



## Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School Districts Promote Family Engagement

Helen Westmoreland, Heidi M. Rosenberg, M. Elena Lopez, & Heather Weiss

There is widespread consensus that family engagement is a critical ingredient for children's school success "from cradle to career." Research suggests that family engagement promotes a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of high school graduation.<sup>1</sup> Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers also recognize family engagement as a critical intervention strategy that maximizes return on other investments in education. Early childhood education programs that have demonstrated significant short- and long-term benefits for children all have intensive family involvement components. Furthermore, investing in family engagement can be cost effective. For example, schools would have to spend \$1,000 more per pupil to reap the same gains in student achievement that an involved parent brings.<sup>2</sup>

Even though it is clear that family engagement matters, less well understood is the role of school districts in promoting this engagement. This brief examines how school districts build systemic family engagement from cradle to career as a core education reform strategy to ensure that parents, educators, and administrators *share responsibility* for family engage-

ment resulting in student success.<sup>3</sup> Shared responsibility requires parents to do their part to support their children's learning, from turning off the TV, to communicating with teachers about their children's progress, to checking (and sometimes helping with) homework, and more. But even though parents want the best for their children, many do not receive the information and support from school and district staff that they need to understand the importance of the parental role in children's education and how best to fulfill that role. Lack of school communication to parents is linked to lower levels of involvement, particularly in lower-performing schools,<sup>4</sup> and parents are more likely to engage when school personnel value, expect, and invite them to be involved.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a shared responsibility for family engagement also requires the commitment of school and district staff to reach out to parents in meaningful ways that help them support their children's academic achievement.

Given that district leadership and capacity building play a key role in supporting strategic and systemic family engagement, it is important to better understand what that leadership and capacity building looks like, how it can be developed and sustained, and how federal, state, and local policies can

support it. The purpose of this brief, then, is to distill promising practices from six districts that are actively working to develop the critical components of systemic family engagement and to examine the implications of their work for federal, state, and local policy.<sup>6</sup>

The core district-level components necessary for systemic family engagement are

- **Fostering district-wide strategies.** A key role of school districts in promoting family engagement is ensuring that it is part and parcel of supporting student learning. This includes superintendents and senior leadership linking family engagement to their district’s instructional goals, the creation of an infrastructure that elevates and communicates about the importance of family engagement, and mechanisms to assess progress and performance along the way.
- **Building school capacity.** Districts can’t do it alone; that’s why districts help schools to understand the importance of, and strategies for, meaningfully engaging families. District-level resources and support enable schools to acquire the capacity to carry out family engagement in strategic ways that align with instructional goals. This happens through ongoing professional development and technical assistance for principals, teachers, and other “family-facing” staff in school buildings. It also includes programs and initiatives implemented by districts to help schools welcome and involve families in their child’s learning.
- **Reaching out to and engaging families.** School districts reach out to families both directly and through partnerships to encourage them to have high expectations for their children’s learning at school and at home, and to develop and share concrete strategies for engagement that supports student success. This happens through leadership

development trainings, listening tours to gather input, and workshops that impart information and skills focused on student learning.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

Data were obtained from six districts that all have core components of a systemic family engagement strategy in place; these data reveal that implementing these core components requires a commitment to a set of five best practices that ensure that family engagement efforts are interconnected and strategic across the various levels of a family engagement system at work. These promising practices are

1. **A shared vision of family engagement.** Districts, schools, and families share a broad understanding of family involvement that honors and supports each partner’s role in supporting student learning—from the district’s most senior administrators to classroom teachers and bus drivers. These school districts move beyond the traditional notion of family engagement, which focuses on parents attending events at the school, to recognizing that sometimes schools cannot “see,” but can still support, one of the most important parts of family engagement: what happens at home.
2. **Purposeful connections to learning.** From the district’s strategic plan and school improvement plans to parent–teacher conferences, these districts demonstrate an unyielding commitment to family engagement as a core instructional strategy, as opposed to an “add-on.” Family engagement has the most impact when it is directly linked to learning.<sup>7</sup>
3. **Investments in high quality programming and staff.** These districts have made strategic use of limited resources, often adroitly piecing together multiple public and private funding streams to build and sustain their family engagement system at work. They hire charismatic leaders with expertise in



family involvement to staff family engagement offices and use volunteers. As opposed to “drive-by trainings” and cookie-cutter approaches, they adapt and build on events and models to implement an organizational, rather than individual, approach to professional development.<sup>8</sup>

- 4. Robust communication systems.** Communication for family engagement is designed to cut across administrators in district offices and departments, school staff, and families and community members. These stakeholders reach out to one another to share information in reciprocal and meaningful ways to ensure they can make decisions and implement strategies effectively.
- 5. Evaluation for accountability and continuous learning.** District family engagement staff recognize that data about family engagement are a lever for change but realize that they still have farther to go to develop meaningful indicators of their work and data systems. Evaluation efforts often hinge on persuading teachers, principals, and other district offices to take data collection related to family involvement seriously. Having the district-wide internal capacity not just to collect data but also to use it as information feeds into planning and improvement.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

If districts are to play a crucial role in supporting family engagement in the ways described above, they need the support of federal, state, and local policymakers. The districts informing this study, as well as research on family involvement systems, programs, and policies,<sup>9</sup> indicate that public policies to build stronger family engagement should

### **Create infrastructure for district-wide leadership for family engagement.**

School districts need the appropriate systems in place to develop, implement, and coordinate the five best practices described above. The districts profiled in this brief have a senior-level officer responsible for family engagement who often participates in the superintendent’s leadership team. Incentives for creating these positions in other districts could be provided by federal and state funds. These district-level family engagement officers also need the staffing—from district-level specialists and trainers to school-level parent and community coordinators—to support family engagement systems at work.

To help build this district infrastructure, the federal government must maintain current investments in family engagement and offer additional resources through new stimulus funds or by increasing the percentage allocations for family engagement within Title I provisions. Furthermore, policymakers need to strategically allocate funds to schools and districts to ensure that there is sufficient oversight, capacity building, and quality control to support effective family engagement policies and practices at the school level.

### **Build capacity for family engagement through training and technical assistance.**

Districts devote significant time to creating training curricula, tool kits, materials, and other resources that can be replicated across schools and with families. But, across districts, there are limited opportunities to share lessons learned. District staff need the support of intermediaries, such as the state Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs), to facilitate the sharing of research and best practices, to coordinate family engagement with other reform initiatives, and to reduce duplication and maximize efficiency among investments.



More attention and resources are also needed to support preservice and in-service training for administrators, teachers, family-school coordinators, and other educators in family involvement and for collaborations with community organizations. Districts in this brief report that principals and teachers enter school buildings unprepared to understand the importance of, and develop effective strategies for, family engagement. Incentives to spur collaborations among districts and higher education institutions, as well as increased assistance from PIRCs, could help to build this capacity.

**Ensure reporting, learning and accountability for family engagement.** Across all the districts highlighted in this brief, there is widespread consensus that, although there are provisions for family engagement in federal legislation, particularly in Title I, expectations for accountability have been weak. District-level staff who coordinate family and community engagement call for more proactive monitoring to ensure compliance with family engagement provisions across the educational system.

Many of the districts described in this brief have integrated family engagement into performance evaluations of principal or teacher effectiveness but note that it is challenging to give these measures “teeth” without clear expectations across other levels of the education system. To help hold schools accountable, districts need clear buy-in and guidance from states on required measures for family involvement and more monitoring of those that do exist. In turn, states need a clear definition and strategy for family involvement, including key standards for quality, from federal policy for family engagement.

**Help districts understand, design, and implement strong evaluation strategies.** One of the most effective messages district leaders of family engagement efforts can share with their superintendents, central administrators, and local boards of education is that

family involvement *matters* for student achievement. However, many districts are struggling to develop an evaluation strategy that assesses the impact of their family involvement efforts and need support in capturing the important intermediary outcomes that then lead to positive student achievement. Policies can provide technical assistance to districts to help them build robust, yet realistic, evaluation plans for their family involvement systems at work.

A first step is capitalizing on some emerging promising practices and sharing those lessons with the field. For example, some districts have developed particularly innovative theories of change that capture the complexity of how family engagement can impact an entire educational system. These districts have moved beyond counting heads to assessing differences in behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes among parents and school staff, from changes in school culture to changes in parenting skills at home.

## Federal Way Public Schools, Washington

Community and district concerns about educational inequity have led to the creation of a Family Partnership Office, through which parents have greater access to the educational system and opportunities to advocate for their children. Promoting parent leaders to shape family engagement activities is a key district strategy.

### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMS AT WORK

#### Fostering district-wide strategies

**District office.** A district office promotes a consistent and integrated approach to family engagement. A Family Partnership Advocate (FPA), who coordinates district wide family engagement activities, heads



the Family Partnership Office. The FPA participates in weekly meetings with the assistant superintendents and the curriculum director to discuss the district's overall goals and strategies to enhance student learning. These meetings embed family engagement in district activities so that it is not treated or seen as an "add-on."

**District Parent Committee.** The FPA relies on a district-level committee, made up of mostly parents and some teachers, to perform key functions. Parents from the district-level committee help shape the annual performance goals of the Family Partnership Office, create the agenda for parent meetings and training and assist the schools in their efforts to communicate with families. This district-level committee models what parent partnership should look like at the school level.

**Accountability meetings.** District accountability for family engagement begins with the FPA and district parent committee setting annual performance goals for parent participation in district and school family engagement activities. The FPA and the superintendent hold quarterly meetings for accountability and improvement, during which school staff members and parents discuss the status of the district's efforts to engage families and how such activities connect to student learning. Parents, community members and school personnel ask questions and provide feedback on how well the district's current strategies are working. These meetings reach a high number of minority parents, many of whom become connected to their children's school because of their experiences with the FPA's office. After each meeting, the FPA creates a summary report that is shared with school personnel, families, and community members.

## Building school capacity

**Professional development.** The FPA's office emphasizes professional development across the district and provides training for *all* employees, from bus drivers to principals, to ensure that parents feel welcomed and

*needed* as partners in enhancing their children's learning. The FPA is a member of a succession committee that trains teachers who aspire to be principals, and this ensures that prospective school leaders have a core level of knowledge about family engagement.

## Reaching out to and engaging families

**Parent leadership institute.** Through a series of workshops developed by the FPA and district-level parent committee, parents exchange ideas and strategies to effectively advocate for their children's school success. The parent advocate workshop helps parents understand their children's strengths and interests, and gain skills on becoming effective communicators. Parents learn how to guide their children to educational success from kindergarten to college. They develop one-page support plans to use as a resource for communicating with teachers and counselors. This workshop serves as the first step toward parents taking leadership roles in the district.

**Family-school communication.** Schools conduct "What Every Parent Wants to Know" workshops, at which parents are invited to ask questions of teachers and administrators. The workshops impress upon parents the importance of their roles in children's education and provide concrete examples of how parents can support their children's academic progress. Parents and school staff members can request these workshops, which are jointly led by a parent and the school principal, at any time during the school year, either at the school or in a community location of the parent's choosing.

**Evaluation planning.** The FPA is in the process of creating an enhanced metric to measure parents' growth as they participate in workshops and other activities. It is expected that by the 2009–2010 academic year pre- and post-tests will be administered to measure the growth in parents' ability to become more effective partners in their children's learning.



## LESSONS LEARNED

Engaging parents as partners requires providing a range of meaningful opportunities for involvement. Federal Way has brought together families and communities to actively participate in developing family engagement at the district and school levels. Parents have meaningful input into the functions of the district office, the roles of school committees, and the district's yearly family engagement goals, activities and performance measures. Through workshops that focus on academic success, parents learn to advocate for their children and to create action steps that support learning.

## Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland

Prince George's County School District's current family engagement efforts grew out the Comer School Development Program, which started as independent school-based efforts and eventually expanded to a district-wide focus. The district is particularly strong, especially among fathers, at creating "demand parents,"<sup>10</sup> who can navigate the educational system and demand the best from the schools that serve their children.

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMS AT WORK

### Fostering district-wide strategies

**Superintendent leadership.** In 2000, the superintendent established the Department of Family and Community Outreach (DFCO) and charged its director with monitoring all of the family outreach activities in the district. The current superintendent has also participated in regular meetings and discussions with DFCO staff.

**Data tracking.** The DFCO tracks the number of families that participate in district-wide events, as well as whether it is their first time participating, and has used these data to assess the effectiveness of its outreach. For example, the first time the district held a welcoming event, 500 parents attended. This number increased to 8,000 the following year and 20,000 this past year. The DFCO also looks at Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) reports and has found that schools with higher family participation rates have shown greater gains in AYP. Lastly, the DFCO surveys school staff members to find out what family engagement means to them, and will use these data to inform planning and improvement.

**Performance management.** Family engagement is a required element of each school's improvement plan, and there are currently discussions about the possibility of including principals' efforts in this area as part of their annual performance evaluations. The DFCO believes that this accountability, coupled with ongoing training, is critical to changing school culture.

### Building school capacity

**School-based parent liaisons.** The DFCO indirectly supervises and provides training and technical assistance to parent liaisons through monthly meetings and professional development. These liaisons have a deep knowledge of the teachers, students, and community the school serves and help tailor the school's efforts to meet the needs of those constituents. Their presence also keeps family engagement "on the radar" of principals and teachers and give manpower to data collection efforts for family engagement. Due to budget cuts this past academic year, over half of the parent liaison positions were eliminated, but the DFCO plans to work with the remaining 80 or so liaisons to restructure their work.



**Professional development.** Internal professional development plays a major role in the district's family engagement plans. The DFCO created a professional development curriculum for new teachers that focuses on creating meaningful school-home communication. In addition, the DFCO conducts training with principals and teachers to drive home the importance of family engagement and demonstrate how schools can extend meaningful invitations to parents to participate in school-related activities.

## Reaching out to and engaging families

**Parent Academies.** As part of its efforts to create demand parents, the district is currently partnering with various community organizations to develop a series of Parent Academies across the county. These academies will provide parent education on topics such as financial literacy and ESL classes, helping to strengthen parents' overall functioning and give them the skills to advocate for their children's needs. Course offerings will be developed based on the specific needs of, and input from, the communities in which the academies are located.

**Father involvement.** In 2007, the district launched a highly successful male role model initiative aimed at increasing the number of fathers and other male parent figures involved with the school. Starting at first as the "Men Make a Difference Day," this initiative seeks to make fathers feel invited and needed in supporting their child's learning. The initiative couples fathers' classroom observations with additional tips and tools, such as checking their children's backpacks for homework at home and providing suggested questions to ask their children about their peer group. In the 2008–2009 school year alone, the district logged over 70,000 instances of fathers' involvement in nonsports-related events.

**Communication and outreach.** The DFCO does not assume that any one method of information dissemination will reach all, or even most, of its families. It therefore engages in a number of outreach efforts to share information. This includes grassroots efforts, such as making phone calls and visiting community gathering places, as well as using technology and mass media, such as creating radio messages and hosting a family engagement blog.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Prince George's County has been effective at getting buy-in from, in their words, "everyone in the system." Family engagement is not just the DFCO's responsibility but is spread across all the work of the district. The superintendent has set priorities that include family engagement and has modeled an approach that considers parents as partners, not problems.

Another important part of a family engagement strategy is connecting family members with one another. Through all of its events and communications to families, the district actively tries to connect family members, particularly fathers, with one another. This has helped create "repeat customers" and a sense of unity among parents who would otherwise be isolated or disconnected.



## Wichita Public Schools, Kansas

Recognizing that family engagement efforts were tied to the commitment of specific individuals rather than integrated into school culture, the Wichita district decided to systematize its efforts to better engage with families. Professional development is a key strategy.

### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMS AT WORK

#### Fostering district-wide strategies

**District oversight.** A Parent Teacher Resources Supervisor works with the Title I director, assistant superintendents, and the division director of professional development to ensure that family engagement is embedded into the district work. For example, the Parent Teacher Resources Supervisor helped show central office administrators the value of family involvement by piloting the inclusion of family engagement measures in a subset of elementary school principal performance evaluations. Family engagement continues to be part of the elementary school principals' goals that they work toward each year.

#### Building school capacity

**Professional development.** The district sponsors a wide variety of professional development activities for all levels of district and school personnel. Beginning in July 2007, Title I parent liaisons have offered professional development across the district, moving away from one-time training events to ongoing discussion about family involvement with teachers, principals, and instructional coaches. In addition, every school receives a family engagement grant for training sessions that facilitate home-school connections. The district also reaches out to national experts in family engagement to provide workshops for school staff. The information from these workshops is converted into a user-friendly binder to help facilitate additional in-service training opportunities throughout the year.

**School-based family engagement teams.** Schools identify a staff member to serve as a family engagement resource person. This staff member receives family involvement training and meets monthly with the Parent Teacher Resources Supervisor and Title I liaisons. The school-based resource people are responsible for developing family engagement teams at their home schools and imparting the information they receive at district-wide professional development trainings to the teams. Through these teams, not only do the school-based resource people help build capacity for family engagement, but they also help teachers, principals, and other staff see the value of family involvement and take ownership for improving their own school culture.

**Data coaches.** The district distributes an annual parent satisfaction and school climate survey and is working with district-wide data coaches to help schools use this information in their planning and improvement. This entails sorting through survey data to generate short- and long-term goals that each school will address, as well as additional information schools need from families and community members.

#### Reaching out to and engaging families

**Building relationships with families.** School-level family engagement teams help organize “porch visits,” during which school staff visit students' homes prior to the beginning of the school year. The visits serve to let staff members, who are trained with a family involvement curriculum, to introduce themselves to families and make them feel welcome as members of the school community. In the 2008–2009 academic year, all 80 elementary schools and most of the middle schools participated in this visitation program. One middle school team visited 900 families. The district will be expanding this model to the high school level.





**Communicating with families.** Using multiple communication channels, the district provides parents with information about opportunities for involvement, tips for communicating with teachers, and school policies. To provide timely and accessible information, the district launched an automated service called *Parent Link* that connects schools with parents and keeps them informed through phone and email. The information includes emergency information, school announcements, and attendance. The district calendar and basic school information is offered in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Through its TV channel, the district produces a program called *Parent Talk*, which offers streaming video clips on topics such as parenting, the new math curriculum, and understanding school performance data.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The creation of a district-level department, funded to carry out family engagement development activities, ensures a consistent level of quality and commitment across all the schools in the district. This structure facilitates school-based staff members' access to training and resources, as well as the dissemination of promising practices such as "porch visits" to develop relationships with families.

## Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts

The Assistant Superintendent for Family and Student Engagement in the Boston Public Schools recently engaged in a redesign of the Office of Family and Student Engagement (OFSE), focusing on creating a vision of family engagement for the district and defining the OFSE's role in leading the district's family engagement work. Deciding that its role was not to *direct* engagement efforts, but rather to build the district's capacity to support schools' engagement efforts, the OFSE began to focus on capacity building rather than direct services to parents.



## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMS AT WORK

### Fostering district-wide strategies

**District leadership.** As part of the superintendent's cabinet, the Assistant Superintendent of the OFSE sits at the table with the academic superintendents, who oversee the principals in the district. The district has adopted a multipronged approach to embed family engagement in the educational system. It markets family engagement as a district-wide strategy for improving student outcomes through increased attendance, decreased suspension rates, and other indicators linked to student achievement. It requires all content-area staff members to address how they involve families in their instructional practices. Curriculum development work includes tools to help parents understand the content issues their children need to master on a grade-by-grade basis. The district also invites participation by family engagement staff members in its conversations about how to increase students' literacy development. As a result, the academic superintendents and principals have increased their use of the OFSE's resources, indicating widespread buy-in at the top levels of district leadership.

### Building school capacity

**Professional development.** The OFSE is working with the district's professional development institute to better the district's training for principals and other school staff with the district's modification of the National PTA® standards, which will be included in the district's blueprint. As of August 2009, the OFSE will provide principals with professional development linking instruction to family engagement, since family engagement strategies will be among the goals principals are working towards during the 2009–2010 school year. The district is also developing a new protocol for teachers to use when conducting home visits, which will be piloted during the upcoming year.

### **Family and Community Outreach Coordinators.**

School-based Family and Community Outreach Coordinators (FCOCs) focus on building relationships between schools and families and help develop schools' capacities to authentically engage families. FCOCs are responsible for developing family engagement action teams at their schools and creating family engagement activities that link engagement to student learning. FCOCs also participate in professional development put on by the OFSE, aligned around a set of core competencies aimed at infrastructure development to help schools carry out family engagement.

### **Reaching out to and engaging families**

**Development of Parent University.** Building on the experience of one of its community's efforts to provide parent education, the district is developing a comprehensive Parent University program, which will be phased in next year over the course of three sessions. The Parent University will house all of the district's parent education efforts, such as its 10-week literacy program, ELL curriculum, and math handbook for parents. Parents will earn credits for participating in Parent University-sponsored classes, and can graduate after earning 9 credits (after 12 credits, they'll be able to graduate with honors). The district is holding focus groups with parents to find out what parents would like to learn from such classes; this feedback, as well as input and resources from community coalitions, will influence the development of course offerings. The district plans to track participation in Parent University classes and other workshops by using the student identification numbers of the children whose parents attend. These data will provide the district with detailed information on how well they're reaching parents from different racial/ethnic groups, ELL categories, and income levels. The district has set a target for all schools to achieve at least 10% participation in Parent University-sponsored classes by the end of the 2009–2010 school year.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

Districts need to put forth a clear definition of family engagement and what it means for the district's school improvement efforts. If the district creates a family engagement office, it needs to be clear about that office's role in relation to the district's overall vision. Family engagement must be part of who the district *is*, not just what it *does*. In addition, district-level staff members should be facilitators of family engagement efforts, rather than purveyors of it. One of the district office's most important roles is helping schools build their own capacities to develop and carry out meaningful family engagement activities, so that schools do not rely solely on district-level mechanisms to carry out this work on their behalf.

## **Oakland Unified School District, California**

Just over two years ago, Oakland Unified School District created the Family and Community Office (FCO) to oversee a variety of processes related to families across the district, including family engagement. Despite some challenging budgetary conditions, the district has developed a number of innovative approaches to family involvement.

### **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMS AT WORK**

#### **Fostering District-wide Strategies**

**District leadership.** Initially, a Chief of Community Accountability worked alongside the Chief Academic Officer to integrate family engagement into the academic work of the district, including building the capacity of middle management to understand the importance of family involvement and help embed it into principal evaluations. In early 2009, however, a severe budget shortfall forced the district to cut this



position. Family engagement efforts are currently developed, implemented, and managed by an Engagement Unit within the Family and Community Engagement Office.

**Connection to district priorities.** The Engagement Unit has connected its family involvement work to the district's goal of reducing truancy and chronic absenteeism. With the help of a consultant, the district has produced a report on how schools and families can work together to improve student attendance. It has also provided professional development to parent–community liaisons and principals about how to involve families in monitoring and improving student attendance.

**Complementary learning.** Oakland Unified School District has a Complementary Learning Department (CLD) that works to align mental health services, after school programming, early childhood education, and health services across the district. The Engagement Unit is beginning to support CLD's cross-cutting work with families. For example, after school supervisors across the district will receive training on how to engage families in out-of-school time.

## Building School Capacity

**High school innovations.** One of the Engagement Unit's parent centers recently provided leadership and technical assistance in helping a local high school host a parent observation day. Through ongoing coaching, the family liaison was able to assist the principal and teachers in understanding that the event would help foster trust and engagement, rather than the creation of more work for them. Working with the family liaison, the African American parent group used a variety of strategies to spread the word about the event. Once other schools saw the success of this event, they began hosting similar events in their own buildings.

**Rubrics for learning.** Together with the former Chief of Community Accountability and a researcher with the Department of Research and Assessment, the Engagement Unit has developed a rubric for family engagement that schools can use to self-assess the quality of their family involvement strategies. This self-assessment includes descriptions of a continuum of increased sustainability in the areas of learning, leadership, advocacy, and systems. Schools that receive training were provided with examples, tips, and tools to promote and improve their family engagement strategies.

## Reaching out to and engaging families

**Soliciting input.** Each year, the district administers a “Use your Voice” survey and school score card to families to foster accountability and assess community perceptions around school quality. Each year, over 30,000 community members and parents complete the survey. In turn, the district analyzes the information to feed into ongoing planning and improvement strategies at the district and school levels.

**Parent leadership.** The Engagement Unit offers a variety of classes to help parents become advocates for their children. For example, the district has a nine-week class called “I Am Here and Ready to Learn” to build parents' capacity to understand how to support their children's learning at home and to partner with the school to advocate for their children's academic achievement.



## LESSONS LEARNED

Having a senior-level position responsible for family engagement that is part of the superintendent's cabinet gives family involvement credibility as a fundamental instructional strategy and allows the district to build capacity for family involvement across all of its work, rather than "outsourcing" it to one office. Districts without such a position have to use a bottom-up approach to family involvement. Lacking such a position, family engagement strategies tend to be located only in schools that already see its value but tend not to spread across the district as a whole. Another successful strategy employed in Oakland is using compliance with federal legislation and lawsuit resolutions to unhook access to other district departments and initiatives.

## St. Paul Public Schools, Minnesota

Recognizing that many of its students' families are unfamiliar with the public school system, the district involves families in understanding how they can support their children's learning and prepare them for college. Parent outreach, surveys, and dialogue keep the district responsive to parent perspectives.

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMS AT WORK

### Fostering district-wide strategies

**District coordination.** The Family and Community Involvement Coordinator (FCIC) heads a district-level steering committee to ensure that the district's family engagement plan is implemented. The FCIC coordinates communication with parent advisory committees, such as the special education, early childhood, and other interest group-specific advisory committees. Currently, the district is in the process of developing a centralized

Office of Family and Community Engagement to standardize training, communication, and other family engagement activities across the district. The development of the office is being funded with stimulus dollars and resources from other district offices.

### Building school capacity

**Shared learning.** The FCIC leads a group of school-based family engagement staff members in monthly meetings that allow them to share their practices and learn from one another. The staff members take what they have learned to their own schools and implement the strategies with teachers and other staff. In addition, the FCIC works with individual schools to enhance their parent outreach efforts, such as training teachers on how to use educational materials specifically created for parents.

**Parent-to-parent innovation.** The FCIC helps schools identify and apply for grants that can build school innovation and, based on lessons learned, eventually become district-wide practice. The principal of one elementary school, for example, worked with the FCIC to secure a grant to develop a parent cohort model that focused on engaging families by grade, rather than at the school-level, so that parents could connect with each other, share resources, and engage with the school via their shared experiences (their children being friends, having the same teacher, etc.). The principal created activities, specific to each grade level to help families become more acquainted with the school's curriculum and its expectations for students.

Today, the school holds events several times during the school year at which parents have the opportunity to get to know one another, talk to teachers about the curriculum, review classroom lessons, and then go into a classroom and actually practice teaching a lesson to a small group of students. The school has created a user-friendly collection of forms, lessons, and other resources in order to facilitate the spread of this cohort model across the district.



## Reaching out to and engaging families

**Parent outreach.** Due to the plurality of languages spoken by students' families and varying levels of family literacy, the district realized that written communication was not the best way to reach its families. The district uses alternate ways of communicating with families by hosting community-based forums, reaching out to housing programs and making videos to distribute to families. The district also partners with neighborhood parent groups to ensure parents are aware of state standards and other critical information.

**Responsiveness to parents.** The district conducts parent surveys and focus groups to assess its progress in helping families support their children's learning. Working with a nonprofit organization, the district created a parent survey with question items that were directly linked to the district's strategic plan. The district surveyed a random sample of parents, allowing it to generalize the survey findings to the community as a whole. The survey results help guide the district in its overall school improvement activities. Results from the 2008 survey helped build the case for a centralized office of Family and Community Engagement.

**Parent dialogues.** The district is implementing a Latino Consent Decree that requires the district to meet regularly with a parent and community group. The parents meet with superintendent's office to discuss educational issues, such as attendance and testing, and to make recommendations to the school board. The district is required to respond formally to these recommendations. Parents also take the responsibility to share district information with those who are unable to attend the meetings. The success of this model of family-school communication has led to its expansion to other parent groups.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The district's role is to establish a vision and goals for family engagement and then monitor what schools are doing to achieve those goals. Because schools have different needs depending on the communities they serve, districts need to allow schools to tailor their activities and to innovate creative programs. This is where the role of a district coordinator becomes critical. The coordinator can help schools translate the district's overall family engagement goals into a set of strategies that address their specific community needs and resources.



Appendix: Overview of Six School Districts Profiled

<b>District Data (2008)</b>				
	<b>Number of Schools</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>Students by Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Free/Reduced Price Meals</b>
Boston, MA	143	56,530	39% Black 37% Hispanic 13% White 9% Asian 2% Other	72%
Federal Way, WA	37	22,178	45.9% White 17.6% Hispanic 15.3 % Asian 13.3% Black 2.4% Pac. Island 1.3% Am. Indian	44%
Oakland, CA	141	38,852	37% Black 34% Hispanic 16% Asian 7% White 4% Other 1% Pac. Island 1% Am. Indian	64%*
Prince George's County, MD	206	128,017	74.2% Black 17.4% Hispanic 5.1% White 2.9% Asian .4% Am. Indian	48%
St. Paul, MN	65	38,469	30% Black 30% Asian 25% White 14% Hispanic 2% Am. Indian	69%
Wichita, KS	85 (+ 16 special programs)	49,146	38% White 24% Hispanic 20% Black 10% Multi-Racial 5% Asian 3% Am. Indian	48%*

\* FRPM data from Wichita, KS, and Oakland, CA, are from 2007.



## (Endnotes)

- 1 For a discussion of the benefits of family engagement at different developmental stages, please see Harvard Family Research Project's *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* series at [www.hfrp.org/FamilyInvolvementMakesADifference](http://www.hfrp.org/FamilyInvolvementMakesADifference); Dearing, E., McCartney, K., Weiss, H. B., Kreider, H., & Simpkins, S. (2004). The promotive effects of family educational involvement for low-income children's literacy. *Journal of School Psychology, 42*, 445–460.
- 2 Houtenville, A. J. & Conway, K. S. (2008). Parental effort, school resources, and student achievement. *Journal of Human Resources, 43*(2), 437–453.
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- 6 Information for this brief was generated through 13 interviews with district-level family engagement coordinators, superintendents, principals, parents, and school board members in six districts. This information was triangulated with secondary information from Web scans and supporting documents sent by interviewees.
- 7 Henderson, A. T., Johnson, V. R., Mapp, K. L., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: The New Press; Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A. S., & King, C. (2007). *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
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- 10 Crew, R. with Thomas, D. (2007). *Only connect: The way to save our schools*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



## About Harvard Family Research Project:

Since 1983, Harvard Family Research Project has helped stakeholders develop and evaluate strategies to promote the well-being of children, youth, families, and their communities. We work primarily within three areas that support children's learning and development—early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education. Underpinning all of our work is a commitment to evaluation for strategic decision making, learning, and accountability.

Building on our knowledge that schools cannot do it alone, we also focus national attention on complementary learning. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach, which integrates school and nonschool supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed.

### Harvard Family Research Project

Harvard Graduate School of Education  
3 Garden St.  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
495-9108  
[www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org)

## About National PTA®:

Founded in 1897, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is comprised of more than five million members, including parents, students, educators, school administrators, and community leaders. With more than 25,000 local units, PTA flourishes in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Department of Defense schools in Europe and the Pacific.

As the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy association in the United States, PTA's legacy of influencing federal policy to protect the education, health, and overall well-being of children has made an indelible impact in the lives of millions of children and families. Visit [PTA.org](http://PTA.org) for more information.

### PTA National Headquarters

541 N Fairbanks Court, Suite 1300  
Chicago, IL 60611-3396  
Toll-Free: (800) 307-4PTA (4782)  
Fax: (312) 670-6783  
[www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)

### PTA Office of Public Policy

1400 L Street, NW, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20005-9998  
Phone: (202) 289-6790  
Fax: (202) 289-6791



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