting and Accountability

- ★ **Annual State Test Report** – Websites and communications that help parents understand their child’s state test score report and how to use it to better support learning at home.
- ★ **School Report Card** – An ESSA-compliant school report card template, currently in use in several states.
- ★ **Parent-Facing Communications** – Websites, parent guides, and portals that help parents understand where their child is academically, and actions they can take on behalf of their child.



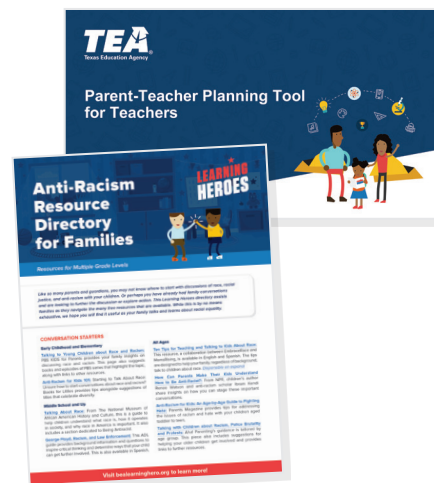
Facilitator Guides and Workshops

- ★ **Developing Life Skills and How Learning Happens** – Facilitator’s guide, videos, and more to unpack the connection between social, emotional, and academic learning with families.
- ★ **Summer REcharge Workshop for Parent Coordinators** – An end-of-year or summer workshop to engage with families about supporting social, emotional, and academic skills.

CUSTOMIZED FAMILY RESOURCES

Year-Round Tools to Support Families in Teaming up with Schools

- ★ **Anti-Racism Resource Directory** – This directory helps parents and educators lead discussions about anti-racism and social justice.
- ★ **Learning Hero Roadmap** – From what grade-level expectations look like to how to support life skills, this interactive Roadmap helps families find resources on a range of topics.
- ★ **Paths to Success** – This interactive webpage helps parents set their child up for success in high school and beyond by providing key milestones, resources, and tips.



Partnering with Teachers Around a Shared Understanding of Progress and Development

- ★ **Readiness Check** – An interactive tool that helps parents see how their child is progressing in foundational math and reading skills and connects them to skill-specific videos, activities, and more to support learning at home.
- ★ **The “Dear Teacher” Letter** – A personalized letter to help families jumpstart the relationship by introducing their family, what makes them special, and sharing their hopes and goals for their child.
- ★ **Team Up for Success** – An ongoing series of free, research-based tools and resources to help families partner with educators at key points throughout the year.



APPENDIX

LEARNING HEROES

Leadership Look Fors

This tool is designed to support school principals in reflecting on their family engagement leadership. Similar to a guide that supports learning walks, it offers specific examples of what to “look for” in order to identify how the three pillars of effective family engagement are showing up in practice.

PILLAR ONE

TRUST

How principals model good practice and promote trust-building in the school:

- ★ **Prioritize deep listening** — Use every opportunity to ask families questions. Seek to understand families' funds of knowledge, what they care about, and what they already do to support their children.
- ★ **Be honest** — Always be truthful and transparent with families. Everyone wants and deserves to know the truth about how their child is doing in school, even if it hurts.
- ★ **Focus on strengths** — Use asset-based language when you talk to staff about families, especially when families do things that staff disagree with.
- ★ **Share positive news** — Parents often report they only hear from schools when something bad happened, so ensure that staff are regularly connecting with families to share positive updates.
- ★ **Share the power** — Allow families to decide where you will meet, when you will meet, and what you will discuss.
- ★ **Meet families where they are (literally)** — Do relationship-building visits in the community and mobilize resources to promote this approach with staff.
- ★ **Build community amongst families** — Intentionally introduce families to each other to strengthen families' social ties and connection to the school.
- ★ **Ask staff about their students' families** — Create space for staff to share what they are learning about families, especially regarding their funds of knowledge, and their hopes and dreams for their child.
- ★ **Examine and address biases** — Biases play a key role in shaping how educators see families and they contribute to mistrust. Consider how bias shows up for yourself and discuss the role of bias with staff and colleagues.
- ★ **Elevate key questions to determine your school's trustworthiness** — Ask yourself and your staff the following questions, which are rooted in the core components of relational trust¹ (respect, competence, integrity, personal regard):
 - Do we seek input from, and do we listen to and value, what all families have to say? (Respect)
 - Do we demonstrate to all families that we see them as competent and valuable caretakers? (Competence)
 - Do we keep our word with families? (Integrity)
 - Do we show families that we value and care about them as people? (Personal regard)
- ★ **Lead the learning** — Model your own learning by sharing how your trust-building with families is making you better at your job. Also, provide time during staff meetings and on training days for staff to reflect on their trust-building with families.

1 This article [summarizes the seminal research](#) linking relational trust to student and school improvement.

PILLAR TWO

STUDENT LEARNING & WELL-BEING

To promote authentic teacher-family collaboration, principals support teachers to:

- ★ **Co-design learning plans** — Provide time so every student starts the year with a plan that is designed with input from the family, teacher, and student.
- ★ **Share key expectations** — Teachers help ensure families know the most important grade-level skills students are expected to master by the end of the year.
- ★ **Discuss data in jargon-free ways** — Time is set aside throughout the year to help families understand the multiple data points teachers are using to assess student learning and well-being, and families have time to ask questions and clarify their understanding.
- ★ **Value what families are doing at home** — Teachers ask what families are doing at home to support learning and well-being, and they ask what additional support might be helpful.
- ★ **Adjust teaching practice** — All staff are able to cite examples of how their day-to-day work is influenced by what they learned from families.

To lead school-wide efforts, principals:

- ★ **Model co-design** — Work with families to design a thoughtful process that helps them contribute meaningfully to school-wide planning and goal setting.
- ★ **Share their own goals and updated data** — Regularly share the most important whole-school goals and school-wide progress through channels that families prefer.
- ★ **Check for understanding with families** — Regularly talk with a cross-section of families to find out what they think about their child's goals and progress.
- ★ **Show families how to use the parent portal** — At a minimum, help every family access the real-time data the district makes available to them. If it is outside of a principal's sphere of control to ensure the data is jargon-free and available in multiple languages, advocate for these changes with district leadership.
- ★ **Co-create purposeful school-wide events** — Engage families as co-planners and co-leaders for all family events (families should be helping define the content). Ensure that each event provides families an opportunity to build trust with their child's teacher, understand their child's progress, and practice what they can do at home to support.
- ★ **Lead the learning** — Model and practice data-sharing conversations with staff and families, including navigating difficult conversations. Provide time during staff meetings and on training days for staff to reflect on their collaborations with families.

PILLAR THREE

INFRASTRUCTURE

Principals who champion family engagement invest in building an infrastructure in the following ways:

- ★ **Define roles, expectations, and growth** — Work with staff and families to define what strong family engagement should look like and what each person's responsibilities are. Support staff in making home-school partnerships a part of their professional growth plan, and use both formal and informal evaluations to advance staff learning on family engagement.
- ★ **Make time for 1-on-1s** — Solo facetime between teachers and families is indispensable for trust-building and true collaboration. Allocate time for it and/or repurpose existing family-facing initiatives.
- ★ **Put it on the meeting agenda** — Use agenda-setting privileges to elevate discussions on trust-building and collaborations with families. Use staff meetings, grade-level meetings, department meetings, committee meetings, PLC meetings, and all other collaborative spaces to integrate family voice into decision making.
- ★ **Put it on the PD calendar** — Staff need training. The best family engagement PD involves families and teachers publicly sharing what they are learning through their improving trust and collaboration with each other.
- ★ **Put it in the budget** — Deploy financial resources to promote deeper trust and stronger collaborations with families.
- ★ **Put it in the interview** — Reward asset-based views of families and experience with family engagement in hiring and promotional practices.
- ★ **Lead the Action Team** — Be an active member of the school's family engagement committee. Make sure the school's team has equal family and staff voice, that the team meets consistently, and is focused on trust-building and student learning.
- ★ **Structure the Family Liaison role as a bridge (if the school has a Liaison)** — Teachers know their students best, so that's who families need to collaborate with. Instead of deploying Liaisons as office staff or service providers, leverage their relationships with both families and staff to intentionally strengthen the family-teacher relationship.
- ★ **Reward staff & elevate mentorship** — Recognize staff who prioritize family engagement in their work, and intentionally connect them with less-effective teachers in order to build the capacity across the school.
- ★ **Manage up** — Share successes, learnings, and what is needed with supervisors and members of district leadership.
- ★ **Lead the learning** — Broadly share what is being learned about institutionalizing this work with staff colleagues and the school community.



★ **LEARNING** **HEROES**

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