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Supporting Social, Emotional, & Academic Development

Research Implications for Educators



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Partnering with Families Supports Student Engagement

Engagement with families should not be viewed as peripheral or tangential to school improvement efforts. There is significant evidence that strong parent engagement practices are related to student achievement.¹¹² Students who have involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level classes; be promoted to the next grade level, pass their classes, and earn more credits; and attend school regularly.¹¹³ Student achievement tends to be higher in schools where principals and teachers are open to parent engagement and view parents as partners in the learning process.¹¹⁴ Further, there is a substantial body of evidence that parental involvement¹¹⁵ influences the development of academic mindsets across multiple dimensions.¹¹⁶

Schools' approach to their relationship with families is evolving. Historically, parental engagement involved teachers telling parents information about their children and perhaps soliciting their support in specific ways. Now, parental engagement is far more complex. Engaging parents involves listening and appreciating their contributions and being responsive to the ways in which they would like to participate in the classroom or in the school.

Teachers understand that their relationships with families are critical to students' success and to the creation of a strong school community. In schools where there are strong relationships between school staff and families, students feel safer and more supported.¹¹⁷ Much of what accounts for the large differences in safety among schools are the ways in which parents, teachers, and students work together and trust each other. Research in Chicago found that among schools that served students from similar neighborhoods—

with similar levels of poverty and similar levels of neighborhood crime—those that had strong relationships between teachers and families had much safer school climates with lower reports of crime and disorder.¹¹⁸

Teachers are more likely to remain at schools with strong family engagement. Schools that don't foster family engagement run the risk of having teachers feel less connected and potentially leaving. In schools where teachers and parents work together to support students, teachers are more likely to feel effective and continue to teach in that school from year-to-year. In a study of many different factors that might be related to whether teachers left or remained in their school, parent involvement was second only to school safety in importance for teacher stability, comparing schools serving similar populations of students.¹¹⁹

How can educators work together to create a school culture that prioritizes and supports family engagement?

Teachers Are the Primary Connection Point

Teacher-parent relationships where parent contributions and knowledge are valued can foster strong and trusting bonds. The teacher is the main connection that families have to the school. Families' experiences of school are deeply influenced by their experiences and relationships with their children's teachers. This makes the teacher-parent relationship critically important. There are many things for teachers to consider in determining how best to engage with families, including self-examining their existing practices. Approaching

¹¹² Jeynes (2003, 2005, 2007); Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton (2010).

¹¹³ Henderson & Mapp, (2002).

¹¹⁴ Gordon & Louis (2003).

¹¹⁵ Throughout this section, when we refer to "parental involvement" and "parents," this reflects what has been the primary focus of the research literature. We recognize, however, that

engagement of non-parental caretakers, including guardians and custodial caretakers, is also important for teachers and school leaders to consider in their professional practice.

¹¹⁶ Jeynes (2003).

¹¹⁷ Bryk et al. (2010).

¹¹⁸ Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson (2011).

¹¹⁹ Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo (2009).

engagement of families through a similar lens as we have outlined with student engagement, we propose that the teacher sets the conditions that enable families to participate in ways that leverage their strengths and that the teacher’s role is to be responsive in adapting their approach based on the needs and interests of their students’ families. Moving from parent communication as a one-way, sporadic effort to a thoughtful, on-going, and mutually beneficial relationship can be an additional building block on the path to creating transformative learning opportunities for students.¹²⁰

In schools where family engagement is a priority, the work of teachers is supported by principals who set organizational goals and strategies aimed at fostering a culture of family engagement. At the University of Chicago Charter School, the school leadership team was intentionally

designed to build a culture of family engagement.¹²¹ The three-person leadership team includes a Director of Family and Community Engagement (FCE), who, in collaboration with the school’s full-time social worker, “attends to the facilitative, inclusive aspect of leadership, particularly engaging the parents and creating an environment that strengthens social and emotional factors that influence learning.”¹²² The FCE works closely with teachers and other school staff to cultivate and maintain a culture of continuous engagement with families. In practice, this means teachers make weekly calls to students’ families, participate in drop-off and pick-up, and schedule informal meetings with families—all in service of providing multiple touchpoints and opportunities to build relationships, and help families feel informed and empowered in supporting their children’s education.

Teachers Can Foster Family Engagement by Working with Parents as Partners in Supporting Students

There are many strategies teachers can use to engage families. Teachers lay the foundation for parent engagement at the beginning of the school year by proactively getting to know parents and learning more about their children. By integrating the input and feedback they receive from families, teachers are able to develop and plan the supports they provide for students, including how they set the learning climate and the goals they jointly work on.

- Host a “meet and greet” where teachers can share with families how they will communicate with them throughout the year and their expectations for students in their classes.
- Create opportunities for informal interactions with parents during drop-off and pick-up times—these can serve to foster relationships and to share information about students.
- Assess student work and enter grades throughout the year, and provide families access to those grades so that they know if the student is falling behind.
- Leverage conferences as opportunities to work with parents to make connections between classroom material and expectations, and their goals for students; teachers can also use these opportunities to learn from parents about student’s strengths, interests, and the development of their children’s self-identity and agency outside of the classroom and school.
- Foster connections between parents, which may serve as another mechanism to help parents persevere through any challenges they encounter in supporting their children at home.¹²³
- Send weekly email updates about what is happening in the classroom or send photos of students working on projects in the classroom. This can foster two-way communication by helping families to feel engaged in the classroom community and providing an opportunity for families to share information back to teachers about student experiences of particular lessons or projects.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Hassrick, Raudenbush, & Rosen (2017).

¹²¹ The UChicago Consortium and UChicago Charter School are both units of the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.

¹²² Hassrick et al. (2017).

¹²³ Hassrick et al. (2017).

¹²⁴ Epstein (2009).

Principals Set the Tone for Their Schools

School leaders play a vital role in creating and sustaining authentic engagement with parents and community members. When principals and teacher leaders see parents as partners, they are better able to engage parents and community members in school improvement efforts.¹²⁵ The organization and culture of schools play a large role in the success of school- and teacher-led parent engagement efforts. Since there are many ways in which parents can be involved in their children's education, it is valuable for teachers and school leaders to work constructively with parents to determine what shared efforts can be most productive.¹²⁶ Principals can organize teachers around shared goals of family engagement and lead by example in their interactions with families. It is important for teachers and principals to think about how best to reach out meaningfully to parents to increase their connections. School leaders could engage staff in discussions of ways to involve parents in roles beyond the oftentimes surface-level tasks they are asked to participate in that are not related to their children's learning (such as bake sales). School staff may inadvertently marginalize families because they ask them to be involved in ways

that do not reflect the crucial role they could otherwise play in support of their children's education.

Principals can support teachers' capacity to engage with families by providing professional development on parent engagement strategies.¹²⁷ Principals can provide resources to mitigate challenges, extra supports for students who are behind, and access to the resources in ways which support a culture of trust and support. They can also support teachers in accessing training and resources around understanding the influence that trauma has on student behaviors and experiences. As highlighted in the prior chapter, this knowledge helps support teachers in developing the trusting, supportive relationships with students that can help mitigate the negative consequences of adverse childhood experiences.

A Responsive Classroom Also Informs Family Engagement

Engagement strategies should be intentional and include strategies to reach parents who might face barriers to participation. Every parent wants the best for their child. Every parent wants to understand how their child is experiencing school and what their teachers are doing to foster learning and development of their

Principals Can Create a School Climate that Supports Family Engagement

- Schools that are welcoming to families set a positive foundation for engagement.
- A welcoming school office environment with friendly school staff who greet parents can create a climate of respect and openness.
- Schools can create easy opportunities for families to be involved and stay informed. School climate surveys are one mechanism which can provide principals with information about which aspects of school climate to prioritize.
- Strategies should be responsive to the ways in which families want to engage. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement. Strong principals are reflective leaders who prioritize the needs of their individual school community when developing family engagement strategies.
- Communication with families works best when it is two-directional and when parent voice is visibly valued. School leaders and teachers can create a feedback loop with parents. This means frequent opportunities to regularly share important information, while simultaneously hearing and integrating parental perspective on both individual goals for their children's learning and development and on important school decisions.

¹²⁵ Giles (2006); Louis (2003).

¹²⁶ Epstein & Dauber (1991).

¹²⁷ Weiss et al. (2005).

children. As teachers develop family engagement strategies, it is essential to reflect and think about the sorts of opportunities they are creating for families to interact with the teacher and the school. In many communities, systems have been developed in ways which limit, if not exclude, family involvement. Families can be shut out of schools in obvious ways, such as a lack of school communications in native languages. There are also subtle practices that can make families feel excluded, for example, receiving communications only when there is a “problem” or something negative to share.¹²⁸ Parents who have previously had positive experiences with schooling or who have access to more social and financial resources may be better positioned to engage in schools. This can inadvertently perpetuate inequality of access for families unless teachers and school leaders reflect on the opportunities they are providing for engagement, and how those are perceived by diverse parents. Many schools in the U.S. today serve students from different cultures and who speak a variety of languages at home. Teachers and school leaders should review their engagement strategies to ensure that they are being intentional about conducting outreach to embrace all members of the school community and are effectively reaching families who otherwise may face barriers to engagement. This can include things such as reviewing and evaluating school-home communication systems and structures, parent-teacher meeting times and locations, school event planning, and how well school norms and the physical school environment reflects and embraces the cultures and languages of its students and families. By taking an active and intentional approach with a specific focus on engaging parents who might face barriers to engagement, teachers and school leaders can further strengthen supports for all students.

It is important to put special emphasis on understanding the unique challenges facing families who have different cultural backgrounds than their child’s teacher or the dominant culture of the school staff. By understanding the power of culture in supporting students’ learning and development, teachers are

increasingly motivated to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students and integrate this knowledge into the learning opportunities they create in their classrooms.¹²⁹ Learning about family culture and background can help foster connections in the classroom. As first steps, this can include having literature that reflects and includes characters with diverse backgrounds; highlighting historical contributions made by individuals from multicultural backgrounds beyond those which are already well known; identifying role models within fields of study that reflect students’ race and ethnicity; and creating opportunities for students to share their cultural backgrounds in class projects and assignments.¹³⁰ However, frameworks for culturally responsive teaching also emphasize the importance of “deep culture,” as educators come to understand different ways of viewing the world or different conceptualizations of “the self” across different cultures. These underlying aspects of culture are critically important because they shape the ways students learn and make meaning.¹³¹ Concurrent with providing a richer and more inclusive learning environment, teachers should also examine their own identities and implicit biases. Reflecting on how the dominant culture has influenced the development of structures that perpetuate inequality can help foster understanding and empathy, as well as create the foundation for a responsive classroom. This can be difficult and emotionally challenging work. School leaders can provide critical leadership in supporting teachers to engage in understanding these deeper levels of cultural responsiveness and in fostering a supportive and reflective environment for adult learning.

Supporting a culturally responsive classroom can help students in forming positive identities and viewpoints of the world that reflect understanding and appreciation for different cultural backgrounds. By supporting students to appreciate and value diversity and focusing on differences in culture as advantageous, teachers can promote and recognize the unique and valuable contributions their students’ cultures bring to the learning environment.

¹²⁸ Evans (2011); Hargreaves (2001).

¹²⁹ Gay (2010).

¹³⁰ Kransoff (2016).

¹³¹ Fryberg & Markus (2007); Ginsberg (2015); Hammond (2014).

Supporting Social, Emotional, & Academic Development

Teachers, principals, and student support personnel all play an important role in creating a school culture that supports the development and success of all students.



What questions can the adults in a school ask themselves as they work to create a supportive school climate?

Teachers and Students

- Have I set up my classroom in ways that promote positive academic mindsets?
- Do all my students feel...?
 - ... they belong in this learning community.
 - ... they can succeed at this.
 - ... they will see their ability and competence grow with effort.
 - ... that the work has value for them.
- Am I using grade and attendance data to tell me who needs more support?

Principals and Families

- What can I do to develop a positive school culture in which students and families feel engaged and empowered?



Teachers and Families

- Am I establishing positive relationships with families at the beginning of the year?
- Am I communicating and engaging with families regularly so we can be partners in supporting students to succeed in class?

Principals and Teachers Working Together

- Are teachers working collaboratively on our common goals for students?
- Do we have strong monitoring and support systems for students that are opt-out, instead of opt-in? How are we assessing whether our systems and strategies are working and for whom?

All School Staff Working Together

- How can we create a culture where teachers, school staff, and families are working together in true partnership to support student learning and engagement?
- How are we allowing students' to bring facets of their lived experiences in to our school?