

## Supporting Family Engagement Through Professional Learning

Jeri LaBahn (1995) defines parental involvement as “a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of the parent to the school and to the student,” or a partnership between school and home to support student learning (p. 1). For many students, it is a combination of both extended families and caregivers who provide this support. According to the National Education Association (2015), parental involvement, or family engagement, increases the likelihood that students will raise grade point averages and earn higher test scores, and attrition rates will decrease; socially, students improve their behavior and adapt better to the school environment, which also affects their academic successes during grade school and beyond. Highly dependent on school-level decisions, family involvement can be encouraged through the PTA, individual classroom activities, and/or school-based events. Whatever the source of the involvement, educators are looking for more ways to

encourage family involvement, because it is critical to student success.

### Current Trends in Family Engagement

The Child Trends Data Bank (2013) report on family engagement in schools found that parental involvement increased between 1999 and 2007 based on habits of volunteering or serving on a committee and measures of attendance at general meetings, meetings with teachers, and school events. Despite that growth in involvement, however, the report found that by 2012, the percentage of parental involvement had plateaued or dropped. Oftentimes, the reasons for the decline were that teachers and administrators found family engagement challenging, particularly with families from low-income areas, families of color, and students at high risk for failure (p. 5–6). Several situational challenges affect family engagement, such as families’ lack of money and time, broken family structures, language barriers, little understanding or knowledge of how to support academics, and parents’ own educational failures (La-Bahn, 1995). Additionally, educators “tend to treat parents and families as bystanders

rather than partners, and often overlook their strengths and their capacity to transform public education” (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010, p. 2). That’s not altogether surprising, given that federal policies to encourage family involvement have been, according to the Department of Education’s Christopher Cross, random, halfhearted, unfocused, and ineffective (2004, p. 157). Because of these difficulties with family engagement, schools and districts need to strategically and thoughtfully design, implement, and evaluate their efforts toward increasing family engagement in classrooms to support student learning.

### Effective Family Engagement in Schools

The first step in establishing effective family engagement is to develop an understanding of the policies and frameworks that exist. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) requires schools and districts to involve families in both private and public schools in school programs and in their students’ education. The Title I, Part A statute of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001) defines parental involvement as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way and

meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities.” The statute requires that local education agencies and schools partner with parents in several ways, specifying that:

- Parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning.
- Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school.
- Parents are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child.
- Other activities are carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA, Parental Involvement (Section 9101[32]).

This requirement for parental involvement has pushed schools and districts to find effective methods of engaging families in their children’s education to support learning needs and goals. The National PTA established their National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs in 2011, which focus on building that much-needed partnership between home and school that supports student learning. These standards include the capacity to:

- Welcome families as full partners in the school community.
- Establish regular, meaningful communication.

- Collaboratively support student success.
- Encourage families to advocate for their own and other children.
- Invite families to be equal partners in making school decisions that affect children and families.
- Reach out to the community for resources to strengthen schools (p. 2).

To establish family engagement in schools, Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg (2010) state that there are four key roles that families need to play in their children’s academic success. The first role is supporting learning, in which schools advance the knowledge and skills necessary for families to support children as they progress through the school years. The second is the school partner role in which families have the knowledge to inform educational decisions and provide support in the best interest of their children, particularly around meeting academic needs. The third role, advocate for school improvement, places families at the heart of collective organizing and mobilization. In the final role as decision-maker and leadership, families that participate in school leadership and governance can build family social networks that influence school culture and climate (p. 5–6). Schools that understand these roles know that family engagement must begin early on because it sets the foundation to develop a child’s

“knowledge, skills, and talents” (p. 6). These roles and standards provide a foundation for establishing family engagement in schools and school districts.

One example of building this type of effective family engagement is explained in “New Visions for Public Schools: Using Data to Engage Families.” Barbara Taveras, Caissa Douwes, and Karen Johnson (2010), who authored this Harvard Family Research Project report, share how the use of achievement data engages families, to help them better understand and support student learning needs. The New York Department of Education and New Visions for Public Schools partnered to support 76 public schools (mainly high schools) to oversee the academic successes of approximately 36,000 students. To address the fact that family engagement was event-driven rather than ongoing, New Visions focused their family engagement efforts on ninth-grade students and their families through the 9th Grade Parent Involvement in College Readiness Initiative. New Visions chose ninth graders because retention problems begin in ninth grade. Additionally, family engagement tended to decrease significantly in the middle school grades, which meant that ninth grade was a crucial time to invigorate family support before college.

To steer this initiative, New Visions focused their actions on three questions:

- What information and data can and should teachers provide parents, and how can this information best be presented?
- Can teachers and school staff co-create with families mechanisms and processes to communicate and collaborate to improve student achievement?
- What resources should the school have, beyond learning in the classroom, to support student success (e.g., out-of-school time opportunities in community)?

With these three questions in mind, New Visions focused their efforts on creating both school-based and student-based performance data tools and four core ninth-grade college-readiness benchmarks. These benchmarks include the following: attendance rates of 92% over the course of the year; course grades of 80% or higher; completion of 11 or more credits by the end of the year; and passing one or two New York State Regents' exams with a score of at least 75%. The benchmarks were distributed to school personnel, families, and students through a family-friendly publication entitled "Is Your 9th Grader on Track to College?" and a series of "Aiming Higher" workshops for both parents and educators.

New Visions realized that to engage families in improving student achievement they had to provide the right information and tools to evaluate students' academic progress and needs. Not only does this put schools and families on the same page to meet the goal of developing college-ready students, but it also builds capacity to apply student data in a meaningful way. The support tools they created included School Data Snapshot (SDS) and the College Readiness Tracker (CRT). The SDS is a color-coded student achievement tracking tool; the CRT, often accompanying report cards, is a tool that tells families about their student's academic progress by subject area. New Visions taught families how to use these performance data tools during a workshop and then teachers met with families on an individual basis to reinforce this learning. During the spring and fall, New Visions also provided two day-long parental involvement institutes to parent coordinators and other relevant school personnel to align their family involvement and college-readiness efforts.

One example of the success from this family engagement model was at the Brooklyn Academy of Science and the Environment (BASE) High School in Prospect Heights in Brooklyn, NY. With two and a half years of support from New Visions, BASE has worked

on the three benchmarks by supporting a shared definition of college readiness, implementing strategies to create a college-ready school culture, setting expectations for the level of rigor during instruction, and establishing a role for each stakeholder in the process. By 2013, BASE aimed to reach all three benchmarks through the support of their parent coordinator, Karen Johnson, who received extensive 12-week training on best practices to engage families with their students' education. Johnson also established the Freshman Academy in 2009 to acclimate ninth graders and their families to the four benchmarks and encourage active participation to monitor student progress during high school. Along with the data tools, New Visions worked on building partnerships with families and students by encouraging them to serve on specific school-based committees and teams. These included the School Committee (discussing school-wide issues) and PTA and School Leadership Team (discussing areas of concern and school community goals). To support these efforts, several teacher and administration-organized teams and personnel were put into place to organize or nurture the development of these partnerships, such as the establishment of an inquiry team (focusing on improving achievement of low-performing students),

grade-level team (examining a particular grade level's data and identifying students with learning needs), and data specialist/programmer (entering student data and working with New Visions to clearly present data to stakeholders).

This example shows how effective family engagement develops families' understanding of student data so that they support their children's academic needs and goals. A model that uses the four key roles for families, the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement, and the Title I, Part A guidelines, in addition to building school-based support systems to maintain ongoing relationships with families throughout the school year, has a solid foundation to build these much-needed and valued partnerships between families and schools to increase student learning. Family engagement does not happen overnight; it's something that must be a dialogue, nurtured, and ongoing.

## **Building Educator Capacity Around Effective Family Engagement**

Understanding of what effective family engagement looks, sounds, and feels like is important. Admittedly, to obtain this in a school culture is difficult—but not impossible—and it starts with developing

the capacity of the school staff. The aforementioned literature demonstrates how great the need is for educators to professionally develop their understanding of family engagement to effectively implement an action plan to encourage this home–school partnership. With a rise in the need for professional development, the creation of a self-assessment instrument for educators to develop their knowledge and skills around effective family engagement is a necessary step. The Family Engagement Professional Learning Maps survey instrument was created for educators to understand and target their professional learning around how to effectively design, implement, and evaluate the use of family engagement in their school and classrooms to better involve families in their children's learning.

### **Development of Family Engagement Professional Learning Maps Survey Instrument**

The creation of the Family Engagement survey started with a review of the professional and peer-reviewed literature that focused on characteristics of effective family engagement, how it's effective, and what educators need to understand to design, implement, and evaluate this type of partnership in their schools and classrooms. To start the instrument development, the

Professional Learning Maps team acted on a request from the New Mexico Department of Education to build a customized survey instrument for their elementary teachers and administrators to advance their understanding and to inform the design, implementation, and execution of family engagement in schools and districts. This customized survey instrument was created as an addition to the Data Use Professional Learning Map to focus on family engagement initiatives within the state.

### **Custom Development for New Mexico Department of Education**

The customized Family Engagement map for New Mexico consisted of nine skills and associated survey items. Two members of the Professional Learning Maps team used the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement as the framework to draft the Family Engagement survey. From these standards, nine skills were created. Upon creation, another Professional Learning Maps team member reviewed the survey items and skills to assess their meaning and alignment with the standards. Revisions were made to reflect the assessment of the third team member to improve the alignment with the standards to enhance the Family Engagement survey. After the revisions were completed, New Mexico distributed the survey to evaluate their un-

derstanding and implementation of family engagement in schools and classrooms.

### Expansion of Family Engagement Professional Learning Map

Expansion of the Family Engagement survey was underway. Two Professional Learning Maps team members, who had not participated in the initial draft, consulted with the previous team members to understand the history of the Family Engagement survey and discuss next steps to ensure a successful expansion. The team members researched family engagement further to aid in this expansion, including in their research the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, the National Education Association on Parental Involvement in Education, the Harvard Family Research Project, America's Promise Alliance's Parental Toolkit, and the Office of Family and Community Engagement from the School District of Philadelphia. These resources, as well as multiple others, provided the foundation for the development of the current Family Engagement survey. As a result, an additional three skills and associated survey items were added to the survey instrument—some focused on data as it relates to supporting student learning and others on techniques and methods for communicating with parents.

### Expert Validation Process

After the expansion of the Family Engagement survey, expert validation established the validity of the survey items based on the intent and meaning of their assigned concepts. Experts were determined based on their knowledge of, experience with, and implementation of family engagement in schools and school districts. During the first round of expert validation in February 2015, participants worked independently to align survey items to concepts and skills. Participants provided context for their decisions and also recommended improvements to the survey items, concepts, and survey structure.

Based on the results of the first expert validation process, several revisions to the survey were implemented to ensure that each item elicited the intended reflection of professional practice. Additionally, a family engagement expert consultant reviewed the survey components, concepts, and items through the lens of a research-based framework. The consultant's review led to three other individual reviews from internal team members to examine the relevance of the survey to family engagement in schools and classrooms. These reviews led to the confirmation of the content validity of the third version of the survey instrument.

The second round of expert validation took place in June 2015 with four internal experts who reviewed the third version of the Family Engagement survey instrument. All four experts had a thorough understanding of family engagement in either schools, districts, and/or classrooms from their position as a teacher, administrator, or district leader in various school systems across the country. To obtain the most objective feedback, all but one expert were unfamiliar with the survey content. Experts worked in pairs to examine the survey item, align items to concepts and skills, and review the description of the concepts to ensure they matched the corresponding professional practice. The second expert validation revealed the need for only minor revisions to the survey instrument. This final survey provides targeted skills and concepts that outline effective family engagement in a classroom and school environment. The development of this instrument can help determine the learning needs of teachers as they incorporate family engagement to build home—school partnerships to better meet student learning needs.

# Family Engagement Professional Learning Maps Survey Blueprint

COMPONENT	CONCEPT
Partnership	Classroom Community
	School Community
	Community Connections
Supporting Student Learning	Data
	Standards
	Family Contribution
	School Community
	Parental Involvement Programs
	Assessments
Communicating with Parents	Parent-Teacher Conferences
	Techniques for Communication
	Methods of Communication

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