



# How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Improve Student Achievement and Influence School Reform

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## INTRODUCTION

Family engagement is increasingly recognized as a critical link in advancing school reform efforts (Cavanagh, 2012; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Yet, despite this awareness, parents and schools have much to do—and learn—to fit family engagement into the reform puzzle. Although several research reviews have been published in this field, researchers and school leaders are still working to understand how to most effectively engage families, and which family engagement strategies lead to school improvement and increased student achievement, particularly in areas with underserved communities.

The current emphasis on successful strategies for school turnaround necessitates research-based information and practices on effective family and community engagement approaches that support student achievement and school improvement. The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) calls for increased stakeholder engagement as states, districts, and schools implement provisions of the law. ESSA requires schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) or targeted support and improvement (TSI) to develop and implement their school-level improvement plans in partnership with stakeholders, including family and community members. ESSA defines CSI schools as the lowest performing 5 percent of schools and high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent. TSI schools are defined as schools in which a subgroup of students is consistently underperforming. As ESSA is implemented, local education agencies and schools will need more research-based information about the most effective partnership programs and evidence-based strategies to support this work.

District and school leaders need current information about research-based practices and reform strategies that can make the greatest difference. Without research-based strategies, states, schools, and districts have been slow to make family engagement a priority. As a result, family engagement has become “one of the most powerful but neglected supports for children’s learning and development” (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridgall, & Gordon, 2009, p. 4). Nevertheless, school improvement approaches have slowly begun to emphasize the shared responsibility that families, schools, and communities have for our children’s education and for school reform.

To assist in the goal of understanding how family and community partnerships can promote school improvement efforts, this literature review strives to address the following questions:

1. What are the key components (practices, challenges, conditions, goals, and outcomes) of promising family-school partnerships that support school- and district-level reform?
2. How do promising partnerships involve families and communities in education reform?



## METHODS

Although the scope of this literature review prevented an exhaustive, comprehensive review of the literature, American Institutes for Research followed established procedures for identifying potential studies to review, through structured search processes. In particular, we searched for studies that demonstrated a direct link between family or community partnership programs or efforts and improvements in student or school outcomes. This was done by conducting searches in Academic Search Premier and JSTOR, which are multidisciplinary databases that include journals and dissertations. We also conducted targeted searches on the Internet, including the Harvard Family Research Project website. We pulled papers, peer-reviewed articles, and reports.

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We applied a two-level screening process. The initial screening determined whether a full and detailed examination of the study should be conducted (i.e., whether the study met the basic criteria set for the literature review and included all necessary information). For this review, we excluded studies published before 2006 and studies outside the K–12 grade range. This step involved reading through

the abstract and determining whether the study might be relevant to any of the research questions listed above. For instance, if the abstract mentioned ways to improve or increase parent or community engagement or involvement, the study was pulled for further review to help answer research question 2. This initial search yielded 52 studies for further review. The second step included examining the entire study and pulling detailed information—such as the study’s population, methods, features of the program, and definitions of the efforts, findings, and challenges—into a template. Of the 52 studies reviewed at this step, 35 were included in this literature review. The studies excluded from this review included literature reviews or meta-analyses that did not focus on a particular program or defined type of effort, studies that did not meet the population criteria, and studies that did not include information about one of our interested outcomes.

The final review included a diverse set of studies. The populations included students from all K–12 grade levels, the general population, special education populations, and minority populations. The methodologies also ranged from qualitative assessments of interview data to quantitative multilevel regression models. Studies included descriptive, correlational, and experimental designs. When possible, the studied population and methodology are mentioned with the findings.





## FINDINGS

A review of the literature found several family and community engagement programs and practices that have been shown to have a positive impact on student outcomes and school improvement. Some of the strategies that were found to be most related to student achievement include engaging parents in their children's learning through social networks, empowering parents with leadership roles in the school environment, providing parents with classes to help with their own education or their child's education, and providing families with opportunities to engage with their children's education at home and at school. Schools that reach out to families and the community and build strong parent-school relationships also were found to have a positive impact on students. Situations in which parents had high educational goals and aspirations for their children, and children who perceived that their parents support their education were found to positively affect students as well.

### Social Networks

One approach shown to have positive results is engaging social networks of parents. Social networks, often referred to as a channel to social capital or parent empowerment, encompass the set of relationships and connections a person has with other individuals (Sheldon, 2002). Social networks vary in size and can include a large group of individuals or two to three people. In contrast to family engagement programs

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that target changes in individual students through their parents' practices, parent social network programs aim to make schoolwide changes through the collective action of parent communities. The following studies demonstrated the potential positive impacts of engaging parent social networks to benefit students, particularly minorities living in urban environments.

Alameda-Lawson conducted a study of a collective parent engagement (CPE) program that had a goal of empowering parents to work together to identify student needs, and then to design and implement programs targeted at addressing those needs (2014). This study focused on parents of students in third, fourth, and fifth grades at a Title 1 school in a western state, where almost 90 percent of the school's population lived in an urban gated housing community. The study used a post hoc, quasi-experimental design that compared survey data between parents from the CPE study group (n=16) and a comparison group (n=16). Fourteen of the parents in the CPE study group were African American. Results of the

study showed parent empowerment through participation in the CPE program to be positively and significantly related to students' reading achievement. Higher survey scores indicating how empowered parents felt corresponded to higher standardized reading scores for their child. Whether or not a parent participated in the CPE program also was found to be significantly related to a student's mathematics and language achievement. A parent's participation in the CPE program corresponded to higher mathematics and language scores for the child.

Another program, Families and Schools Together (FAST), also attempted to create an empowering network of parents by having families meet together in a school setting along with their children. In these meetings school personnel were present, but the meetings were led and designed by parents. All families spent time together, then separated into two peer groups of children and parents. Afterward, they participated in family play time where parents and their children interacted. During these meetings parents were able to connect and build bonds with each other and also establish connections for their children between home and school. McDonald et al. conducted an evaluation of this program targeted at parents of Latino elementary school students in Milwaukee (2006). The study used a multilevel regression model to compare parents and students assigned to the FAST condition (n=80) with those assigned to a comparison condition (n=50). The researchers found that two years after the completion of the FAST program, teachers rated students of this program as having significantly higher social and academic skills and lower aggressive behaviors than students in a comparison group.

The Alliance Schools network had similar aims for low-income, low-performing schools (n=16) in Austin. Alliance Schools recruited parents, teachers, and community members to form "core teams" at the school. These core teams led organizing activities to strengthen school, family, and community relationships. Core team members received coaching and leadership training, and recruited new potential leaders into their school network. For most Alliance Schools, parents had weekly meetings with the principal to discuss concerns; attended six-week parent academies to learn about the district's principles of learning, key issues in public education, and organizing skills; and took leadership roles in the school. A study by Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister collected data from stakeholder interviews, teacher surveys, and school data using a mixed-methods design (2009). Results indicated that parents in high-involvement Alliance Schools reported more access to important information, opportunities for communication, and respect from school staff than parents in low-involvement Alliance Schools. This finding was statistically significant. In addition, regression analyses revealed a statistically significant and positive relationship between level of school involvement in Alliance Schools and student test scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. High-involvement schools had higher test scores than low-involvement schools.

Promesa Boyle Heights was another network comprised of resident and youth leaders, community organizations, and schools located in the eastern edge of Los Angeles. This network included a general assembly to make decisions on changes to the network's vision, mission, values, and key focus areas and monitor overall progress; a solutions team to guide and implement the work in key focus areas; Promesa staff; and a steering committee to provide oversight. The network's goals and values included building residents' power, capacity, and confidence; advocating for community needs; implementing



community-driven practices; and collaborating with a range of partners. A program study conducted interviews with key stakeholders and revealed several findings resulting from participation in the network. Individuals mentioned personal and professional growth. Organizations noted their strengthened capacity to partner on work. Community members described a shared sense of ownership for the work and their ability to use partnerships to meet community needs. Schools indicated a shift in culture and climate to be more inclusive of student voices and needs. In addition, one initial project of the network was the Academic Spark Program at Mendez High School, which sought to increase graduation rates by concentrating on seniors with the greatest risk of not graduating. This project resulted in increased graduation rates between 2011 and 2015, college readiness and going in 2016 (i.e., application, acceptance, and attendance rates), school attendance, and state testing scores (Potochnik, Romans, & Thompson, 2016).

## Parent Leadership

Empowering parents to exercise leadership within schools as an approach also has shown positive results. For example, a partnership between the Kentucky Parent Teacher Association and the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership aimed to help parents understand new education reforms, create parent leaders, and train parents on how to become involved in efforts to improve their children's schools. Results of an evaluation of this partnership indicated an increase in family engagement in schools and in families serving as active decision makers with school staff in support of school improvement (Raimondo, 2009).

Another study by Leithwood & Mascal found positive associations between schools with higher student achievement and diffused leadership structures. This study used a subset of data collected from the

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Learning from Leadership study, which selected schools using a stratified random sampling to ensure variation in geography, demographics, and student achievement. This study analyzed 2,570 teacher survey responses from 90 higher achieving elementary and secondary schools using path analysis techniques. Findings reported

that leadership influence in the high-achieving schools was extended to more stakeholders, including parents, to a greater degree than lower achieving schools (2008). This study suggests that extending more decision-making authority and leadership to parents can positively influence school success and student achievement.

## Parent Classes

Another approach shown to have positive results is providing classes to families. These classes can range from training that helps improve the literacy and education level of parents, to courses focused on helping to improve parenting skills and families' skills to support their children's education and learning. The following studies show that classes for parents can have both direct, predicted effects and intangible, unpredicted effects on student outcomes.

A Parent University program implemented at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina provided courses in parenting awareness; helping with children's education, health, and wellness; and personal growth for parents. Portwood, Brooks-Nelson, and Schoeneberger (2015) analyzed enrollment data from Parent University, student data from parents enrolled in the program (n=862), and student data from a comparison group whose parents were not enrolled in the program (n=835). Results of the program evaluation showed that students of parents who attended at least one course had a significantly lower number of unexcused absences in comparison with students whose parents did not attend any courses. The most frequent grade level for participating students was second grade (13 percent) (Portwood, Brooks-Nelson, & Schoeneberger, 2015).



The Stevenson YMCA Community School, a program located in an urban area of Southern California, offered a variety of classes to adults and parents in the local community. Courses included family literacy, school advocacy, parenting, how to help children in school, English as a second language, and college preparation. The school also offered a community leadership program. Researchers distributed a self-administered survey to a nonrandom sample of parents at the school ( $n=113$ ). A majority of the parents (94 percent) identified themselves as Latino. Surveyed parents revealed that a few of the biggest changes they perceived after participating in the program were increased knowledge of how to help their children and the types of help they were able to provide to support their children's academic success. Participants in the program also perceived better grades for their children (O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008).

A third parent training program, Families Promoting Success, offered a series of workshops that trained parents to help elementary students with reading, particularly word analysis skills. This program was located in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the study sample included a convenience sample of 80 parents, of which the majority identified as Latino immigrants. Evaluation of this program included interviews, focus groups, and surveys, and showed no measurable impact on students' academic achievement. However, it did show other perceived program benefits for schools and families, including increased parent knowledge and use of new literacy strategies, increased awareness about school expectations and testing, and stronger parent-child and parent-school connections (Auerbach & Collier, 2012).

## Family Engagement at Home

Having parents engage in education practices with their children at home has been an approach widely linked to increasing student outcomes. Engagement at home, however, can manifest itself in several different ways. Thus, different methods of family engagement at home can have different impacts on student outcomes and can vary by types of students.

A study on the impact of parent engagement and high school students defined parent engagement at home as monitoring and helping with homework and providing rules and routines for school. This study collected student surveys, used an experience sampling method in which students' subjective experience in science class was measured repeatedly, and reviewed school records from 12 high school science classrooms ( $n=244$ ) in a single high school located near a large metropolitan area. Results from ordinary least squares regression showed a positive association with students' engagement in the classroom.



The study also showed that ninth graders earned better grades if their parents were more involved at home; however, for students in higher grades, it showed a negative association with students' grade point average (GPA) (Shumow & Schmidt, 2014).

Conversely, a similar study with high school students conducted by Wang and Sheikh-Khalil did show a positive association between home engagement and GPA. This study was based on a convenience sample of 10 public high schools (n=1,056 in Wave 1) within a large, socioeconomically diverse city. Student surveys, parent interviews, and school records were examined using a structural equation model. In this study engagement was defined as the extent to which parents organize study time and provide educational materials and opportunities for students outside of school. This study also showed a positive association between home engagement and student behavior, which was more strongly associated for low socioeconomic status (SES) groups (2014).

Another study of African American high school students from two large, urban Southwestern and Southern cities in the United States likewise found positive associations between home engagement and student outcomes. This study relied on a convenience sample (n=145) of parent-reported behaviors and outcomes.

Results revealed that engagement at home was a statistically significant predictor of grades and days missed at school. Students with more engaged parents had higher academic achievement and missed fewer days of school.

Parent survey data were analyzed using hierarchical regression analyses. In this study, parent engagement at home was defined as parent communication with students about school (e.g., talking about school experiences, knowing how well the student is doing in school). Results revealed that engagement at home was a statistically significant predictor of grades and days missed at school. Students with more engaged parents had higher academic achievement and missed fewer days of school. The last

finding was particularly true for older students, so that parents with higher levels of engagement at home have older students who miss the fewest days of school, while the absenteeism rate for younger students remains fairly constant. This study, however, found no statistically significant association between engagement at home and discipline referrals (Hayes, 2012).

A study focusing on students' path from middle school to high school also found positive associations with engagement at home on GPA. The sample included students (n=1,452 in Wave 1) from 23 public middle schools in a large Maryland county. This study collected three waves of data from student self-administered questionnaires, parent interviews, and school records, and used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to determine how parental involvement changed between grades. Parental involvement through scaffolding independence (e.g., parents providing opportunities for children to complete schoolwork and solve problems on their own) and providing structure (e.g., designated homework time) was associated with improvements in GPA from seventh to eleventh grade, especially for African American students. Parents providing structure at home also was associated with decreased behavior problems (Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014).

Another study looking at middle school students found positive associations with students' cognitive engagement and academic performance. This study used data for seventh and eighth graders (n=1,971), collected as part of a nationally representative survey for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Parent engagement in this study was defined as parents talking with students about school work and their school day, and helping students with a project. Structural equation modeling found a positive and significant effect of this type of engagement on students' college aspirations and on students' average grade for mathematics, science, history or social studies, and language arts (Mo & Singh, 2008).

An additional study looking at middle school students (seventh and eighth grades;  $n=79$ ) in a large, urban public school system found a positive association between parents providing homework support and student achievement. This study collected data from parent questionnaires and teacher ratings of student achievement. Regression analyses revealed that parents who provided structured homework support (e.g., setting aside time for homework or providing incentives to complete homework) had a significant and positive impact on student mathematics grades. Parents providing direct assistance (e.g., demonstrating how to solve problems or being involved in homework) and autonomous support (e.g., discussing problem-solving strategies or encouraging students to monitor their own level or understanding), however, did not have a significant impact (O'Sullivan, Chen, & Fish, 2014).

A study by Zhang, Hsien-Yuan, Oi-man, Benz, and Bowman-Perrott, which looked at special education students in second through ninth grade ( $n=13,370$ ), also showed a significant and positive association between parent engagement at home and student achievement (2011). Data from a national study, the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study, were collected through parent/guardian interviews and direct student assessments. In this case, engagement was defined as talking with children about their school experiences. Structural equation modeling (SEM) demonstrated that higher levels of engagement at home resulted in better academic performance. Another study with special education kindergarteners ( $n=156$ ) randomly selected from rosters of kindergarten teachers across Kansas showed similar results. Parent engagement data were collected through parent surveys, and academic and social-behavioral skills were measured by the Kansas Early Learning Inventory. Multivariate regression analyses demonstrated that parent engagement at home—defined as reading with children, providing children with enrichment activities, or teaching children a sport—was a significant and positive predictor of academic and behavior scores (Epley, 2013). Likewise, a study by Baker, which looked at African American kindergarten students ( $n=2,461$ ), showed a positive association between talking to children about school experiences and students' academic scores (2014). This study used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K), which collected data through direct child assessments and parent interviews. A hierarchical regression model showed that parents who engaged in more discussion with children at home had students with higher science and social studies scores.

Results from another study of elementary students ( $n=9,203$ ) found similar findings to the high school study by Shumow & Schmidt (2014). This study also used data from the ECLS-K and analyzed data using regression models. Parent engagement at home for this study included reading with children, playing games with children, and so on. This type of engagement was determined to be a negative predictor of reading and mathematics achievement at third grade for the student population as a whole (Sibley & Dearing, 2014). For Latino immigrants and U.S.-born Asian students in the study, however, this was found to be a positive predictor.



## Family Engagement at School

Similarly, engaging families at school also has been a method widely linked to increasing school success and student outcomes. Again, engagement at school can manifest itself in several different ways. As a result, different types of engagement at school are associated with different outcomes.

The Shumow & Schmidt (2014) study on the impact of parent engagement and high school students also showed a positive association with parent engagement at school and students' GPA. In this study engagement at school was defined as volunteering, attending events at school, and interacting with teachers. However, there was a negative association with this type of engagement and students' time spent doing homework. The study with high school students conducted by Wang and Sheikh-Khalil also showed a positive association between parent engagement at school and students'

These studies show that increased communication efforts with families can have a positive impact on school success and student outcomes.

emotional engagement (2014). For this study, engagement at school was measured by the extent to which parents volunteer and attend meetings and events at school, and emotional engagement was measured as student reports of enjoyment in learning and interest in learning at school.

The Wang, Hill, and Hofkens longitudinal study focusing on students' path from middle school to high school also found positive associations with parent engagement at school on GPA. Parents' communication with teachers to prevent problems and the quality of parent-teacher communications were associated with improvements in GPA from seventh to eleventh grades. In addition, parents' communication with teachers to prevent problems also was associated with decreased behavior problems (2014).

Last, a study that looked at English language learner elementary students ( $n=1,020$ ), who were part of the ECLS-K, showed similar results. This study used data from parent survey and student self-report instruments, and analyzed data using SEM. Parents who reported attending school events and communicating with teachers had children who reported fewer social and emotional concerns (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014).

## School-Family Outreach

Although family engagement can have a positive impact on student outcomes and one way to increase family engagement is through school outreach efforts (e.g., parent-teacher organizations, parent-teacher conferences, family events at the school), the following studies have demonstrated that outreach efforts may have their own independent association with student achievement. These studies show that increased communication efforts with families can have a positive impact on school success and student outcomes.

A study by Galindo and Sheldon confirmed that a positive and significant association between school outreach to parents and kindergarten students' gains in reading and mathematics was only partially mediated by family involvement (2012). This study used data for kindergarten students collected by the ECLS-K ( $n=15,960$  for reading analysis and  $n=16,430$  for mathematics analysis). Two-level HLM was used to show the positive association between principal reports of school outreach (e.g., parent-teacher-student organization meetings; written reports sent home; teacher-parent conferences; home visits; parent invites to school performances, classroom programs, or family nights; fairs or social events; workshops for teachers that focus on parent involvement) and reading and mathematics achievement.



González and Jackson also showed that efforts to increase communication with families were positively associated with increases in reading achievement, and efforts to increase volunteer opportunities were positively associated with increases in mathematics achievement for kindergarteners (2013). This study also used data on kindergarten students collected by the ECLS-K (n=9,564 for reading analysis and n=11,608 for mathematics analysis). HLM demonstrated the positive association between administrators' reported school outreach efforts and student achievement. However, the researchers found that efforts to increase parenting services (e.g., parenting classes, literacy classes, health or social services) were negatively associated with mathematics scores. Furthermore, when looking at SES differences between schools, all of these findings held for high-SES schools but not low-SES schools (González & Jackson, 2013).

A study of middle and high school students also showed positive results. The study sample included rising sixth- and ninth-grade students who participated in a summer academy in Boston that served largely low-income and minority students. Students were part of a clustered randomized trial, in which the parents of students in the treatment group (n=69) received daily calls from English teachers and daily texts from mathematics teachers. The parents of students in the control group (n=71), on the other hand, received calls and texts at the discretion of teachers (i.e., the amount of communication was neither restricted nor specified). The study used teacher logs to capture teacher-family communication data and classroom observations to capture student engagement data. A multilevel modeling framework was used to test the relationship between school outreach to parents and student engagement. Results showed that students in the treatment group were more likely to submit on-time homework and participate in class and less likely to need redirection than students in the control group (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

## Family-School Relationships

Building strong parent-school relationships is another way to increase school and student outcomes. One study defined parent-school relationships by the degree to which parents trust staff, have positive interactions with staff, and feel welcome at the school. This study used data from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007: Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey, which collected data from across the United States. This study restricted data use to students in sixth through twelfth grades. Data for parent-school relationships and student outcomes were gathered through parent interviews. Results from SEM revealed that all three aspects of this parent-school relationship were positively associated with student outcomes (i.e., estimates of students' grades, report of students' problem behaviors at school, report of whether students had to repeat a grade) (Froiland & Davison, 2014).



A study by the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research reviewed longitudinal data from 100 elementary schools in Chicago and found that strong parent-community-school ties was one of the five essential supports for school improvement. The other essential supports were a coherent instructional guidance system, the school's professional capacity, a student-centered learning climate, and leadership that drives change. The study found that the presence and quality of these parent- community-school ties link directly to students' motivation and school participation. Furthermore, schools with strong indicators on most of the supports were ten times more likely to show improvement than schools with weak supports. Bryk and colleagues found that when schools use effective family engagement practices, students in those schools were ten times more likely to improve their mathematics performance and four times more likely to improve their reading performance than students attending schools that did not implement meaningful engagement practices (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

## Family Educational Goals and Values

Several studies have shown a positive link between parental aspirations for their children's academics and student outcomes. As a result, programs that focus on increasing parental aspirations for children may result in better student outcomes.

One such study that explored parental academic expectations for high school students showed a positive association with parental aspirations and students' academic achievement and behavior. In the Wang and Sheikh-Khalil study, parental expectations were based on a scale that measured the extent to which parents communicate educational goals and values and discuss plans for the future

with their children.

Parental expectations also were positively associated with students' emotional engagement and more strongly associated for low-SES groups than high-SES groups (2014).

A study focusing on middle and high school students also showed a positive association between parents' high school and college graduation expectations and students. In particular, the Mo and Singh study

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showed that parental expectations also had a significant impact on students' cognitive and emotional engagement in school (2008). The Wang, Hill, and Hofkens study focusing on students' path from middle school to high school found positive impacts of parental expectations on academic achievement and behavior as well. Discussing the importance and future of education was associated with improvements in GPA and with decreased behavior problems from seventh to eleventh grades (2014).

Results from the Sibley and Dearing study of elementary students showed similar findings. Parental expectations of how far they expected their child to go in school also were significant and positive predictors of reading and mathematics achievement (2014). This finding was particularly strong for U.S.-born White students in comparison with other ethnic groups and immigrants. Similar results were found in the Froiland and Davison study of middle and high school students. Parental expectations, defined as the level of education they expected their children to achieve, also were positively associated with academic grades (2014). Likewise, the study by Zhang et al., which looked at special education students in grades two through nine, also showed a positive association between parents' expectation that their child would graduate high school and student achievement (2011).



## Perceived Parental Support

Similarly, studies have found that students who perceive their parents as supportive and engaged in their academics have better outcomes. For example, one study found that students in secondary schools in England believed that lack of parental support for education contributed to their poor behavior and academic performance in school. This study involved in-depth case studies of 20 schools that were part of the Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement project. Data collection included interviews with teachers, staff, parents, and students. Findings indicated that students and teachers felt that parental support indicated agreement with school policies, which contributed to better behavior and more learning at school (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Another study involving students in elementary schools in Singapore also showed perceived parental support and engagement to be a significant predictor of behavior and academic performance. This study sampled students in third through sixth grades from nine elementary schools across Singapore that were meant to be representative of public schools in Singapore. Data were collected through student questionnaires and school achievement and conduct scores. Hierarchical regression modeling revealed that students' perception of the amount of parent-teacher conferencing was a positive predictor for behavior and academic performance. Students' perception of parental engagement at home also was a positive predictor for academic performance, particularly for boys. Students' perception of parent engagement at school, however, was a negative predictor for behavior and academic performance (Stright & Yeo, 2014).

## School-Family-Community Partnerships

Research has found the importance of involving community organizations in addition to families in order to improve student and school outcomes. The Ohio Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement is one initiative that has shown preliminary success in forming partnerships and has led to significant academic achievement across targeted subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities, low-SES students) in one school. A study of this model evaluated six pilot schools in Ohio. Three of the schools were located in an urban area, two were in a rural area, and one was located in a rural area but had demographics more similar to urban schools. Five of the schools were elementary schools, serving kindergarten through sixth grade, and one school served seventh- through tenth-grade students at risk for school failure. Data were collected through surveys, observations, meeting minutes, and interviews. Each school was provided a detailed implementation guide, technical assistance from expert consultants, professional development and networking opportunities, and money to support implementation. Key elements of the model include increasing the number and variety of stakeholders in determining school needs and priorities, identifying interventions and partnerships to address needs, and building collaborative leadership infrastructures. Results from preliminary findings of a mixed-methods approach found that all six schools included community and family stakeholders on their improvement teams, and expanded their improvement plan based on the review of academic and nonacademic data. In addition, infrastructures were developed to help connect teachers to other service providers, and schools were able to enhance and expand their



funding streams through these partnerships. Last, one of the pilot schools moved its status from “academic emergency” to “school improvement” at the conclusion of the year (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010).

Another study of six community schools in the Redwood City School District also demonstrated positive associations with school outcomes. These community schools served mostly low-income and Latino communities and focused on family engagement, extended learning, and social support services. Two of the schools served kindergarten through fifth grade, three served kindergarten through eighth grade, and one served sixth through eighth grades. This study used program attendance, participation and achievement records, and longitudinal growth modeling. Findings showed that taking part in family engagement programs (e.g., parent education classes, leadership and volunteer opportunities, on-campus events) at the schools was associated with better attendance. In addition, taking part in family engagement programs was associated with higher mathematics achievement scores but had no significant impact on English language arts achievement (Biag & Castrechini, 2016).

A longitudinal study of four schools that were part of the Providence Full Service Community Schools initiative in Rhode Island found positive associations with school outcomes as well. Schools in this initiative focused on providing and coordinating comprehensive services in school, including family literacy, expanded learning, wraparound services, health services, and family engagement. For this study data were collected through parent questionnaires (n=685 for Wave 4) and analyzed using analysis of variance. Results demonstrated a statistically significant increase in parent comfort (e.g., the quality of parent-teacher and parent-school relationships), reputation (e.g., parent endorsement of the school), and parent-teacher communication (e.g., frequency of contact between parent and teacher) initiative-wide (Chen, Anderson, & Watkins, 2016).

A study of high school family centers, which promote school-family-community partnerships, also demonstrated additional positive outcomes from participation in this type of program. This study chose eight geographically and ethnically diverse centers (two in Boston, one in Memphis, two in Houston, one in San Diego, and two in Los Angeles) to review. Researchers conducted interviews with parents, students, and school staff; made observations; and collected informational and outreach materials. Qualitative analyses revealed four major outcomes. First, relational trust among adults was created. Respondents felt welcome and respected in the school, and parents were seen as crucial

stakeholders for school improvement. Second, parents experienced a shift in their role construction and efficacy. Parents understood the importance of staying involved with students’ education at the high school level and felt more confident they could help students. Third, students developed trusting relationships with staff

Research has found the importance of involving community organizations in addition to families in order to improve student and school outcomes.

at the family centers. Last, students’ efficacy (i.e., level of confidence, resistance to setbacks, understanding of academic importance, desire to stay in school, feelings of achievement) increased (Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, & Meza, 2008).

Last, a study of 35 public elementary schools in an urban center in southeastern Virginia found that community engagement at school also had a positive association with student achievement. This study collected survey data from teachers and other instructional faculty (n=1,292) as part of a larger study. In this study, community engagement is defined as actively engaging parents in the school and building school-parent-community partnerships. Findings revealed that there were statistically significant and positive associations between community engagement and student achievement in reading and mathematics, even when controlling for SES. Findings also suggested a positive academic optimism (i.e., collective efficacy of teaching competence and teaching task, faculty trust in students and parents, academic press or optimism) and community engagement in schools (Kirby & DiPaola, 2011).



## Strategies for Increasing Family Engagement

A review of the literature also has found several ways to increase family and community engagement in programs and schools. Some of the strategies found to increase family engagement include using technology to increase communication and focusing on building trusting relationships with parents and communities.

A study of parents of students in fourth through sixth grades demonstrated that parents had a positive perception of technology use to improve family engagement at the school. The study examined parent survey (n=89) and parent interview (n=7) data. Results showed that some forms of technology are better depending on the type of information being shared. More specifically, e-mails, phone messages, or fliers were preferred for information exchanges that involve quick updates or yes/no questions. Phone calls or in-person communications were preferred for discussions about student performance or behavior. Also, language barriers continue to persist with technology use and need to be considered. Overall, however, parents and teachers valued the use of technology for family engagement (Olmstead, 2013).

Another study in a Title I school in Georgia also found that parents had a positive attitude toward technology-based communications with teachers. Findings based on interviews with parents and school staff (n=8) revealed the primary obstacles to family engagement at the school to be communication, conflicts in scheduling, and teacher attitudes. Using technology for communication was one way to address these barriers that showed promising and favorable results from parents' perspectives (Helgeson, 2012).

A study by Eisner and Meidert found that the neighborhood network had a significant impact on participation and completion rates in a parenting skills program. Data for this study were derived from the Zurich Project on the Social Development of Children, which studied children in primary schools across Zurich, Switzerland. Data were collected through parent questionnaires and program attendance records and were analyzed using a random effects logistic regression. In this randomized trial, parents were offered participation in a community-based parent training intervention. Results showed that stronger neighborhood networks were associated with higher participation and completion rates in the programs (2011).

Building a feeling of community at the school itself also has shown to be important for increasing family engagement. A study by Francis et al. collected qualitative focus group data from parents (n=58) at five elementary schools and one middle school that represent all major U.S. geographic regions in order to determine what facilitates trusting parent-school partnerships (2016). Findings revealed that a school culture of inclusion (e.g., a feeling of community and inclusive practices to meet all student needs) was one of the top themes discussed by parents to increase parental partnership and engagement at school. Other top themes included positive administrative leadership (e.g., strong and effective leadership, direct involvement, great expectations), positive partnerships (e.g., strong communication, respect, commitment, professional development), and opportunities for family involvement (e.g., school leader position, volunteer opportunities).





## DISCUSSION

Based on overall findings, we found that key components of promising family-school partnerships include employing multiple strategies, having a goal of increasing family engagement and aspirations, and accounting for different student populations. As demonstrated by the findings, there are multiple, meaningful ways for families to be engaged, including but not limited to forming social networks, taking classes, engaging with children at home, engaging with the school, creating high aspirations for children's academic success, and so on. And within each of these approaches, there are multiple strategies that can be employed. Each strategy could potentially have a different effect on school improvement and student outcomes. Consequently, employing multiple strategies in a program will likely increase the odds of getting families to engage and of positively affecting school and student outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings show that there are some differences in student outcomes, depending on the student population (e.g., SES level, grade level, gender, special education or English language

learner populations).

As a result, when forming partnerships, the demographics of the school, district, families, and community need to be taken into account. Different strategies may work better for certain populations.

Although this review did not specifically address how engaging families and communities helps promote student-centered learning, aspects

Consequently, employing multiple strategies in a program will likely increase the odds of getting families to engage and of positively affecting school and student outcomes.

intrinsic to family engagement initiatives support a student-centered education approach. Engaging families can help tailor and contextualize individualized approaches to teaching and learning. Learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic support strategies can be informed and guided by engaged families that partner with schools and share responsibility for their children's education. Engaging families and having them jointly review student data can help parents and teachers connect student skills and interests to instructional approaches and programming, build the child's individual development needs, and inform transitions.

The review indicates several family engagement approaches that schools and districts can use to improve overall and increase student achievement. These include using technology to increase communication and build trusting connections with parents and communities. Again, it is important to note that family engagement programs may need to incorporate several approaches and should tailor strategies to different target populations.

We found that engaging families and communities promotes student learning, both directly and indirectly. Many studies have shown a direct and positive association between family engagement and student academic achievement in a variety of subjects. Studies also have shown a positive association between family engagement and student social and behavior scores. If children are being redirected less for behavior problems and feel more comfortable at school, this may relate to a better learning foundation and could eventually result in better academic achievement.

Strong partnerships and relationships with family and community were fundamental to positive outcomes. Four foundational elements of partner collaboration emerged strongly in the data:

- **A focus on building respectful and trusting relationships,**
- **Supportive and engaged school leaders,**
- **Skilled staff that work to align and coordinate partners, and**
- **Using data to determine and act upon priorities.**

Study findings also uncovered keys to implementing successful programs. Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, and Meza (2008) found that (1) a supportive infrastructure, (2) the existence of skilled staff, and (3) the presence of responsive programming were key to successful implementation.

Finally, it is important to note that we choose to include a few international studies in this review. When interpreting findings from international studies we must consider that the ways families of a variety of cultures interact with the U.S. school system can be very different from how families in other countries interact with international education systems. We included these international studies because they provide useful information about family engagement practices and outcomes. As with any intervention or application of practices, you cannot assume that outcomes seen from family engagement in one context, or country, will translate to other contexts or U.S. schools.

Front and center to developing successful engagement programs is acknowledging, understanding, and addressing the cultural and linguistic competence of practitioners who work with families. Addressing issues of cultural competency is outside the scope of this review. However, we acknowledge that any family and community engagement initiative needs to tackle cultural competency at the onset. Educators need support and training on cultural competence in order to develop meaningful partnerships with all families. When referring to cultural competence we mean the set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Increasingly, schools and districts are challenged to address the growing diversity in schools and communities. Too often, teachers and school practitioners do not reflect the racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic makeup of the student and family populations being served. Attention needs to be given to building the capacity of educators to address cultural bias, and have an awareness of their own cultural identity and views about difference in order for them to be effective with students and families from cultures other than their own. Training in cultural competence can help mitigate differences in class, culture, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Family engagement initiatives that address cultural competency can help address racial and economic disparities. It is important to remember that while this review highlights family engagement strategies that can improve achievement and school practices, intentional involvement, attention to context, and tailoring to that context are key to the success of these programs.





## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Of the family engagement programs that were reviewed, there were several implementation issues and challenges that arose. Following is a list of barriers that are important to be aware of for any future family engagement programs:

- **Staff turnover at schools:** Programs are not able to be fully implemented when there is turnover.
- **School characteristics:** Some parents feel that it is easier to engage in elementary schools rather than middle and high schools.
- **Hard-to-reach parents:** Focusing only on hard-to-reach parents, especially when they are a small portion of the population, may lead to minimal gains and neglect of keeping other parents engaged.
- **Test-driven curriculum:** Having a parent program centered on increasing test scores may not produce intended results and likely does not meet parent needs.

Findings from this literature review contain several limitations. Many of these studies are based on survey results; thus, family engagement is often measured by perceived amounts and quality. These may not be completely objective measures. In addition, several of these studies had small or narrow sample sizes; therefore, the results may not be transferrable or representative of other populations. Finally, these studies are based on a limited search and are not inclusive of all the programs and practices shown to have an impact on school improvement and student outcomes, but they do represent a good sample.





## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings reveal that there is a demonstrable connection between family engagement, school improvement, and student outcomes. Schools and districts should focus not only on family engagement, but also on establishing strong partnerships and relationships with families and communities. These relationships and partnerships take time to build, but can lead to benefits for students and schools. Although most administrators and program funders are interested in seeing schools move out of improvement status and academic achievement scores increase, other benefits to students that may arise include improvements in positive behaviors, engagement in class, increased social skills, emotional well-being, and postsecondary readiness.

Recommendations for strengthening family, school, and community engagement that can lead to school improvement and increased student outcomes include the following:

- Provide opportunities for parents to work together, learn from each other, network, and build social capital.
- Focus on empowering parents, building parent leadership, and developing capacity for families to act as partners in decision making with schools.
- Offer classes and courses for families that can improve adult life skills, increase their ability to support their children's education and learning, and get them involved in community building and advocacy.
- Provide training, resources, and support to encourage family engagement at home.
- Offer multiple ways for families to be involved at school that are linked to learning and program improvements.
- Provide specific and targeted outreach to parents, including the use of technology, which creates meaningful, two-way communication opportunities.
- Create initiatives that target increasing parental goals and aspirations for their children.
- Focus on building trusting and respectful relationships among staff, families, students, and community members that recognize, respect, and address cultural and class differences.
- Develop purposeful community partnerships focused on increasing access to resources and services and engaging stakeholders as decision makers.
- Build the capacity of both families and school staff to share responsibility and work together as equal partners in improving school and student outcomes.

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