



Safe
Schools
Healthy
Students

Creating Conditions for Meaningful Family Engagement From Pre-K to High School

Part of the SS/HS Framework Implementation Toolkit

1. Plan

2. Implement

3. Sustain and Expand

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Introduction

“It’s vital to understand that promoting education equity necessitates family engagement. It is when families are authentically engaged and listened to as active partners that our students reach their full potential and graduate college and career ready.”

—Dianna R. Wentzell, Ed.D., Connecticut State Education Commissioner, 2016

Have you ever asked yourself, “What is family engagement in schools?” If you were to ask 10 colleagues about the meaning of family engagement, it is likely you would get 10 different responses describing variations of traditional parent participation or family involvement activities. This is unsurprising given that the roles and expectations of parents and schools have been rapidly changing and evolving in recent years. Whereas the past gauge for parental involvement mostly tracked attendance at parent–teacher and PTA meetings, fundraising, school trips, and volunteerism, current national policy informed by research is setting new standards that call for meaningful family engagement in today’s schools, districts, and state education systems. Advancements in brain science have shed light on the critical role that parents and family members have in their children’s learning, development, and well-being from birth on. Research indicates that young children as well as older students benefit when families are meaningfully and continuously engaged in their children’s education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2016). Family engagement contributes to positive student outcomes, including improved child and student achievement, decreased disciplinary issues, improved parent–teacher and teacher–student relationships, and improved school environment (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). More and more, research-based practices that foster meaningful family engagement and partnership in children’s learning and development are being adopted by preschools to high schools.

Meaningful family engagement occurs when educators and family members work in partnership, at both state and local levels, to design, plan, and implement system improvements and programs that matter in the lives of children and their families. Whereas educators bring professional experience to the planning table, family members share “lived experience.” Lived experience represents the direct encounters that families have with services, programs, policies, and systems as well as critical knowledge parents have about their children and neighborhoods. Whether collaborating about a new policy or addressing an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a family’s lived experience provides an up-close and real-time perspective on what is needed and working as well as what is not working for their child and school community. Broad family representation that reflects the diversity of the school community is essential in planning, decision making, and co-creating education policies and programs that positively impact every child, youth, and family.

State and local leaders are making significant progress in implementing effective and formal collaboration with families to improve their education system. Connecticut’s State Education Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell, Ed.D., adopted a shared leadership approach to building family engagement state-wide. Dr. Wentzell’s announcement at a state educators meeting communicated her commitment to establish meaningful family engagement by developing and implementing policies and programs in partnership with families instead of “attempting to bring them [families] on board after the fact” (Wood & Carson, 2016). The round table’s membership and structure demonstrates equal partnership with balanced representation of Connecticut’s major constituencies—school/district staff, parents (or guardians), students, and community members. Consequently, the Commissioner’s Round Table for Family and Community Engagement in Education was established to advise on education policy and programmatic priorities aimed at improving outcomes for all



students and advancing the State Board of Education’s comprehensive plan for equity and excellence in Connecticut schools (Wood & Carson, 2016).

At the national, state, and district level, policies are becoming more precise regarding standards, methods, and expectations for family engagement that target student achievement, school performance, and district planning. As an example, the [Nevada Department of Education, Office of Family Engagement, adopted a set of six standards](#) to guide the state and districts in policy making and expansion of parent and family engagement (Nevada, 2018). Key goals include establishing district advisory councils state-wide, integrating family engagement training into onboarding and professional development expectations, and requiring that District and school improvement plans focus efforts on intentional family engagement. At the national level, the revised Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) policy includes provisions requiring that Local Education Agency (LEAs) engage families in meaningful and substantive roles in developing the district’s family engagement policy, plan, and in monitoring progress towards building family engagement as outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. ESSA Title I – Parent and Family Engagement

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
Title I—Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged
Sec. 1116—Parent and Family Engagement

- LEAs are required to outreach to all parents and families in the district.
- Engage LEAs and families to partner in co-creating the district’s family engagement policy, establishing the agency’s expectations and objectives for meaningful family involvement.
- Provide coordination and technical assistance to build school capacity in planning and implementing effective family involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance.
- Coordinate and integrate parent and family engagement activities across relevant federal, state, and local laws and programs as appropriate.
- Include meaningful involvement of families to conduct an annual evaluation of policy effectiveness and impact in improving academic quality.
- Identify and address barriers to family participation affecting diverse subpopulations.
- Conduct an assessment to learn what families need to support their children’s learning and to increase school engagement.
- Use evaluation findings to design evidence-based strategies to build family engagement.
- Collaborate with community-based organizations experienced in family engagement.
- Establish regular two-way communication with families in their preferred language.
- Option to establish parent advisory boards that reflect families served by the district to develop, revise, and review the parent and family engagement policy.

Source: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965
[As Amended Through P.L. 114-95, Enacted December 10, 2015]

Family engagement in Title I schools calls for a differential approach to engaging families, including families from nondominant racial and ethnic groups. Although a school-wide approach to family engagement may work for some families, schools often find that broad-based tactics alone are not effective in reaching all families.



Instead, a differential approach is needed to reach and engage families of all children who are academically struggling and most at risk. Therefore, a family’s lived experience and perspective is essential in prioritizing and framing their student’s strengths, challenges, and needs. Collectively, family perspectives and lived experiences present opportunities for mutual learning that prepare educators and families to collaborate in effectively addressing the academic and social–emotional challenges and needs of all students. This resource will highlight how districts and schools have implemented a differential approach that includes selective, intensive strategies and culturally responsive methods to build relationships, trust, and connections with families once considered hard to reach.

Although family engagement policy and practices in education are changing in significant ways at the state and national level, considerable efforts are still needed to meaningfully engage and prepare families to take on new roles in their school community. Continuity of active family engagement throughout a child’s education offers an added protective effect. The more families support their children’s learning at home, the more likely their children will do well in school and continue their education (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Nevertheless, despite their best efforts, many schools struggle to establish basic connections and regular communication with all families.

This resource is intended for educators and family leaders interested in strengthening their family engagement approaches and practices in schools and classrooms. An overview of key family engagement policies is provided to shed light on regulatory requirements, expectations, and recommendations meant to support districts and schools in their efforts. The guide also features Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s, [Safe Schools/Healthy Students \(SS/HS\) State Grantees](#) and local education agencies (LEAs) that have advanced family engagement in their states and schools by implementing the [SS/HS Framework](#), its strategic approaches, and its guiding principles. Also highlighted are early education programs recognized by Head Start. Finally, this resource guide includes tips on how families and schools can work together to use their collective expertise to create optimal conditions for meaningful family engagement from pre-K to high school.



Cultivate Family Engagement in Early Childhood Programs

“Strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central—not supplemental—to promoting children’s healthy intellectual, physical, and social–emotional development; preparing children for school; and supporting academic achievement in elementary school and beyond.”

—U.S. Departments of HHS & ED Policy Statement, 2016

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees Head Start, and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued a joint policy statement addressing the critical role of family engagement in promoting children’s success in early childhood systems and programs titled “Family Engagement From the Early Years to the Early Grades” (U. S. Departments of HHS & ED, 2016). The stated goal of the HHS and ED policy statement is that all early childhood systems recognize and support the essential role of families in children’s development, learning, and wellness. The joint statement puts forth guiding principles for family engagement in early childhood systems and offers guidance on setting policies and procedures to effectively support and sustain family engagement in early childhood programs and schools. The joint policy statement also includes a comprehensive overview of family engagement best practices and recommendations for implementation in early childhood systems.

[New Hampshire’s](#) early childhood programs host Wednesday Family Learning Days once a month to share information that families requested and to learn from parents about their needs and barriers in accessing early childhood support, resources, and training.

High-quality early learning programs are making significant gains in preparing young children and parents for future success in school. New Hampshire’s SS/HS staff recognize family partnership as an essential element in early childhood programs. Their SS/HS program has focused on building family engagement by implementing strategies to connect early on with families to learn about the children’s and families’ interests and to maintain family–school connections throughout the year. Early childhood programs in Wisconsin and Oklahoma have been recognized by Head Start and other organizations for producing positive outcomes in literacy skills, school readiness, and health (Acelero, 2016; CAP Tulsa, 2011). Keys to their programs’ success include data-driven improvement processes, intensive professional development, and designing training and supports for their diverse family groups. Their robust family engagement approaches build upon family strengths and foster family empowerment. Acelero Learning and CAP Tulsa Head Start programs continuously work at engaging parents from diverse socioeconomic, educational, and racial/ethnic backgrounds in supporting their children’s learning at home (Acelero, 2016; CAP Tulsa, 2011). Acelero and CAP Tulsa families receive individualized feedback on their children’s progress during regular home visits by parent educators and are provided with a curriculum tailored for the families and children to work on at home.

Other opportunities for skills development offered by early childhood programs include online videos, family-to-family networking, and workshops that engage families in hands-on learning activities to address gaps in learning. Studies show a positive association between supportive parenting practices and social–emotional outcomes, such as fewer behavioral problems, increased cooperation in school, and being liked by peers (Van



Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Early childhood programs are increasingly focused on providing families with personalized guidance on social–emotional development, addressing behavioral problems, implementing appropriate discipline practices, and establishing home routines and structure (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Additional support services are arranged through collaborative agreements with community mental health providers to address social and emotional needs of children and families.

Tips for Cultivating Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in Early Childhood Education Programs

Probably the most difficult phase of family engagement is laying the groundwork for meaningful and lasting family engagement. Educators must dedicate the time needed to develop positive relationships and build trust with each family. Dialogue with families is the best way to communicate, build relationships, and learn about the family and their student’s strengths and needs. Maintaining regular connections strengthens parent–teacher partnership and contributes to a child’s academic success. The following tips can help pave the way for meaningful family engagement in early education programs:

- Strive to establish good relationships with families by getting to know each individual family from the start. Families appreciate knowing that you share common interests regarding their children. This investment of time early on will pay off over the school year.
- Keep in mind that every family is unique. Ask families how to correctly pronounce their child’s name or surname if unfamiliar to you. By doing so, you are demonstrating respect and appreciation for their culture.
- Ask families/parents to share about their children’s personal strengths and anything else they feel you need to know.
- Show a genuine interest in recognizing and understanding each family’s cultural background. Ask if there are any cultural considerations you need to be aware of that may affect their child’s experience in the program (beliefs, values, customs, practices, religious/nonreligious).
- Ask parents about their language of preference and preferred time and method of communication. Review purpose, process, and frequency of communication with parents.
- Advise families of their role as partners in their children’s learning and development at home and in school. Ensure that both school staff and parents review and fully understand their roles and expectations outlined in parental agreements or contracts. Agreements should be in each family’s language of preference and written in a family-friendly format.
- Learn about activities or routines implemented in the home to stimulate their children’s learning and play and ask about needed training and materials as the year progresses.
- Reinforce the continued importance of a parent’s primary role in the child’s learning and development at home and explain how it complements progress at school.
- Create opportunities for families to acquire knowledge and skills about developmentally appropriate ways to promote their children’s learning and development at home. Offer family-friendly materials in a range of formats, including training videos, toolkits, and bilingual products.
- Always be strengths based! Keep in mind that preschool may be the first time a family with a young child experiences another adult’s feedback about their child’s behavior and development.
- Support families in preparing for their transition from preschool to kindergarten to include guidance on the following:
 - Kindergarten registration process
 - The new school’s academic program: What does the child need to know? What will the child learn?
 - Expectations for behavior



- The child's preschool records
- How to advocate for a child with special health and mental health needs



Build Up Family Engagement in Elementary Schools

“Research indicates that urban elementary students’ academic success was positively related to parental involvement and parental involvement programs. In addition, parental involvement was found to be associated with higher achievement for students of racial minority and somewhat higher for boys than girls.”

—W. H. Jeynes, 2005

Transitioning to elementary school marks a very important milestone for children and their families. This is an exciting time that starts with “first day of school” photos and jitters. As is common with any change, many families feel unsure about how to support their children in making a successful transition to kindergarten from home, childcare, or preschool. Oftentimes, families must figure out on their own how the new school system works. Preschool programs that provide family coaching, training, home visits, and supports are smaller in size and more relationship based, whereas school systems seem complex, formal, and difficult to navigate. Families commonly feel overwhelmed by new school policies and unwritten campus formalities. Children and families must adapt to longer school days, classroom protocols and procedures, and different methods of communication. School administrators, teachers, and staff have titles and roles that are unfamiliar to parents. Families of children with identified developmental and behavioral needs may have the added stress of figuring out how and where to get help for their children. While advancing to kindergarten is exciting, it can also signal a change for the family and their relationship with the school throughout their child’s elementary grades.

Wisconsin’s teachers receive professional development on family engagement, how to recognize family strengths, and how to effectively communicate with families. View [Effective Family Engagement video](#) developed in partnership with SS/HS state team.

Current data shows that family involvement tends to decline as children enter kindergarten and elementary grades. On the other hand, a comprehensive review of research on family involvement in early childhood indicates that efforts to strengthen family involvement may be a significant factor in supporting learning and development of children in preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary grades (Jeynes, 2005; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). For these reasons, schools are implementing different methods to smooth the transition from pre-K to kindergarten for children and to connect with families early. Schools are working jointly with pre-K programs in development and implementation of companion curriculums to bridge learning and prepare children and families for the structure and learning expectations of the kindergarten classroom. For example, in Wisconsin elementary schools, families and children benefit from opportunities to visit the new school campus and classroom and meet their kindergarten teacher prior to the first day of school. If home visits are planned, measures are taken to ensure that the family understands and has consented to the visit in advance of showing up at their door. Families are provided with verbal and written information as to the purpose for the home visit, the process, and alternative options, which may be especially important to families of color who may have concerns about privacy, trust, or preparing their home for a guest.

Promising models have shed light on strategies that work in strengthening family engagement. School campuses are adapting leadership approaches, assessing school climate, and addressing staff readiness to



engage families. High-quality school–family relationships are recognized as having a positive influence on family and student engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Yet with everything teachers must do, how do they find the time needed to build relationships with each family? Fortunately, group approaches that engage families in learning and discussion have been found to work in building family–school relationships. Classroom gatherings versus school-wide events create opportunities for family-to-family networking, which can be an ongoing source of support and information for families (Project Tomorrow, 2018). However, educators must also make time for one-on-one dialogue with each parent and encourage two-way communication at every opportunity. Planning such meetings must consider barriers to family participation, such as inconvenient meeting times, lack of transportation, and childcare needs. To address access barriers, schools hold family orientation and training events in neighborhoods and places that are convenient and easily accessible to families, such as community centers, libraries, apartment complexes, and parks. The best locations can be identified by asking families for their recommendations. Diversity in language and culture is another common barrier that keeps families away. When teachers, staff, or volunteers of a similar culture and language cofacilitate school events, they create comfortable and safe zones for diverse families to interact and ask questions in their preferred language. In the absence of bilingual staff, consider enlisting the support of experienced family volunteers. When schools clear access barriers, they communicate awareness of diversity and thoughtfulness of family needs.

Tips for Creating Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in Elementary Schools

Elementary school staff can play a key role in paving the way for a smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten by supporting the child’s and family’s adjustment to their new school system. This is also an opportune time to learn about and build upon family engagement skills and practices that parents learned in the preschool environment.

- Plan activities before the school year begins to prepare and help children and their parents to make a smooth transition from kindergarten.
- Provide multiple opportunities for families and children to visit the new school campus and classroom and to meet their kindergarten teacher.
- Provide staff training on family engagement, how to learn about family strengths, and how to respond to a family’s communication preferences.
- Request a family’s agreement in advance of a home visit and engage them in planning. Discuss the purpose and process before, during, and after the visit.
- Support parental skills building such as how to manage challenging behaviors and nurturing ways to promote social–emotional development.
- Encourage families to network with other families when hosting family training events. Parents of elementary school children are most likely to rely on parental “word of mouth” for information about their school (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- To improve attendance, engage families in planning and problem-solving barriers, such as transportation, interpreters, dinner, and childcare.
- Provide training and access to materials that families can use at home to build their children’s math, reading, writing, and literacy skills.
- Show families how to access homework assistance, use materials such as home kits, and establish structured study habits early.
- Improve engagement of diverse families by utilizing training videos with actors that match the families’ race/ethnicity and language preferences.
- Establish clear, open, and reliable two-way communication channels so that families know who to discuss their concerns with before they escalate to a crisis.



- Ask families about their informational needs and interests, such as accessing school and community services. Host regular meetings to present information and learning activities.
- Engage the assistance of an interpreter or volunteer to improve two-way communication with non-English-speaking families and to ensure understanding of educational materials.



Strengthen Family Engagement in Middle Schools and High Schools

“Parents who are viewed as ‘hard to reach’ often see the school as ‘hard to reach.’ Where schools have made concentrated efforts to engage the ‘hard to reach’ parents, evidence shows that the effect on pupil learning and behavior is positive (particularly of hard-to-reach parents), showing improvements in attendance, behavior, and student achievement.”

— A. Harris and J. Goodall, 2007

Family engagement commonly declines in middle school and high school where, according to a 2013 Child Trends report, parents are less likely to participate in a general school meeting, attend a scheduled teacher meeting, or volunteer in school activities. However, research also indicates that when parents establish working relationships with teachers and are actively involved in their children’s education, these students attend school regularly, have fewer behavioral problems, have better academic performance, and are more likely to complete high school than students whose parents are not as involved in their school (Child Trends, 2013; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007). For these reasons, districts and schools have ramped up efforts to strengthen family engagement in middle school and high school education.

Middle and high school family members are more likely to actively engage when their needs and interests are taken into account. As an example, student-centered, student-led conferences are gaining traction in middle and high schools across the country, replacing typical parent–teacher conferences and significantly boosting family engagement in one district from 20% to 90% (Hechinger Report, 2016). Students take responsibility for inviting their parents and families, coordinating and scheduling the conference, and preparing a portfolio of their academic work. Students not only present their work but lead the meeting and discussion with their families and teachers. Overall feedback from all involved has been very positive (Hechinger Report, 2016). This approach additionally builds youths’ skills in planning and executing meetings that can be applied to other settings.

Training and informational seminars have increased family response when topics are relevant to their needs and barriers to participation are addressed. New Hampshire’s Family Resource Center staff found that holding on-site trainings resulted in a significant increase in family participation across all three districts that participated in the SS/HS initiative. Most important is that topics of focus addressed the needs and interests identified with family input rather than staff only. New Hampshire held parent–caregiver education programs in middle schools focused on homework support, promoting healthy choices, Internet safety, and substance misuse.

Michigan’s family resource centers staffed by family engagement specialists have been effective in serving as a central access point for information and services within their middle and high schools. These centers are staffed to provide training and information to families. Michigan also co-located health and human services agency caseworkers in schools to facilitate access to state health and social services for families and their

Michigan’s SS/HS state-wide family engagement initiative is providing professional development to help staff reframe any negative beliefs about families before launching family engagement programs. For more information on Michigan’s family engagement effort, see the [Authentic Family Engagement](#) grantee spotlight.



children. Broader school-wide efforts focus on building educators’ readiness for meaningful family engagement through self-reflection and professional development.

To address system gaps for students with intensive needs, Wisconsin’s SS/HS schools implemented parent peer support (PPS) services to assist families in accessing school and community-based mental health and social services and supports for their children. PPS providers have been highly effective in helping families of students with intensive mental health needs navigate systems, such as when transitioning from day treatment or other placements back to school or when involved with external agencies such as child welfare and juvenile justice. PPS providers are also trained and experienced in guiding families through IEP and Section 504 meetings. When families are supported, they are better informed and prepared to actively participate in planning appropriate programs and services for their children at these important meetings.

Families considered “hard to reach” respond to strengths-based engagement approaches. For example, Parent Cafés focus on strengthening families through meaningful conversations about what is important to them (Parent Cafés, 2018). Wisconsin’s Menominee Indian School District, an SS/HS program site, implemented Parent Cafés and successfully increased family engagement in their schools and community. Parent Cafés have been broadly implemented in the United States and territories to strengthen family engagement of diverse family groups in their communities, including Latino, Chinese, and Chamorro communities (Parent Cafés, 2018). Parent Cafés are an adaptation of the World Café model that has effectively promoted collective learning and collaboration to problem-solve community issues in the United States and internationally (World Café, 2018).

New technology-based strategies are being used to improve teacher–parent communication. School websites with parent portals offer convenient access to parent surveys, training videos, tools, school calendars, and general school information. Some districts have expanded portals to provide parents access to students’ attendance records, homework assignments, and grades. Although many families may not use a computer, most families have access to mobile devices, such as cell phones and tablets. Project Tomorrow (2018) reported that the parents surveyed prefer educators communicate with them through e-mail, phone calls, and texts, in that order.

Tips for Strengthening Family-Friendly Conditions for Engagement in Middle School and High School

Families and school staff may not expect or be accustomed to working in partnership over the course of a student’s middle and high school years. Parent–teacher conferences and communications are fewer than in the early years of a child’s education or cease altogether until there is a problem. Yet having families as allies can be more effective in addressing issues of concern. For this reason, it’s important that educators reset their values and approaches and partner with families in fostering their students’ success in school and life. The following are suggested strategies to strengthen family–school connections:

- Engage each parent in creating a communications plan to keep them informed of the student’s successes, progress, and struggles. Agree on communication methods and time frames.
- Consider that, when communicating about an individual student, middle and high school parents prefer e-mails, texts, or calls and rank handwritten notes as the least preferred communication method (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- Be sure to inform students and follow through with plans to regularly communicate with parents about students’ strengths and needs.
- E-mails, automated phone messages, texts, and online newsletters are most preferred by families for general communications from school to home (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- Advise families of developmentally appropriate resources and information on how they can support students during transitions to middle school and high school and upon graduation.



- Directly inform families about learning expectations for each class, classroom rules, and test schedules rather than rely on students or school portals to communicate the information.
- Provide parents and students with information on what they can do each year to become college and career ready. All families and students should be equally advised of college and career options.
- Engage parents and community partners in teaching students about various career options. Students are showing increased interest in work experience, field trips to companies, learning from professionals, and online abilities/career assessment (Project Tomorrow, 2018).
- Encourage parents to regularly engage their youths in discussions around educational and career goals. What are the youths' aspirations? What will it take to achieve their goals?

Family–school partnerships are most effective and sustainable when implemented as a collective effort between families and school staff—one that is fully integrated with the school's overall mission and goals, supported by leadership, and provided with sufficient staffing and funding. When all family members in a school community are meaningfully engaged, supported, and respected as equal partners, their “voice” and experiences are invaluable in creating innovative solutions that support a student's academic success and healthy development at home, at school, and in the community.

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