



# The Engagement Advantage

Findings from a Mixed-Methods Study  
on Family-School Partnerships

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## Letter from Study Advisor, Dr. Karen Mapp

In early 2022, as scholars and practitioners began making sense of the pandemic's impact, one thing became immediately clear: many schools needed to engage families more effectively.

That spring, I joined an online convening for the launch of [Unlocking the How: Designing Family Engagement Strategies that Lead to Student Success](#), a report authored by my collaborator and former student, Dr. Eyal Bergman. During that conversation, I shared what I had observed through multiple conversations with district leaders during the pandemic: two years after schools had shuttered, those that had prioritized family engagement *beforehand* appeared to be experiencing stronger outcomes for students. There was broad agreement that this hypothesis merited rigorous study, and a funder stepped forward to support the work.

Since then, Learning Heroes and TNTP have partnered to design the three-stage Family Engagement Impact Study, and I have had the pleasure of serving as an advisor. After more than 25 years in the field of family engagement, I knew how important and timely it would be to thoroughly examine the impact of family engagement on student outcomes and to identify the practices that truly make a difference for students.

The study's methodology is rigorous, and the findings are striking. Schools with strong pre-pandemic family engagement indeed experienced better outcomes after the pandemic, and while we expected to see a relationship between engagement and chronic absenteeism, we were stunned to find that family engagement was more strongly associated with differences in chronic absenteeism than poverty. Through interviews with more than 100 educators and families, the study also surfaced clear, actionable practices that set these schools apart.

I could not be more excited to share the findings of this study, and I am even more eager to see how practitioners, scholars, and policymakers apply what we know: strong family engagement is consistently linked to better outcomes for students—even, and perhaps especially, in times of disruption.



Sincerely,

*Karen L. Mapp*

**Dr. Karen Mapp**, Professor of Practice  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

# Executive Summary

Though all schools were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, not all were impacted equally. Anecdotal evidence from the field—particularly from scholars and education leaders—informed our hypothesis that strong family engagement practices grounded in trust and focused on student learning and well-being were key pre-pandemic conditions that led to stronger post-pandemic outcomes. In other words, we wanted to test whether or not schools with strong family engagement had a unique advantage during the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic represented a unique opportunity to deepen our understanding of the importance and role of family engagement as a key condition of excellent schools.

In late 2022, Learning Heroes—in partnership with TNTP and with guidance from Dr. Karen Mapp and Dr. Todd Rogers at Harvard University—launched the Family Engagement Impact Study to test our hypothesis and better understand the relationship between family engagement and academic outcomes. This mixed-methods study consists of three stages: Testing Our Hypothesis, Identifying Distinguishing Factors, and Improving Measurement.

While the third stage of the study is still underway, the following report provides a detailed discussion of the study's methodology and findings from Stages 1 and 2.

## STAGE 1: Testing Our Hypothesis

In the first stage, we sought to answer the following question: To what extent were schools with strong family engagement prior to the pandemic better equipped to withstand the academic impacts of disruptions in schooling? To answer this question, we used publicly available data from the 5Essentials survey in Illinois to conduct a statistical analysis of the association between schools' family engagement scores in 2019 and student outcomes in 2022. We used the 5Essentials survey because, based on our in-depth interviews with family engagement experts, it emerged as the most rigorous and comprehensive tool available for measuring family engagement at the school level.

Across numerous key outcomes (e.g., chronic absenteeism, attendance rates, and ELA and math achievement), we found that schools with strong family engagement had better outcomes, even after controlling for approximately two dozen student and community

### The 5Essentials Survey

Since 2013, [the 5Essentials survey](#), developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, has been administered in nearly 4,000 Illinois schools. The survey has been rigorously validated through longitudinal research, and nearly 75% of teachers respond each year. While the data is limited to schools in one state, the survey has national relevance: Illinois is [the most demographically representative state](#) in the country across race, income, and geography.

The 5Essentials survey measures schools' strengths in five key areas related to school improvement: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Supportive Environment, Ambitious Instruction, and Involved Families.

Each school that uses the 5Essentials survey receives an Involved Families score, which measures the strength of family engagement across three constructs:

- Parent influence on decision-making in schools
- Parent involvement in school
- Teacher-parent trust

characteristics. This connection between family engagement and student outcomes was not a surprise, but the *magnitude* was striking: the effect size of family engagement on chronic absenteeism was larger than the effect size of poverty. In other words, the data showed that family engagement had a stronger relationship with chronic absenteeism than poverty. This finding suggests that when a school invests in building strong relationships with families, it may help mitigate the impact of poverty on student outcomes, presenting a meaningful opportunity to address income inequality in schools.

***Family engagement had a stronger relationship with chronic absenteeism than poverty.***

## STAGE 2: Identifying Distinguishing Factors

At the end of Stage 1, we knew that schools with strong family engagement had better outcomes for students, but we wanted to know: What are schools with strong family engagement doing differently that leads to better outcomes? In Stage 2, we sought to identify the factors that led to better-than-expected outcomes using a qualitative methodology centered on in-depth conversations with principals, teachers, and families.

Using 5Essentials data, we first designed a rigorous sampling approach to identify “Bright Spot” schools that consistently outperform expectations on family engagement. Then, for each Bright Spot school, we identified a “Partner” school that was a very close match across key characteristics (e.g., same district, same local community, and very similar student populations). The only difference was that Partner schools had weaker family engagement and student outcomes. We interviewed more than 100 educators and families across Bright Spots and Partner schools to understand what practices and mindsets distinguished Bright Spot schools from others in the same communities.

We found four distinguishing factors that set Bright Spot schools apart: Mindsets, Leadership, Communication, and Relationships.

### Distinguishing Factors at Bright Spot Schools

- **Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners** | Educators and families emphasize a shared belief that they are on the same team and are equal partners in helping students succeed.
- **Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure** | Leaders provide a cohesive vision for family engagement and inspire their staff by modeling its importance, communicating clear expectations, and creating accountability structures.
- **Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering** | Schools emphasize proactive, consistent, and persistent communication with families in one-on-one interactions focused on academics.
- **Relationships: Personal & Enduring** | Schools show evidence of deep, personal connections with students and families that extend beyond the school building and the school year.

### Partnering Across Language & Cultural Differences: More Than Just Translation

We also surfaced an important finding that cuts across the four distinguishing factors: in communities with large English Learner populations, Bright Spot schools go beyond language access. While educators at Partner schools emphasized having communications in multiple languages, educators at Bright Spot schools also emphasized practices like student-mediated interactions to bridge cultural differences and offering support services to families.

# Testing our Hypothesis

## Methodology

We launched the study with a planning phase to ground our work in existing literature and identify the most appropriate dataset for measuring family engagement in schools. Our literature review emphasized studies that examined large disruptions to schooling, including the COVID-19 pandemic. We also conducted in-depth interviews with 18 leading researchers and practitioners in the field of family engagement to deepen our understanding of what was (and was not) known about the relationship between family engagement and student outcomes, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Critically, these interviews indicated that the most rigorous and comprehensive tool for measuring family engagement in schools was the **5Essentials survey**.

To understand the effect of family engagement on student outcomes, we applied a statistical model. The key input was schools' 2019 Involved Families Score on the 5Essentials survey. We controlled for more than 20 school and community characteristics, including prior achievement, school size, the percentage of low-income students, student demographics, and civic engagement.

### Inputs, Statistical Controls & Outcomes

#### KEY INPUT

##### Strength of Engagement

Using the "Involved Families" score from the 5Essentials Teacher Survey.



#### STATISTICAL CONTROLS

##### School and Community Characteristics

Using public data that captures differences across schools, such as student demographics, census data, and the 2019 outcome of interest.



#### KEY OUTCOMES

##### Schoolwide Student-Based Measures

Including student attendance, enrollment, achievement, growth, and survey-based perceptions.

By applying these statistical controls, we were able to estimate the relationship between family engagement and several key student outcomes, including chronic absenteeism, attendance rates, and ELA and math achievement.

With the controls in place, we divided the population of schools in the sample into two groups:


- **Schools with strong family engagement** had an Involved Families score in the 90th percentile.
- **Schools with weak family engagement** had an Involved Families score in the 10th percentile.

A detailed overview of our analysis, including a comprehensive description of our statistical controls, modeling approach, and outputs of interest, can be found in the [Technical Appendix](#).

**In our analysis . . .**

**Schools with Weak Family Engagement** had an Involved Families score in the 10th percentile

**Schools with Strong Family Engagement** had an Involved Families score in the 90th percentile



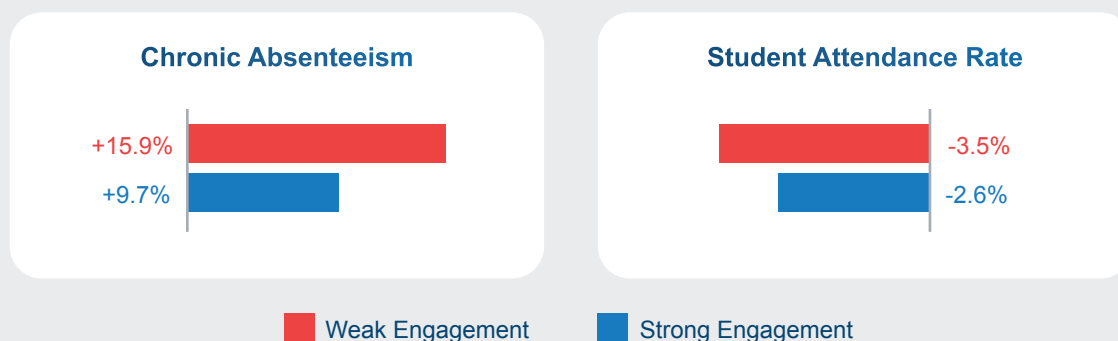
**But are otherwise very similar...**

- Same 2018–2019 outcomes...
- Served same proportion of low-income students...
- Served the same grade levels...
- We're located in the same type of community...

## Key Findings

Our comparative analysis of post-pandemic outcomes reveals what we call “the engagement advantage”: schools with strong family engagement performed better across key measures of school performance, with **strong pre-pandemic family engagement consistently associated with better-than-expected post-pandemic student outcomes**.

### Typical change in attendance outcomes from 2018-19 to 2021-22 by strength of family engagement



In schools with strong family engagement, the post-pandemic increase in chronic absenteeism rates was more than six percentage points *lower* than in schools with weak family engagement. That equated to a 39% smaller increase in chronic absenteeism. In a school with 1,000 students, that equates to 62 fewer chronically absent students.

Similarly, the decline in attendance rates was 25% smaller at schools with strong family engagement. In a school with 1,000 students, that difference is equivalent to 1,600 fewer absences each year.

The impact of family engagement on attendance also has implications for school funding. In states like Illinois, where districts are funded based on average daily attendance, that 1,000-student school would be able to access approximately \$90,000 more in funding per year.<sup>1</sup>

While the relationship between strong family engagement and lower rates of chronic absenteeism was not necessarily surprising, the magnitude of the effect was groundbreaking: The effect size of family engagement on chronic absenteeism was **larger than the effect size of poverty**.

After controlling for all available data in our model, we found that poverty accounted for a 5.7-percentage-point increase in chronic absenteeism when comparing schools in the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles of poverty. By comparison, the difference between schools in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles of the family engagement score accounts for a 6.2-percentage-point decrease in chronic absenteeism.

This finding indicates that sustained investment in family engagement may help mitigate the effects of poverty on student outcomes, highlighting a meaningful lever for reducing income-based disparities in schools.

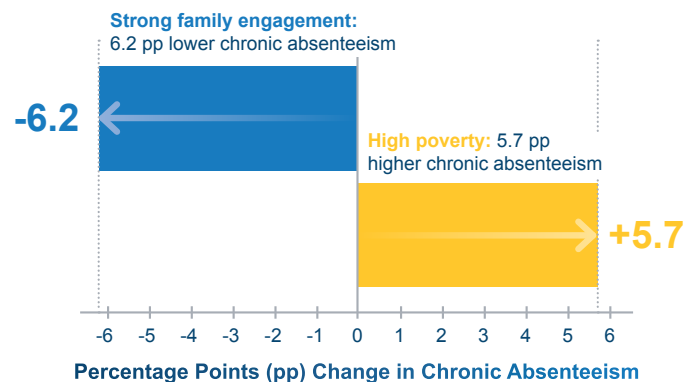
## Family engagement was associated with a larger difference in chronic absenteeism than poverty

### Keeping all measured characteristics the same . . .

. . . The estimated **difference** in chronic absenteeism between a school with weak **family engagement** and a school with strong family engagement\*

**compared to**

. . . The estimated **difference** in chronic absenteeism between a school that serves a low percent of **low-income students** and a school that serves a high percent of low-income students\*\*

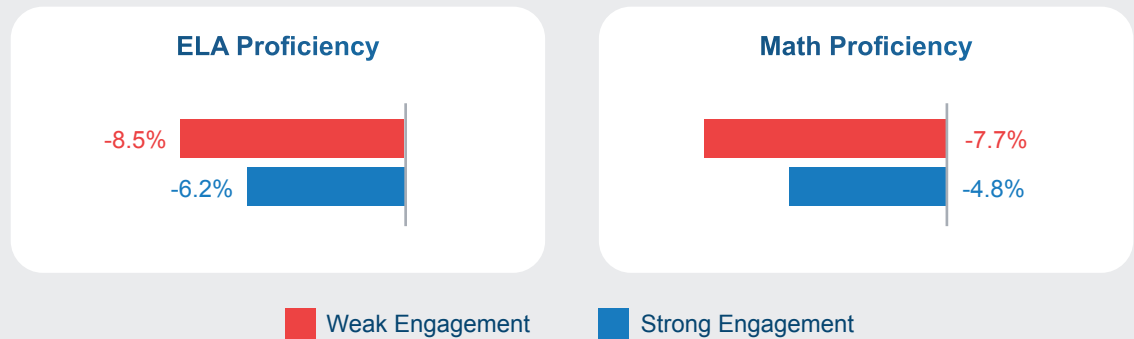


\*Schools with "weak family engagement" have Involved Families scores in the 10th percentile, and schools with "strong family engagement" have Involved Families scores in the 90th percentile. The Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. The 10th percentile is equivalent to an Involved Families score of 26 and the 90th percentile is equivalent to a score of 78.

\*\*Schools with "a low percent of low-income students" have a low-income student population in the 10th percentile, and schools with "a high percent of low-income students" have a low-income student population in the 90th percentile. The percent of low-income students in a school ranges from 0-100%. The 10th percentile is equivalent to 15% low-income students and the 90th percentile is equivalent to 93% low-income students.

1 This figure is based on typical inputs from the 2022 Illinois State Board of Education Report Card: the budget of 500-student school, with 180 days of instruction was approximately \$5,040,000, which equates to \$56 of allocated funding per student, per day. We multiplied the daily allocation of \$56 by the number of school days, the number of students in our hypothetical school (1000), and the 0.9 percentage point difference in attendance rates at a school with strong family engagement (compared to schools with weak family engagement). The total difference in funding would equate to \$90,720. Source: <https://isbe.net/ilreportcarddata>

## Typical change in proficiency outcomes from 2018-19 to 2021-22 by strength of family engagement



Schools with strong family engagement also experienced smaller declines in ELA and math proficiency rates. The decline in ELA proficiency was 2.3 percentage points smaller in schools with strong family engagement—a 27% smaller decline. Similarly, the decline in math proficiency was 2.9 percentage points smaller, representing a 37% smaller decline. In a school with 1,000 students, that equates to approximately 22 more students meeting ELA proficiency standards and 28 more students meeting state standards in math.

### Effect of strong family engagement was similar to the effect of in-person instruction during 2020-2021

Difference in **ELA** proficiency was equal to

**114**

In-person days instead of remote

Difference in **Math** proficiency was equal to

**96**

In-person days instead of remote

The difference we observe for schools with stronger family engagement is so large that it is comparable to having 114 additional days of in-person learning in ELA and 96 additional days in math. This finding is particularly important given [existing research](#) on the pandemic's impact on student outcomes, which suggests that districts that spent more time in remote instruction experienced weaker academic outcomes for students.

Taken together, the Stage 1 findings suggest that investing in family engagement may lead to better outcomes for students, especially in the context of large-scale disruptions. However, an important question remained: **What were the distinguishing factors that set apart schools with strong family engagement?** To answer this question, we began Stage 2 of our analysis.

# Identifying Distinguishing Factors

## Methodology

To compare schools with stronger and weaker family engagement, we used a positive deviance approach—an [asset-based methodology](#) designed to help us understand why some schools outperform their peers even when contexts and resources are nearly identical.

To perform this comparison, we used statistical modeling to predict the Involved Families scores on 5Essentials for schools in Illinois based on publicly available data. This expected Involved Families score included over a dozen factors, such as student enrollment, grade band, per-pupil expenditures, and the percentage of low-income and English Learner students (see our [Technical Appendix](#) for more details).

We then compared the expected scores to the actual scores for nearly every school in Illinois, which allowed us to identify “Bright Spot” schools with significantly higher-than-expected Involved Families scores.

The chart to the right displays these findings. It includes a gray dot for nearly every school in Illinois. For example, we can see that one school’s actual Involved Families score of 82 was roughly *double* what we would expect. In other words, while there are schools that score higher than 82, the average for schools that closely resemble this one is only 40. This suggests that this school is outperforming its most comparable peers based on student and school characteristics.

### Identifying potential Bright Spot schools



## Identifying Bright Spot & Partner Schools

The chart to the right shows the eligible Bright Spot and Partner schools. Bright Spots were schools ranked in the top 20% for overperformance for two years in a row. To be eligible to participate in the study, each Bright Spot also needed a matched Partner school that was highly similar across key characteristics: in the same district, in the same local community, and serving very similar student populations. However, Partner schools scored at or below the 50th percentile on family engagement.

As a result, Partner schools closely resembled their Bright Spot peers in almost every way, but had weaker family engagement and lower student outcomes.

To assemble a representative sample, we selected schools that reflected the demographics of the state. We included elementary, middle, and high schools; schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas; schools serving higher- and lower socioeconomic communities; and a mix of student demographics that collectively approximated statewide averages across a range of key variables (see chart below).

### Identifying Bright Spot & Partner schools



### Demographics and outcomes of Bright Spot and Partner schools

Demographics	All Potential Schools	Bright Spots	Partner Schools
% Low-income Students	49%	45%	54%
% Students w/Disabilities	19%	22%	17%
% English Learner Students	15%	20%	28%
% Black Students	16%	9%	14%
% Latinx Students	28%	38%	43%
% White Students	47%	42%	33%
Involved Families Score on 5Essentials	50	75	45
Involved Families Overperformance	0	+17	-8
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	27.9%	24%	33%
Math Achievement Rate	26.4%	42%	29%
ELA Achievement Rate	32.9%	47%	30%

→ We wanted these school characteristics to be similar.

→ But we wanted family engagement to be different.

→ Bright Spots also had better student outcomes.

We conducted more than 100 one-on-one interviews, which included every school principal, and dozens of teachers and family members. Family interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish. During interviews with teachers and families, we did not reveal whether a school was identified as a Bright Spot or Partner school. Instead, all interviews followed the same structured protocol to elicit unbiased responses.

Once all interviews were completed, transcripts were anonymized so school identity and designation were masked during coding and labeling. We then analyzed the coded data to determine the most prominent themes across matched pairs of Bright Spot and Partner schools.

## AI-Assisted Coding Process

To code and analyze the interviews with educators and families, we combined the work of human researchers with a secure, private generative AI platform. First, our research team developed a codebook informed by the interviews and the existing literature on family engagement. The AI system then suggested revisions to the codebook. Researchers finalized the codebook, applied it to a subset of the interviews, and instructed the AI system to do the same.

Once we confirmed that our AI system was coding at a level of accuracy comparable to our human team, we used it to code the remainder of our data.<sup>2</sup>

With AI assistance, we improved both the efficiency and quality of our coding process, applying nearly 5,000 codes to interview excerpts that helped us understand what distinguishes Bright Spots from their Partner schools. This approach enabled:

- **A stronger codebook**, because AI served as an additional coder and enabled researchers to spend more time engaging with interview text and refining labels rather than applying them.
- **Human-level accuracy at scale**, because labels could be applied in hours instead of weeks, with consistent application and no coder fatigue.
- **Reliable replication**, because the same model and prompt reproduced results consistently, allowing us to replicate and refine labels.

## Key Findings: Distinguishing Factors at Bright Spot Schools

Based on the themes identified through interviews and coding, we identified “distinguishing factors” that set Bright Spots apart from their matched Partner schools. While all schools engage families in some way, for our purposes, we sought to identify what Bright Spots did differently—the practices and mindsets that distinguished them from their peer schools and were associated with meaningful differences in chronic absenteeism, attendance, and math/ELA achievement.

We identified four key distinguishing factors. These factors are not mutually exclusive; rather, they overlap in ways that collectively promote a stronger culture of family engagement. The distinguishing factors themselves should be understood as umbrella terms, each encompassing a subset of specific characteristics that differentiate Bright Spots from their Partner schools.

***Partner schools should not be seen as the opposite of Bright Spots. Instead, they reflect the norm across the state while Bright Spots are exemplary in their approach to family engagement.***

<sup>2</sup> Across testing, human-to-human agreement was substantial (Cohen’s kappa = 0.62) and AI-to-human agreement matched human-to-human agreement almost exactly. (kappa = 0.60). For more details, see the [Technical Appendix](#).

Importantly, the fact that Partner schools emphasized these distinguishing factors less does not mean that these practices and ideas were absent altogether. In many cases, educators and families at Partner schools described similar practices and ideas to those mentioned at Bright Spots—they simply did so less consistently and less frequently. Therefore, our analysis suggests that Partner schools should not be seen as the opposite of Bright Spots. Instead, they reflect the norm across the state while Bright Spots are exemplary in their approach to family engagement.

What Partner schools emphasized more frequently were barriers to family engagement. In total, participants identified eight barriers: cultural differences, digital access, language access and translation support, distance and transportation, negative past experiences, time and work conflicts, educator capacity, and educator interest. While barriers exist at all schools, Bright Spots consistently placed less of an emphasis on barriers—and when they were mentioned, they were not treated as insurmountable. As one Bright Spot Principal put it: “Are there barriers or just excuses? Language is the number one barrier, but I try [to speak the language], and parents seem to appreciate it.”

***“Are there barriers or just excuses? Language is the number one barrier, but I try [to speak the language], and parents seem to appreciate it.”***

**– Bright Spot Principal**

Below we present the four distinguishing factors that emerged from our analysis. We highlight quotes from Bright Spots that exemplify these factors and their underlying characteristics, as well as contrasting quotes from Partner schools that illuminate some common challenges.



### Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners

At Bright Spots, educators—and many families—consistently expressed a belief that they are on the same team and are equal partners in helping students succeed. Bright Spot staff emphasized valuing families' assets and contributions, and reinforced the idea that neither school nor home can succeed alone.

#### Bright Spots Emphasize a “Same Team” Mindsets

**“The ‘why’ is pretty simple: We don’t achieve our mission without our families. It’s as simple as that.”**

– Principal

**“I tell parents this on day one every year: you know your kids the best. We never know better than you. We’re obviously experts in this subject, but this is a hundred percent a partnership.”**

– Principal

**“This school is like an extended part of my family. I honestly feel like we are collectively raising my son.”**

– Parent

#### Partner Schools Describe Challenges with Existing Mindsets

**“I think sometimes there’s a mindset piece. I have heard a lot of people talk about it directly and indirectly, like ‘well, what’s it going to do if I call their parent? Why bother, it’s not going to help.’”**

– Teacher

**“We’re all so busy. Most parents work. They don’t think they can contribute anything—which we know is incorrect. So, [we’re] trying to train families [but it] takes time and effort.”**

– Teacher

**“School staff only reach out when my children are bad or off task. [If] it’s a behavior issue, we work together to solve it. That’s it.”**

– Parent



### Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure

At Bright Spots, leaders provide a cohesive vision for family engagement, inspire their staff by modeling its importance, communicate clear expectations, and create accountability structures. Teachers consistently demonstrate a clear understanding of principals' vision and expectations.

#### Bright Spots Emphasize Effective Leadership

**“If I get an email from a parent, I’m expected to return that email within 24 hours of the school day. At the beginning of the year they lay out some pretty—I don’t want to say strict guidelines, but you know, you better be communicating with the kid and the parent.”**

– Teacher

**“I expect them to do two communications a week: one precursor—here’s what we’re doing this week—and then a roundup towards the end of the week, so that parents have a good idea of what’s going on. We do that through just simple messaging [on an] app, so it’s very seamless. Lots of teachers do more than that and I’m tagged on all those.”**

– Principal

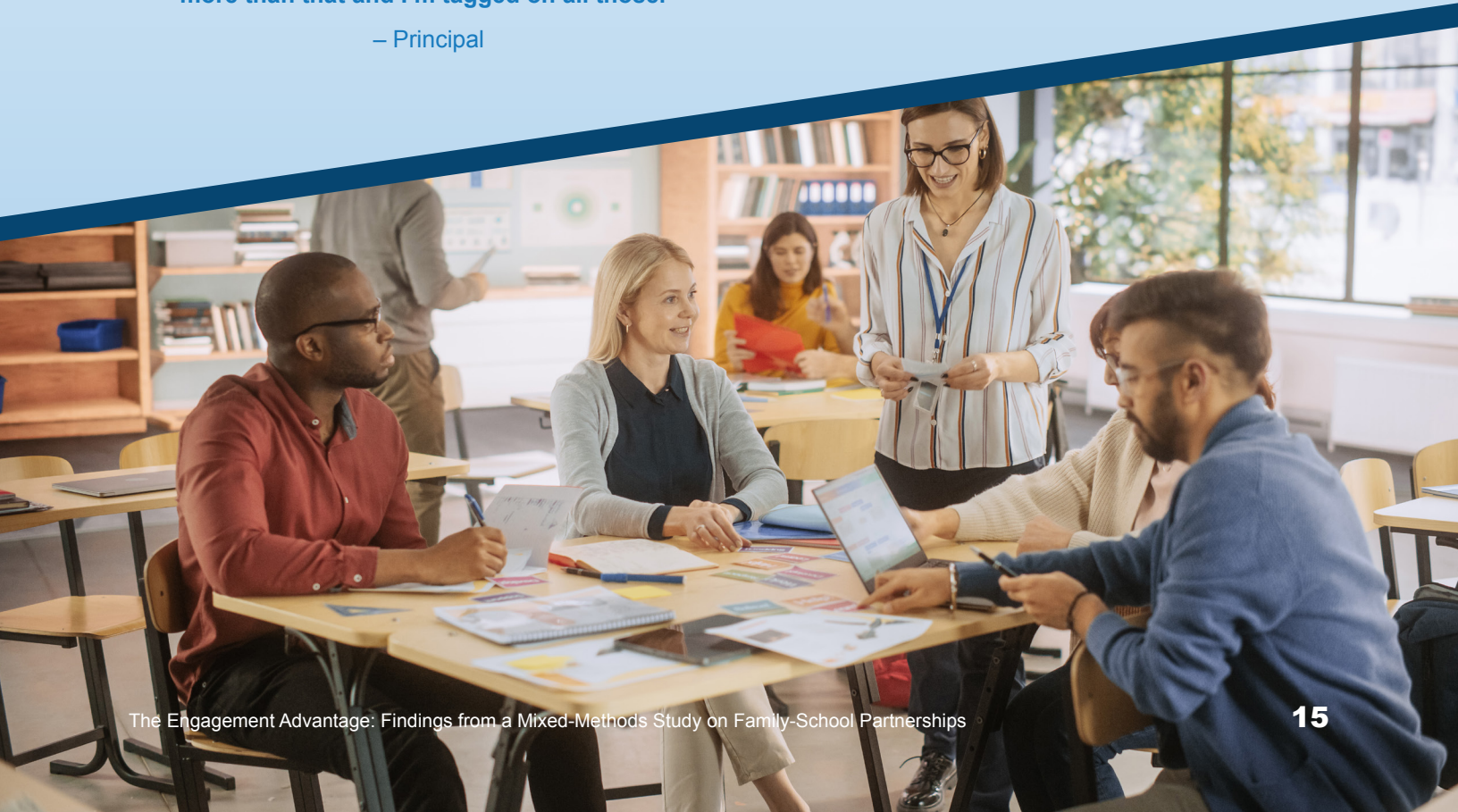
#### Partner Schools Describe Challenges with Effective Leadership

**“I think they want to do [family engagement], but... our leadership team is so busy with other stuff.”**

– Teacher

**“My manager [communicated that] you need to email families [and] let them know if students are failing. [But] I don’t know if there was a lot of communication about expectations. I feel like the vibe is really, if a kid is in trouble with moving on, it is communicated.”**

– Teacher



### Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering

Bright Spot schools discussed communication in two distinct ways: *how* they communicated (one-on-one, proactive, consistent, persistent) and *what* they communicated (anchored in academics).

The one-on-one nature of the parent-teacher communication was a key differentiator. While Partner schools emphasized communicating with families in large groups (e.g., at events, or through email blasts), Bright Spots consistently described individual, planned and unplanned communication between parents and teachers as a key factor in their success.

Bright Spots also described **communications that were far more likely to focus on students' individualized academic performance**. Staff also emphasized an unwavering approach to outreach, engaging in outreach methods until they were able to connect with a family and persisting even when initial outreach was unsuccessful.

Taken together, these patterns resulted in parents who were more likely to be informed about their child's individual learning progress and goals. In contrast, communications at Partner schools were more likely to focus on whole-school events, initiatives, or committees. Some Partner school staff also noted a lack of clear expectations, describing communications as reactive—occurring only once students were already struggling.

#### Examples of learning resources include:

- Uploading bilingual videos to Google classroom that walk families through math techniques
- Sharing classroom lessons with explicit instructions for how parents can work with students to strengthen skills at home
- Messaging families about a key lesson, including questions they can ask their student to check for understanding
- Sending home grade-appropriate books to read with students at home
- Sharing learning apps that students can use for additional practice

#### Bright Spots Emphasize Effective Communication

**“For conferences, we’ve gone to parents’ houses and parents’ work, knocked on doors, [and even] rode the bus home with students to meet their parents at a bus stop.”**

– Teacher

**“My daughter was behind in math. And then the teacher started telling me that it’s really a team effort. She sent me books and [materials] we could work on together, and yes, my daughter made progress in her learning.”**

– Parent

#### Partner Schools Describe Challenges with Effective Communication

**“I do call parents frequently, but I don’t see that across the board. Besides the parent coffee, and having our family nights, I don’t see anything else.”**

– Teacher

**“There is no explicit direction that I have to contact parents. Ever. When we discuss students that are struggling of course it comes up: ‘Let’s call home. Have you tried to call home?’ But there is nothing structured that says I have to call them.”**

– Teacher

### Relationships: Personal & Enduring

Bright Spot educators emphasized building connections that went deeper than day-to-day interactions. They described getting to know families well and staying in touch with alumni to follow and support students' life journeys.

In contrast, Partner school educators were less likely to emphasize the importance of personal relationships with families, and some described relationships with families that were client-based or transactional.

#### Bright Spots Emphasize Deep Relationships

**“I know it sounds silly, but our staff, [we have] conversations with families about their other children or about their job, taking time to connect with the parent on a deeper level — [not] just ‘hi, how are you,’ but ‘how are you *really*? Is there anything that I could do for you?’”**

– Teacher

**“We’re able to have conversations with our families, almost like they’re our old friends. In families, you can have spats, you can have disagreements, but at the end of the day, you know you care about them. I would say, at least 90% of the families that I have had over my career, that if I saw them at the grocery store, it’s like catching up with an old friend.”**

– Teacher

#### Partner Schools Describe Challenges to Establishing Deep Relationships

**“There is one parent that sticks out to me, who I probably talk to about twice a year, but every time I talk to her it is a very intense conversation, where I feel as though I’m her social worker rather than her kid’s [teacher]. Then there are parents that we will meet [with] every quarter, have a lovely conversation, and then maybe talk a few more times over the year if their kid is struggling, but not if they’re okay.”**

– Teacher

**“I have noticed some of my newer coworkers, they don’t really have guidance, they haven’t really been taught how to [communicate with parents].” They’ll say things like, “[your child] is trashing my room, or he’s disrupting the class,” instead of, “hey, I’m concerned. I’m coming from a place of care.”**

– Teacher



## Partnering Across Language & Cultural Divides

We also identified an important finding that cut across all four distinguishing factors: at Bright Spot schools, **educators go beyond translation and language access in their support of English Learners and immigrant families.**

Partner schools emphasized traditional supports (e.g., translating materials and providing interpreters), while Bright Spots went above and beyond. Educators at Bright Spot schools consistently described practices such as hiring dedicated staff to support families, ensuring families feel welcomed in the school community, integrating families into the school community through staff roles, providing resources and services, and most importantly, creating opportunities for students to engage their families as learning partners.

Given that many immigrant families come from cultures with different norms around engagement with schools, **student-mediated interactions** can offer a cultural on-ramp for immigrant families into their children's schooling experiences. While this theme emerged across Bright Spot schools in our sample, it was particularly pronounced in immigrant-rich communities, and it was the most consistent differentiator between Bright Spot and Partner schools with high English Learner (EL) populations.

### Examples of student-mediated interactions at Bright Spot schools:

- Student-led parent-teacher conferences
- Students presenting projects to families at parent night
- Students performing for families at a poetry showcase
- Family members expected to sign off on 20 minutes of reading time
- Parents asked to sign off on completed assignments to acknowledge that they reviewed students' work

#### Bright Spots with High MLL Populations Emphasize Partnership Across Language & Cultural Differences

**"I usually make a brochure for student-led conferences. It has their learning history, just to show parents their growth, because the [typical] report is not very visual. I have it translated to Spanish, of course, but with an explanation. Not just sending the information home, but [having] an explanation along with it as well, because it could be easy to overlook or not really understand what's being sent home."**

– Teacher

#### Partner Schools with High MLL Populations Describe Challenges with Partnership Across Language and Cultural Differences

**"I guess sending things home in Spanish is one way to connect with the parents, and I mean, [we] do that very well. Other than that, I really just feel that there is a lack of communication. There's really no time during the year that the stakeholders all come together. There's just not many opportunities for that other than maybe a random movie night or something."**

– Teacher

# Lessons for Research & Practice

Taken together, our Stage 1 and Stage 2 findings illustrate that two schools can be similar in nearly every way, yet produce markedly different student outcomes. Our study found that schools with particularly strong family engagement—or Bright Spots—showed consistently better outcomes. Bright Spots seemed to exhibit an engagement advantage, and shared four distinguishing factors that set them apart from their peers.

## Distinguishing Factors at Bright Spot Schools

### **Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners**

Educators and families emphasize a shared belief that they are on the same team and are equal partners in helping students succeed.

### **Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure**

Leaders provide a cohesive vision for family engagement and inspire their staff by modeling its importance, communicating clear expectations, and creating accountability structures.

### **Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering**

Schools emphasize proactive, consistent, and persistent communication with families in one-on-one interactions focused on academics.

### **Relationships: Personal & Enduring**

Schools show evidence of deep, personal connections with students and families that extend beyond the school building and the school year.

Additionally, in communities with high English Learner populations, Bright Spot educators go beyond basic translation access and leverage student-mediated interactions and other dedicated supports in order to build strong, effective partnerships across lines of language and culture.

## Recommendations for Future Research

### Key Insights for Continued Inquiry

Three findings from this study were particularly salient and warrant additional focus from family engagement scholars and practitioners:

- **One-on-one communication** between families and educators was a key factor in distinguishing Bright Spots and Partner schools. Many engagement efforts in schools today are whole-school or whole-classroom in nature. Additional scholarship on supports that help teachers conduct individualized interactions grounded in students' academic progress and learning goals could reveal approaches that unlock meaningful student and school improvement.
- **Student-mediated interactions** were a significant differentiator between Bright Spot and Partner schools. This finding builds upon existing [research](#) that identifies student invitations as a key factor in motivating parents to engage with schools, and it helps explain why student performances or student-led conferences often draw more families. In our study, the effect of these interactions was magnified in schools serving larger populations of English Learners. Our findings suggest that student-mediated interactions may offer a unique cultural on-ramp for immigrant parents raising their children in the United States—particularly in schools that also demonstrate other Bright Spot characteristics. Further research on student-mediated interactions may be a pathway toward improved engagement practices in immigrant-rich communities.
- **Barriers to family engagement** exist everywhere, but one of our most consistent findings was that *more* barriers were emphasized *more frequently* at Partner schools. At Bright Spots, these barriers (e.g., cultural differences, digital access, time and work conflicts, and educator capacity) were mentioned less often and were less likely to be treated as insurmountable. Existing [research](#) underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the challenges that educators and families face in building strong partnerships. Continued study of how schools with strong family engagement address barriers may inform more effective school culture, practices, and policies.

### A Call to Improve Measurement of Family Engagement

A common refrain in improvement science is: “We cannot improve what we cannot measure.” Future research should support schools and districts in measuring family engagement practices so they can focus efforts on approaches proven to advance student learning and well-being.

To further evaluate the association between family engagement and student outcomes, we encourage states to develop and promote statewide teacher surveys that are similar or identical to the 5Essentials in Illinois. One such data source is the [North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey](#), which includes a construct related to family engagement.

Currently, there is no validated, reliable tool that can be used across school systems to objectively measure the family engagement practices most strongly linked to improved student outcomes. To address this gap, the third stage of this study aims to develop a new tool and test it in a national sample of schools to assess its measurement properties and its viability as a policy instrument at the school, district and state levels. Ultimately, we hope this field-wide measurement tool will provide schools and districts with a practical instrument to support implementation of research-informed strategies that make a meaningful difference for students.

# Recommendations for Practitioners

Family engagement suffers from limited attention and resources in schools. As we know from prior [research](#), most educators are not trained in effective engagement strategies, and many have not observed strong practice firsthand. Principals are frequently left to develop family engagement strategies on their own, which can lead to pockets of excellence rather than systemwide practices that improve learning at scale.

We advise districts to invest in building the capacity of their leaders. Below are questions that can guide team discussion, inform professional development, and shape strategic planning:

<b>1. Mindsets</b>	<b>2. Leadership</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To what extent do we see families as part of our team to advance student learning?</li><li>• How do we incorporate family perspectives into our decisions?</li><li>• How often do we emphasize barriers that prevent families from engaging?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is our vision for partnerships with families?</li><li>• What expectations and accountability structures are in place to support family engagement?</li></ul>
<b>3. Communication</b>	<b>4. Relationships</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do we prioritize one-on-one communication with families, or primarily group communications and events?</li><li>• To what extent are academics at the heart of our communications, versus logistics and administrative information?</li><li>• How proactive, consistent, and persistent are we in our outreach, even when families are hard to reach?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do we cultivate personal, trusting relationships that extend beyond classroom transactions?</li><li>• Do these relationships persist over time?</li></ul>

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