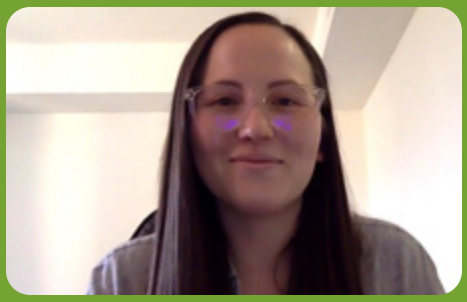
Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement


A Report From

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Written by
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Our goal is to motivate a transparent, honest, and thoughtful interrogation of what stands in the way of authentic partnerships between families and schools and to show the way toward a more liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused family engagement practice that supports educational excellence for all children.

– **Karen L. Mapp** and **Eyal Bergman**, Authors of *Embracing a New Normal*

On the Cover: As a supplement to *Embracing a New Normal*, the authors collaborated with five grantee partners of Carnegie Corporation of New York that are innovating and leading in the field of family–school partnerships. In January 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and a renewed national reckoning on systemic racism, they spoke via Zoom with grantee staff, family, school, and community partners to reflect on, explore, and rethink family engagement practices. Pictured on the cover (clockwise from top left) and featured in this report: **Nathaniel Royal**, parent, New Orleans, LA; **Jessica Picasso**, kindergarten teacher, San Jose, CA; **Monica Roberts**, chief of student, family & community advancement, Boston Public Schools; and **Georgia Gross**, curriculum specialist, Baton Rouge, LA. To learn more about the grantee partners and hear directly from family and school stakeholders, visit carnegie.org/NewNormal.

PREFACE

The Education program at Carnegie Corporation of New York seeks to bring together families, communities, students, educators, policymakers, and the public in support of an equitable and high-quality educational system. We fund programs that bridge the gap between home and school, because we believe that when families are empowered as true partners in their children's education, students thrive, schools are stronger, and the whole community benefits. We want families to have access to the information they need to support their children's learning and to be able to act as effective advocates for change.

When schools shut down in March 2020 due to the pandemic, we finally broke the imagined boundary that existed between home and school. Parents suddenly had a front row seat to their children's learning, gaining new visibility into their education. Family engagement, the concept of schools partnering with families to help them support their children's learning and development, is not new, but the pandemic brought its importance front and center. Research shows that parent involvement at home has more than double the impact on student test scores than parents' education level or socioeconomic status. Family engagement is also a critical factor for equity in education, which demands our attention.

In order to start a national conversation about effective family engagement practices and how they can become essential components of systems change, we commissioned Karen L. Mapp, a leading expert on family engagement at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to write a paper on sustainable and equitable family engagement.

The report underscores how, due to the pandemic, family engagement is finally being recognized as a core strategic component of any intentional effort to provide equitable and excellent educational opportunities for all children. However, even with this acknowledgment, federal, state, and local education entities and stakeholders struggle with how to create and sustain effective family engagement strategies and initiatives.

This report challenges us to build effective and equitable family engagement practices throughout our educational system and provides recommendations for doing so to the field. We hope this report serves as a call to action for all stakeholders in the education community to prioritize family engagement at all levels, specifically the creation of family-school partnerships built on a framework of trust and respect as an essential component of student and school success.

Ambika Kapur
Program Officer, Education
Carnegie Corporation of New York

Voices for Engagement

Nathaniel Royal, Parent, New Orleans, LA

"I trusted that the school was giving my daughter proper feedback, telling us if something was wrong. But that wasn't always the case. Now I'm more focused on her work and her grades. We communicate with her teacher more. Now that she's remote, at times I'm in the room listening to the teacher, and I think, 'That doesn't make sense.' Or I push my daughter to answer a question if I think she's being quiet. This experience has got me more focused on what the school system is actually doing."

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, there has been a continuous push to recognize family engagement as a fundamental component of student success and school improvement. Scores of research studies, reports, and articles have linked family engagement to beneficial outcomes for students, educators, and families.[1] Throughout much of this time, however, change efforts were met with denial, resistance, or outright rejection by various education stakeholders.[2]

In 2018, Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned a challenge paper to serve as a call to action, titled *Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next-Generation Family Engagement: Engaging Families to Transform Education*.[3] This paper, prepared by the Global Family Research Project, summarized the research on family engagement, outlined a vision for the next generation of family engagement, and identified high-leverage areas to consider in building family engagement strategies. Since then, some districts have begun to embrace family engagement as a strategic component of teaching and learning, investing in family engagement departments and cabinet-level staff to guide the work. Overall, however, change in this area has remained slow.[4]

Until now.

The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism are forcing a recalibration of family-school partnerships. Finally, the engagement of families in their children's education — particularly nondominant families, defined as "those impacted by systemic oppression, such as marginalization based on race, class, language, or immigration status"[5] — is being taken seriously. The shift to remote learning has forced educators to prioritize collaborations with families instead of thinking of them as "nice to do when we have time." And educators are noticing, many for the first time, that families know more, see more, and can do more than previously acknowledged. Districts and schools are examining how power and privilege are determined and distributed in their communities and which families have a voice and a seat at the table. The two crises that came to a head in 2020 are fundamentally reshaping the relationships between home and school and galvanizing long-overdue conversations and changes in practice and policy about family engagement.

With this report, we are issuing a second call to action: for the PreK–12 sector to walk through the door opened by COVID-19 and the antiracist movement and address the often-ignored and unspoken dynamics that prevent the cultivation of effective partnerships between families and educators. We call on the sector to seize this opportunity to move toward a family engagement practice that is liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused.

In the following sections, we describe what this "new normal" would look like, as well as the underlying challenges that have inhibited effective home-school partnerships in America. We then outline a path forward for the PreK–12 sector and offer recommendations for systems leaders who may be seeking to use the historic infusion of nearly $200 billion in federal stimulus funds to advance a new vision for their family and community engagement work.

EMBRACING A NEW NORMAL: LIBERATORY, SOLIDARITY-DRIVEN, AND EQUITY-FOCUSED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

We have a choice about this crisis. As educators, we can make our "new normal" better than the old, engaging parents as the partners they are. Or we can wait for parents to lose whatever faith in us remains. They cannot unsee what they have witnessed so vividly in their own living rooms.

– **Sonja Brookins Santelises**, CEO, Baltimore City Public Schools

In a December 2020 *EdWeek* op-ed, Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Sonja Brookins Santelises called for educators to take advantage of the disruption caused by COVID-19 to dismantle longstanding educational inequities, with parents as partners.[6] We echo this call and propose three fundamental principles for family engagement that is liberatory (free of dominance), solidarity-driven (in union and fellowship), and equity-focused (fair and just).

First, schools must reject deficit-based views of families. Most family engagement initiatives, particularly those aimed at nondominant families, are designed with a deficit-based lens. Even well-intentioned efforts often define families by what they don't have or don't do. We see any attempt to solve other people's problems for them as reinforcing principles of oppression, privilege, and individualism. Dominant and hierarchical programs and activities keep families at arm's length and deny them access to power — and do more to discourage engagement than to encourage meaningful partnership.[7]

The new normal must be built on antiracist and social justice principles. Families from all backgrounds must be seen and celebrated as "the geniuses that they are," in the words of Shantae Toole, cofounder and codirector of First Teacher in Boston.[8] They must be embraced by educators as equal partners and recognized as experts on their children and communities.[9]

Second, the new normal requires a codesign model of engagement. Educators and families should work together to define their shared challenges and improve the educational experience for children. Schools that take a codesign approach understand that families' wisdom must be brought to bear on any problem the school encounters. Codesign models move beyond parent committees and compliance mandates to involve families in the day-to-day work of education.[10] Educators are not afraid to hear what families think because they are secure in their relationships with families and appreciate their perspectives and skills.

An example of codesign is the process the State of Connecticut used to define family engagement. In 2017, families, educators, policymakers, and community members collaborated to create a definition of family engagement that reflected each group's knowledge, needs, and experience. The work involved several gatherings where feedback was collected, summarized, and shared with the stakeholder groups. The result was a definition of family engagement that represents the shared commitment of multiple stakeholders:

> *Family engagement is a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children's learning from birth through college and career.*[11]

NAMING THE CHALLENGE

Third, family engagement must be seen as a core element of effective and equitable educational practice. As Michele Brooks, former assistant superintendent of family and student engagement at Boston Public Schools, said, "Family engagement is not a program; it is a practice."[12] Seeing engagement as a core practice means embracing the family-school partnership as an indispensable component of student success and school improvement. Gone is the notion that family engagement is an add-on — a bothersome, time-consuming activity done after the important business of teaching and learning. Instead, family engagement is considered a pillar of effective teaching and school improvement and requires significant attention and investment from schools and systems.[13]

Family engagement is a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children's learning from birth through college and career.

– **Connecticut State Department of Education**, 2018

To move toward a new normal, we must dismantle the barriers to family engagement created by unjust power structures. And to dismantle these barriers, we need to name them.

In *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson describes how the race-based caste system in the United States — "an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value" — shapes how people are treated. She writes:

> *As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats in a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power — which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources — which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence — who is accorded these and who is not.*[14]

These unspoken and often-ignored dynamics influence how families are seen and treated by educators, irrespective of their intentions. Depending on their place in the caste system, families may be seen and valued or discounted and ignored. The caste system Wilkerson describes is evident when the following behaviors and attitudes are the norm.

Nondominant families are treated at best as spectators of the work of schools. For example, families are expected to be seen at back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences but not necessarily heard. If families don't show up for meetings or events, the reaction isn't "why might they not feel welcomed?" It's often "they don't care" or "they don't know how to help their kids learn." This deficit-based view of families is all too commonplace. Even well-intentioned sentiments like "they're too busy because they work multiple jobs" still pin the blame on families and obscure the school's responsibility for creating a welcoming climate for them. Busy parents show up if they think educators will listen to them.

Families' expertise and cultural capital are overlooked or devalued. As a result, families are often excluded from decisions about how to educate their children. Families from nondominant communities have felt unheard and unvalued for generations.[15] Many have come to believe that it's best to stay away from schools, either because they are worried about possible retaliation against themselves or their children if they raise a concern or because they believe nothing will change.[16]

Family engagement efforts take on an assimilation function. When districts and schools invest in family engagement, even their best intentions are often shaped by traditional structures and dynamics. Investments in family engagement often involve hiring family liaisons and developing parent trainings to assist families in navigating schools and understanding how to support their children at home. These initiatives are not bad or wrong, but they are incomplete. Without solidarity-driven family engagement efforts, they position schools and educators as the providers of information and families as the needy receivers. They embody what the liberatory educator Paulo Freire calls "false generosity,"[17] whereby educators intend to help others but — intentionally or not — do so in a way that designates themselves as the authority on what others need, reinforcing the power imbalance between home and school.

Such power dynamics have persisted because our sector has never prioritized authentic, solidarity-driven engagement. The vast majority of educators in America have never been exposed to equitable family engagement practices that emphasize the humanity and wellness of families and communities.[18] Without training and exposure, many educators unsurprisingly do not see this type of practice as realistic. Thus, we have an education sector where many cannot imagine a world in which their work is inextricably tied to authentic partnerships with families. Models for effective family engagement have not been baked into our educational system.

Naming these truths may be difficult, but it is the first step toward the new normal we wish to create. It can be difficult for educators and system leaders to know where to start and what to change, but we are encouraged by the number of requests we've seen from educators seeking support and opportunities to share high-impact family engagement strategies over the past year. It may be helpful to consider the challenge before us as an adaptive one rather than a technical one. Whereas technical problems have solutions that already exist, adaptive challenges require people to learn new ways of thinking and doing business. These problems are systemic, they are not easily fixed, and they activate people's loyalties and values.[19] Ultimately, educators must develop new mental models of family engagement in order to understand and enact liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused practices.

We have an education sector where many cannot imagine a world in which their work is inextricably tied to authentic partnerships with families. Models for effective family engagement have not been baked into our educational system.

Voices for Engagement

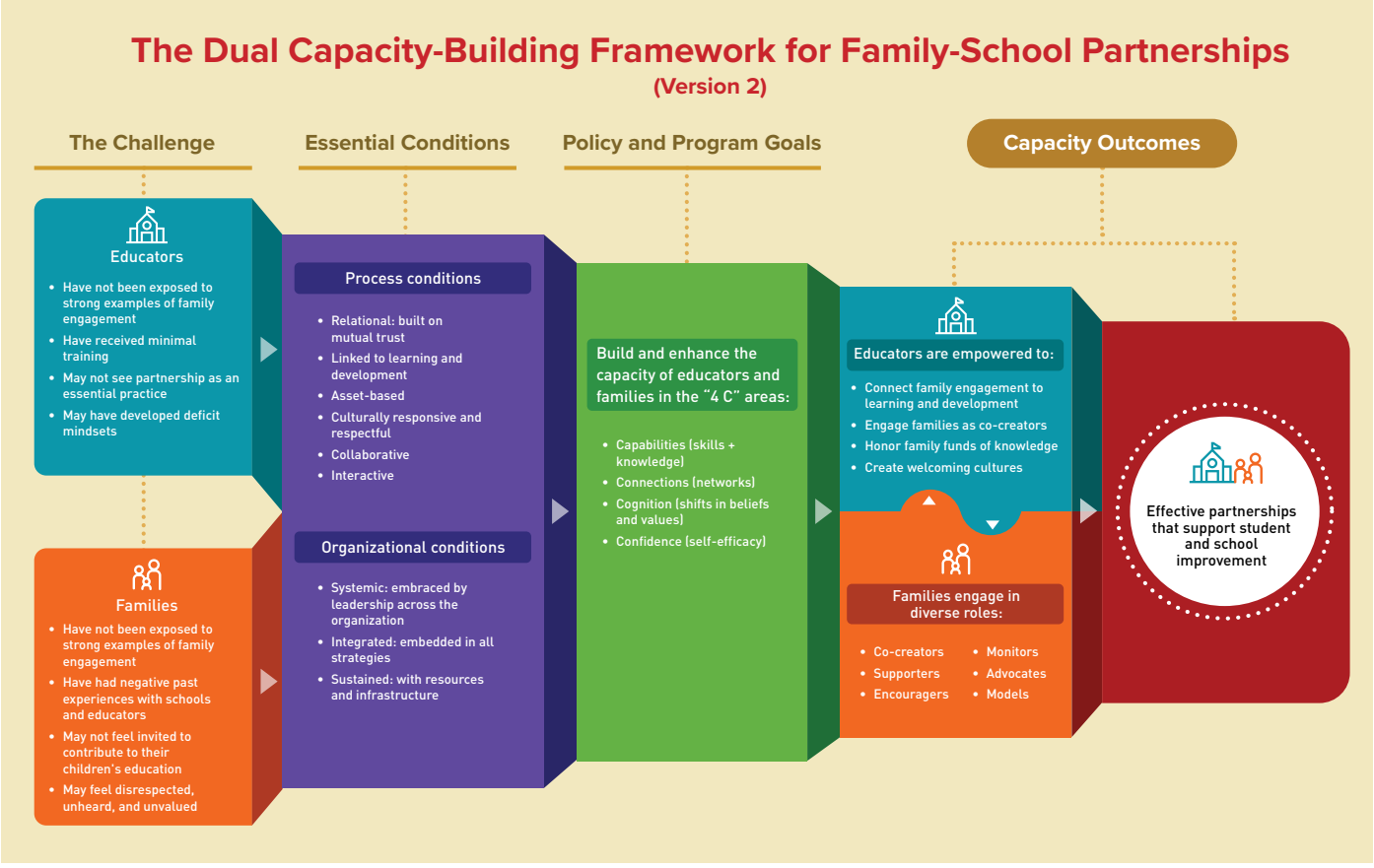
Jessica Picasso, Kindergarten Teacher, San Jose, CA

"I'm with my students for such a short portion of their time, so I want to give parents as much as possible. You kind of get addicted to helping parents, to wanting that light bulb to go off – not just for the child but for the parents too. Because then they'll realize they really can help their kids' brains grow – continually."

THE WAY FORWARD

The first Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships was published in 2013 and launched at the Institute for Educational Leadership's 2014 National Family and Community Engagement Conference.[20] This research-based framework was designed to provide direction for educators, policymakers, and researchers on how to cultivate effective family-school partnerships. Based on feedback and suggestions from families and practitioners, the framework was revised in 2019 to better articulate the challenges standing in the way of effective partnerships and the essential conditions necessary to shift practice.[21]

This framework represents a departure from schools' typical approach to family engagement. As discussed earlier, many existing initiatives focus on developing families' capacity to engage more fully in their children's education. Many have also focused on building parent demand for better schools, and funding priorities have shifted to support parent leadership and organizing. These efforts are essential, but they are not sufficient to shift educator mindsets and practices in districts, schools, and classrooms. The framework promotes a dual approach, emphasizing the building and activation of both educator and family capacity by embracing certain *essential conditions* for effective family engagement.



The Essential Conditions

In *The Water of Systems Change*, John Kania et al. write, "Systems change is about advancing equity by shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place."[22] Accordingly, the essential conditions defined in the second version of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework are those needed to develop the new practices and mental models we propose. Since every community is different, these conditions need to be adapted for particular contexts.

The essential conditions described in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework are the building blocks for family engagement practices that are liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused. They are divided into two types:

- **Process conditions** are the day-to-day elements of effective practice.
- **Organizational conditions** provide the infrastructure for the process conditions to flourish and to sustain effective family and community engagement practice across an organization.

In this report, we describe each of the conditions and steps to be taken to achieve them in schools and communities.

Process Conditions

Relational: Built on Mutual Trust

In our work with districts and schools, we have found that the relational condition is frequently overlooked, undervalued, and disregarded. It is the condition that most directly challenges traditional approaches and existing mental models of family engagement. Building (and restoring) trust is often difficult because it requires educators to critically examine their beliefs — rooted in America's caste system — about which families are deserving of trust.

To help educators check their beliefs and assumptions about how they go about building trust with all families, we offer the following questions. They are rooted in four key elements for relational trust — respect, integrity, competence, and personal regard.[23]

- 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 am competent and 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)

The relational condition must be prioritized for equitable partnerships between home and school to be cultivated and sustained. A focus on building relational trust also creates opportunities to repair past negative experiences between home and school. Fundamentally, we believe that any family engagement practice that does not explicitly seek to build and restore relational trust is ultimately doomed to fail.

Our ongoing conversations with educators suggest that schools, classrooms, and organizations that prioritized trusting relationships with families found it easier to respond effectively to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those that have not yet invested substantially in this work might take the opportunity to reset their relationships with families by focusing on building relational trust as students return to in-person schooling.

Linked to Learning and Development

Family and community engagement strategies must be aligned with learning and development goals for students. Traditional family engagement events and activities often fail to meaningfully connect families to what their children are learning or offer opportunities for joint planning around learning goals. Families possess a wealth of knowledge that should be drawn on to support students' learning and development. By investing in authentic relationships with families and honoring them as children's first teachers, educators invariably learn about children's learning styles, strengths, interests, and values. Educators can then use these "funds of knowledge"[24] to enhance curricular and pedagogical strategies.

Rather than focusing on communicating school rules and procedures, educators should discuss useful and actionable information with families. Scores of research studies show that families want to know more about how their children are doing in school, and they want their input to be taken into account.[25]

Asset-Based

> *Parents in our community are very busy, and many work several jobs. Our school worked hard to flexibly respond to parents' schedules, meeting with parents before school, during lunch and after school, for example. But we struggled to foster a stronger bond between school and home.*
>
> *The pandemic changed everything. When the lockdown started, parents of children in early grades were right next to their children as they participated in lessons. As I taught, parents were there to fix technology issues, clarify assignments, and answer questions.*
>
> *This experience has been a lesson for educators like me. We talk about meeting our students where they are, academically and emotionally, by building on their strengths and assets. But we don't talk enough about families, one of students' biggest assets. When parents go back to work and students go back to school, I hope this partnership carries on.*
>
> – **Christina Armas**, teacher, P.S. 307, Queens, New York[26]

An asset-based approach is one that focuses on strengths. In the context of family engagement, this means understanding that all caregivers are capable of supporting student learning and development and engaging as equal partners in the education of their children and the improvement of schools. In an asset-based approach, schools and educators examine the systemic and structural impediments to solidarity-driven family engagement rather than judging and assigning blame to families when strategies fail. Shifting to an asset-based mindset fundamentally changes every aspect of family engagement, replacing transactional, impersonal dynamics with a culture of transformation and equitable partnership.

Culturally Responsive and Respectful

Rather than viewing families as "obstacles in the way of progress and problems to be overcome,"[27] it is essential for educators to adopt a more culturally responsive and respectful framework for practice.[28] In liberatory family engagement, educators explore, respect, and integrate the culturally based practices and resources of diverse families as key elements of their partnership. In doing so, they honor and lift up the cultural socialization practices families already engage in — the "parental practices that teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and history; that promote cultural customs and traditions; and that promote children's cultural, racial, and ethnic pride, either deliberately or implicitly."[29]

Collaborative

Family and community engagement practices must be designed to ensure that educators and families work together in a way that includes each side's expertise. Schools and systems will need to move beyond seeking only limited types of input from families, such as through focus groups and surveys, and redesign planning and decision-making processes to ensure that those directly impacted by decisions have meaningful decision-making power.

Collaborative practice requires educators to recognize that "histories and systemic inequalities shape how families and communities experience and participate in formal spaces, and that patterns of inequity tend to reassert themselves despite good intentions."[30] Collaborative family engagement centers the voices of nondominant families in efforts to address the problems that matter most to them. This starts when educators elicit families' stories and expertise in ways that allow for inclusive participation and attend to racialized power dynamics. Historically, decision-making in schools has occurred behind closed doors in a way that systemically denies families access to information and decision-making power.[31] Collaborative practice brings families and educators together for shared learning and cocreation, creating learning environments that transform individuals, institutions, and communities.[32]

Interactive

Research on effective professional development shows that capacity-building efforts must provide opportunities for participants to test out and apply new skills in interactive ways.[33] Effective professional development also requires ongoing coaching and practice. Existing family engagement strategies, however, often involve distributing information and tools to educators and families without opportunities for colearning, practice, and coaching. Information dissemination strategies are important but woefully insufficient for driving substantive changes in behaviors and mindsets. For educators and families to learn new ways of engaging with one another, they need opportunities to practice new strategies and receive feedback, support, encouragement, and coaching from each other and their peers.

We believe the best professional development on family engagement brings families and educators together as colearners and codevelopers. Educators should certainly learn about the research and best practices in family engagement, but they also need to engage in dynamic and interactive experiences with families directly. Interactive spaces that center family voices offer opportunities for the unlearning of problematic family engagement practices and for meaningful exchanges that build trust and understanding.[34]

Organizational Conditions

Richard Elmore's theory of reciprocity states that "for every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation,"[35] meaning that expectations for significant shifts in practice require proportional investments in capacity building. Sustained improvement in family engagement practice requires an infrastructure to support the work and remove systemic and structural barriers to progress. For the process conditions described in this report to be enacted at scale, a solid foundation must support the work and pave the way for continuous growth and improvement. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework identifies three organizational conditions needed to cultivate and sustain effective family engagement practices.

Systemic: Embraced by Leadership across the Organization

Leaders across the organization must embrace family and community engagement as indispensable to system-wide improvement. They must reflect their commitment to family and community engagement by clearly communicating its importance for educational improvement, particularly in instruction, and allocating the necessary time and resources for educators and families to build and sustain capacity.[36] Without system-wide leadership support, strong family engagement practices and innovations will gain little traction and will evaporate with shifts in interest and personnel.

Integrated: Embedded in All Strategies

Family engagement should be embedded in systems, structures, and processes across the organization. A system or a school's efforts to build the capacity of families and staff to form deeper partnerships should be integrated into all aspects of its improvement strategy, including teacher and leader recruitment, professional development, instructional technology, budgeting, curricular development, and evaluation and assessment. Any aspect or strategy of an organization should include a family engagement component.

Sustained: With Resources and Infrastructure

Every organization signals its priorities to stakeholders by what gets funded and embedded into its leadership structure. Over the past decade, districts such as Baltimore City, Richmond, and New York City have established senior cabinet positions focused on the oversight of family and community engagement efforts. Individuals in these positions report directly to the CEO and are tasked with collaborating across the system to elevate and integrate family and community engagement as a core priority. The existence of this type of position sends a clear message to stakeholders that the engagement of families is a top priority for the district. However, it does not on its own guarantee equitable family engagement at scale. Equitable engagement can only be achieved at scale if resources are provided to build and sustain capacity in schools, classrooms, and the community.

Infrastructure for this type of work also includes policies and procedures that promote and reinforce expectations for effective family-school partnerships. Many schools and systems have policies for family engagement, often because they are required to have them for federal and state funding eligibility. Systems put more of a stake in the ground when they pass board policies that lay out expectations for improvement, not just compliance.

Voices for Engagement

Monica Roberts, Chief of Student, Family & Community Advancement, Boston Public Schools

"One of the things that we have been struggling with as a district is this idea of equitable information access and communications in ways that embrace our families' languages and cultures. And, in particular, thinking about how that works at the classroom level where we know family engagement is most impactful for students. Families are always their child's first teachers. We connect with families in ways that are respectful, dissolving some of the angst and concern they have about why we are engaging with them. This sort of outreach is powerful."

The Framework in Action:
The Learning Community School in Central Falls, Rhode Island

The Learning Community demonstrates how family engagement can be sewn into the fabric of a school and contribute to phenomenal student outcomes. Like its surrounding community, this K–8 school has a high proportion of Hispanic students (81 percent) and students of color (96 percent). Most are low-income (85 percent), and many are English learners (33 percent). Notably, students at the Learning Community far outpace their counterparts across Rhode Island on state tests. Compared with Hispanic students across the state, the school's Hispanic students are nearly twice as likely to demonstrate proficiency on the state's English language arts (ELA) and math tests, and its English learners are more than three times as likely to do so compared with Rhode Island's English learners. The Learning Community's middle school was the state's top-performing urban middle school in both ELA and math. Most telling is the demand from the community — the Learning Community is a charter school with a 1,200-student waitlist and 98 percent retention from kindergarten through eighth grade. Drawing on observations and interviews with school staff and families, this case study illustrates how the school has made family engagement a cornerstone of its success.

Process Conditions in Action

The school's focus on trust-building is apparent from the moment families enroll their children. Each newly enrolled family participates in a 30- to 45-minute welcome meeting with a codirector of the school, who shares the school's core beliefs:

- Families are the greatest strengths in their children's lives.
- Families have a right to be involved in their children's education.
- It is the job of all school team members to engage all families.
- All family engagement efforts should build trusting relationships to support the healthy development and education of students.

Most of the principal's time in these meetings is spent listening, with a few standard questions to guide the conversation:

- What are you most proud of about your child?
- What are your hopes and dreams for their experience at the Learning Community?
- What experiences have you had with schools in the past?
- What do you want to contribute, and what do you want to learn about?
- What do you want to know about us?

As families engage with the school community, they see that family-facing initiatives have a distinctly asset-based framing. For instance, its annual open house has a celebratory environment, including a tradition where families write and draw their hopes and dreams for the year. Those dreams then get placed by the classroom doorway so that students are reminded of their families' love for them every single time they walk into class. Monthly parent café events are codesigned with families and linked to learning goals for students. One mother said, "Whatever they are teaching our kids, they are showing us. They don't rush. They listen and help us help our kids."

Families at the Learning Community don't dread school events or feel obligated to attend, which is perhaps why 95 percent come to conferences and the annual open house, even though many parents work long hours and multiple jobs. Families look forward to their time at the school because they know they are seen as indispensable contributors to their children's education, and their ideas are valued. One parent said, "The commitment this school has toward parents is just very different. They show you that you really matter. Other schools, if you don't show up, that's on you. Here, they're always waiting for you."

Organizational Conditions in Action

Like the hidden foundation of a house, the family engagement infrastructure at the Learning Community supports its positive outcomes. Leaders at the school have focused for many years on building staff capacity and creating an environment that promotes authentic engagement. They see it as their responsibility to ensure that family engagement is systemic across the school, integrated into every strand of their work, and sustained with meaningful resources. This infrastructure enables teachers to lean into the work. One teacher said, "You can't have family engagement be a part of the DNA of a school unless the administration provides the support. Families are going to rely on me, and I'm not going to feel free to ask [hard questions] if I'm going to be expected to fix it all."

The following are a few examples of behind-the-scenes leadership moves that provide the infrastructure for family engagement.

Hiring Practices

Every job candidate is asked, "Why do you want to work in this community?" Whenever there is a deficit-based response, "our pencils go down," said Sarah Friedman, cofounder and former codirector of the Learning Community. "When I walk that person out, I'll say, 'You need to know that what you said is offensive. You shouldn't be saying those things about families that are here.'"

Professional Development

Every year, the Learning Community hosts a summer institute designed and led by teachers to address evolving student needs and set the priorities for the year. Dozens of parents are invited to share their views. Reflecting on the experience, one parent said, "They took notes, and a few months later, they implemented the majority of the things we said. They just literally follow through."

Experimentation and Ongoing Professional Learning

The school's leaders understand that staff learn to engage families by actually *engaging* with them, and that professional learning time is a valuable resource for ongoing improvement. Soon after the school's founding, the faculty undertook a period of experimentation that included activities like riding the bus with children, holding teacher office hours in the community, and visiting families at home for Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. They also examined who did most of the talking during family conferences. These initiatives were meant to strengthen family engagement, but just as importantly, they provided opportunities for staff to reflect on their experiences together and develop plans for continued improvement.

The Family Liaison Role

Maria Duque is an administrative manager, but most schools would call her a family liaison. Her job isn't to build and maintain relationships by herself, however. For Friedman, "everyone in the system has to be in contact with families directly," so Duque's job is to facilitate contact among members of the school community and to coordinate events. It seems that everyone at the Learning Community has a story of being "Duque'd" — that is, being reminded that they are responsible for contributing to the school's community. "She asks if [parents are] okay when they don't come to an event," a teacher explained. "She doesn't aim to blame. But she doesn't take no for an answer." The school's leaders have conceptualized Duque's role as focused on building trust and solidarity within the school, not as managing all relationships.

Conclusion

The Learning Community story underscores the power of a strong infrastructure for building a liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused family engagement practice. It is easy to become enamored with the school's programming, but the success of initiatives like its open house and parent café is in the behind-the-scenes efforts to ensure that family engagement is fundamental to everything the school does. "Families have a right to know what we're doing," Friedman said. "We're not doing them some favor. The love and the trust that comes back is transformative. Once you do that, you can't stop doing it."

Voices for Engagement

Georgia Gross, Curriculum Specialist, Baton Rouge, LA

"I work with a panel of parents, and I get feedback from them. What are they liking? What can we do better? It's making a big difference. And it's changing the way we look at literacy, the way parents are looking at it. We're all way more engaged in reading, way more engaged in the curriculum. We're looking at standards differently. Everyone's afraid of standards, but now it's like, 'Oh, it's not that bad. We can do this. It's not as bad as we thought it was.' And that's another big, big shift as well."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The three federal stimulus bills passed by Congress in 2020 and 2021 provided $190 billion to schools through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. This tremendous infusion of one-time funds offers schools and systems a historic opportunity to invest in high-priority areas. To support systems seeking to invest in family engagement, we offer the following recommendations for building the infrastructure to support the organizational conditions described in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2). These recommendations are meant to help schools and systems overcome the resistance to change that has inhibited effective practices to date and to build a new model for family engagement through a liberatory vision of public education.

Make time during the workday for family engagement. We urge states and districts to provide protected time for educators to partner with families. Building relational trust takes time, and the sector has historically underinvested in this area. During remote learning, many schools and districts have added family outreach time into teachers' weekly schedules. At the very least, this time should be preserved. Teachers' unions and systems leaders have an important role in advocating for this time allocation. In several cities, family outreach time has been included in collective bargaining agreements. In schools across America, teachers are paid as part of their regular contract to conduct home visits or meet one-on-one with families at the start of the year. If schools do not offer protected time, family engagement will likely continue to be seen as an add-on to educators' already busy schedules.

Invest in professional learning (and unlearning) to shift mindsets about families. Deeper partnerships start from an asset-based view of families, so school and system staff need professional learning experiences designed to counteract the prevailing deficit-based view. This involves unlearning — becoming aware of an existing mental model and beginning to shift toward a new one.[37] Catalyzing this type of mindset shift requires direct contact with families. While it is important to understand research and best practices, the most effective professional learning involves educators interacting with families directly in ways that flip the existing power dynamics.[38] The goal should be to build trust and to experience a new type of interaction. Home visits and other eye-opening "seminal experiences"[39] offer rich learning opportunities, especially if educators use those experiences to reflect on their current practices and iteratively develop new strategies.

Invest in ongoing guidance to incorporate new mindsets into existing routines and practices. Professional learning experiences can lead to real change if they are complemented by ongoing support and coaching from content experts. Given that a liberatory approach to family engagement is new for so many educators, systems need to find ways to offer them continual guidance. Schools already have structures for this type of support; it is akin to a district math coach delivering professional development for a school and then following up with grade-level teams during their protected collaboration time to help them embed their learning into their day-to-day teaching habits.

Create senior-level positions dedicated to family and community engagement. School systems need leaders to marshal this work. If states and systems want to raise the bar, they should invest in staff to elevate family engagement and integrate it into their strategic plans. Many school districts have created cabinet-level positions reporting directly to the superintendent or CEO. We see such investments as part of a zero-sum game — either family engagement work wins out in terms of funding and priorities, or it does not. 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.

Focus family engagement efforts on staff development. Most family engagement work in America is family-facing, with staff planning and executing family events or support initiatives. That approach is not wrong, but it is incomplete because it fails to build systemic, integrated family engagement practices. It also emphasizes assimilation, positioning educators as the providers of information and families as the receivers. Systems that want to elevate family engagement should focus resources on building the capacity of all staff to improve their family engagement work.

Building trust and deepening relationships with families of different races and ethnicities creates openings to address biases and assumptions, but only if educators are supported to unpack what they've learned about themselves through their collaborations with families.

Integrate family engagement into equity agendas. Family engagement is equity work at its core. We see authentic family-school partnership as a powerful lever for addressing inequities in schools and communities. At the same time, we believe schools and systems will continue to struggle to enact equity efforts if their staff are disconnected from the communities they serve. Building trust and deepening relationships with families of different races and ethnicities creates openings to address biases and assumptions, but only if educators are supported to unpack what they've learned about themselves through their collaborations with families.[40] Equity agendas should emphasize this type of work because it helps educators see families of different races and ethnicities for their brilliance and for all that they do to support their children — and paving the way for them to recognize how racialized power imbalances between home and school influence their work.

Develop authentic family engagement policies and metrics. As the old saying goes, what gets measured gets done. Leaders who truly want to elevate family engagement will apply the same tools they use to advance their other priorities. That means creating policies that support a liberatory vision for family engagement and articulating specific, measurable expectations for the system's improvement over time.

CONCLUSION

Community engagement should be on the agendas of school boards and cabinets. This work will never be systemic unless senior leaders embrace it. Boards and cabinets should model the internal capacity-building efforts they want to see in others and publicly share what they have learned. We suggest bringing in community organizing and engagement partners to facilitate these learning experiences, and we offer the following guiding questions that can be used during team retreats and other collaborative time:

- What would it look like if we truly valued families as cocreators and coproducers of an excellent education for our students?
- What has to change in our policies and practices to make this happen?
- What investments do we need to make now and in the future?
- How can we embed trust-building in every aspect of our family engagement work?

Policymakers should ensure that family engagement coursework is required for all preservice teachers and included in teacher evaluation rubrics. As of September 2020, only 17 states require aspiring teachers to learn about effective family and community engagement practices in their credentialing programs, and less than 50 percent require aspiring administrators to do so.[41] This should be a requirement in all 50 states. Each state and district should also include a family engagement standard in its evaluation rubric. Additionally, as we cannot expect new teachers to excel right away in their family engagement practice, funding should be provided to support educators in improving their practice throughout their careers.

With this report, we have issued a call to action for America's PreK–12 sector to walk through the door opened by the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism and to embrace a new normal for family and community engagement. We hope it informs, supports, and inspires educators to address ignored and unspoken dynamics in their schools and systems and to think deeply about how to improve family-school partnerships. Our goal is to motivate a transparent, honest, and thoughtful interrogation of what stands in the way of authentic partnerships between families and schools and to show the way toward a more liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused family engagement practice that supports educational excellence for all children.

For readers who would like to use this report to support their journey, we offer a few prompts to generate discussion on the current state of their organization's family engagement practice:

- Which parts of our family engagement practice most closely resemble a liberatory philosophy? Where do we see asset-based framing? How can we grow from there?
- What is the full range of mindsets toward families among our staff?
- Which recommendations for the field could we adopt right away? Which could we move toward within the next year?
- What should be our family engagement vision? What is our North Star?

ENDNOTES

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Eyal Bergman's professional and academic work focuses on building the capacity of school systems to promote deep, meaningful partnerships between educators and the communities they serve as a means of driving equitable outcomes for children. He founded and led the Family & Community Engagement Office in the Cajon Valley Union School District in El Cajon, California, and was previously a community organizer and youth mentor.

Bergman earned his doctorate of education leadership from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. As a doctoral student, he served as a superintendent resident and coauthored the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2). He also earned his master's of education from Harvard and his bachelor's from Tufts University. His upbringing in a bilingual Latino immigrant home informs his work and shapes his views on schooling in America.

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