



Family and Community Engagement

Family and Student Voice in School Decision Making

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What Is the Topic

[Research](#) indicates that when schools foster a collaborative environment where the perspectives and concerns of English Learners (ELs) and their families are heard, educators can gain valuable insights into [cultural considerations](#) related to this group, and the specific support mechanisms required for ELs. Cohen et al. (2002) note that schools can have formalities and bureaucratic processes that affect engagement, like one-way lectures and presentations at back-to-school nights or procedural steps in the school front office. As educators delve into the knowledge, strategies, and practices presented in this brief, it is crucial to remember a fundamental distinction: [while many immigrants are English learners \(ELs\), not all ELs are immigrants](#). Understanding this nuance allows us to foster inclusive environments where every learner's unique background is acknowledged and celebrated.

Building a sense of warmth and collaboration can forge a connection between families and educators that is more enjoyable and beneficial for everyone involved, especially for ELs and their families, who may be less familiar with the dynamics of U.S. schools (Carreón et al., 2005). The literature emphasizes the significance of moving beyond well-intentioned programs that might inadvertently impose school agendas on parents, families and caregivers of ELs (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

What do we mean by Families and Student Voice?

The voices, stories, and perspectives of ELs and their families engender meaningful and active participation in shaping educational policies, programs, and decisions. This approach emphasizes moving beyond one-way information dissemination. By recognizing and [amplifying](#) the voices of ELs and their families, schools ensure a more equitable, culturally sensitive, and inclusive learning environment. Additionally, this approach is critical for EL families who have been [marginalized](#) and alienated (Arias, 2008). A suggested approach could be for schools to open spaces for families and



students to share their perspectives, which creates a platform for collaborative problem-solving and a means to bridge relationship and communication gaps between schools and families.

What Is the Evidence Base

Prior and current research shows that when the voices of ELs and their families are recognized, valued, and taken into account within teaching and learning environments, it has a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Helo-Treviño, 2016). A growing body of [case studies](#) shows that communication between parents, families, caregivers and schools helps develop trust, which is essential for families to express their perspectives. One step in culturally relevant parent engagement is to acknowledge the support for education that parents and caregivers already provide at home (Auerbach, 2007). Moreover, when schools offer small-scale activities and outreach with a personal touch, families tend to respond with more open participation (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Arias (2008) argues that addressing students' needs goes hand in hand with attending to the needs of their families, which helps build strong connections between home and school. Overall, strategic efforts and initiatives within districts and schools, such as the ones presented below, are likely to increase efforts in including and recognizing the voices of ELs and their families in school decision making.

The incorporation of frameworks and models we offer below, can effectively contribute to identifying strategies that best suit the needs of students and families.

- [Epstein's Conceptual Framework](#): This is a recognized model in educational research that emphasizes the importance of family-school partnerships for student success (Epstein, 2002). Within this framework, there are [six types of involvement](#) that describe vital aspects of involving and partnering with youth, families, and communities in schools. This [toolkit](#) describes sample practices, challenges, and expected results using Epstein's framework.
 - A [study](#) on parental involvement using Epstein's Framework with ELs found that implementing strategies including conferences (both teacher and student-led), language translation, and regular communication through memos and newsletters, increased parental engagement and improved learning outcomes (Cohen et al., 2005).
 - August & Shanahan (2006) argue that EL parents and caregivers are valuable resources in their children's education, but schools often struggle to engage them effectively. To promote families' voice, a [report](#) from Carnegie Corporation of New York emphasizes that school communication can be enhanced through a home-school coordinator or liaison, educators conducting home visits, distributing multilingual newsletters, offering a multilingual telephone homework line, or organizing monthly meetings.
- [The Student Voice Framework](#) serves as a research-based tool designed to assist educators in establishing and implementing student voice practices within their classrooms or schools. The framework comprises 8 elements categorized into structures and relationships that can be adapted according to the learning needs of the students.



- In this [video](#), four educators in Nashua, NH share insights on strategies employed to amplify student voices for ELs in their classrooms.
- An [ethnographic study](#) on parental involvement in California offers valuable insights into initiatives led by parents and caregivers, such as the Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA). This committee, established by parents, created a platform for dialogue between parents and the school. Their active participation resulted in positive changes, including involvement in decision-making processes and the initiation of the [Latino Family Literacy Project](#) (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).
- Similarly, in Texas, when researchers asked Latinx parents and caregivers how they would like to be part of their children's education, they wanted to have more personal talks with educators. They wanted to share information about their children's health, academic needs, and expectations (McKenna and Millen, 2013). Another example includes the [Chinese Early Language and Immersion Network](#). The goals of this program include ensuring that ELs have opportunities to develop high-level multilingual and intercultural competency. As this [study](#) shows, studying Chinese helps students acquire grit for being persistent, develop learning strategies, and foster an attitude of self-confidence which helps students use their perspectives in school decision making.

Example from the Field

"I understand the importance of a parent to be involved in the school activities of our children," a parent whose child will soon attend kindergarten in the district, said to the board through a translator. "But we would only be able to get involved if there was better communication between the parents and the teachers."

<https://riverheadlocal.com/2024/02/08/spanish-speak-ask-school-district-for-translation-services-at-meetings-and-events/>

- [Research](#) highlights that increasing student voice is particularly important for marginalized groups, including Black, Latinx, students with disabilities, and English language learners. A study by Benner et al. (2019) highlights various strategies for states, districts, schools, and educators to include student input into school decision making. These strategies include student surveys, involvement in student government, journalism, student-led conferences, democratic classroom practices, personalized learning, and youth participatory action research. These strategies vary in their impact, ranging from fundamental changes in school operations to more incremental adjustments.

Summary

Review of relevant literature: Theoretical basis	Review of relevant literature: Support of identified research and practice	Empirical evidence on how it serves students and promotes systemic change
Epstein's Conceptual Framework emphasizes the	Sample practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family support 	Strategies including conferences, language translation, and regular



<p>importance of family-school partnerships for student success. Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family-Like Schools • School-Like Families • School- and Family-Like Communities 	<p>programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home visits at transition points (pre-school, elementary, etc.) • Neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families. 	<p>communication through memos and newsletters, increase parental engagement and improve academic outcomes for ELs.</p>
<p>Student Voice Framework</p> <p>Studies suggest that students as young as nine years old can provide meaningful input into school decisions (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).</p>	<p>A practice-based recommendation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to speak and write about their lives regularly in small, casual, low-stress ways so that they begin to identify common experiences and desires across cultures and levels (Ferlazzo, 2010). 	<p>This article highlights that the use of sentence frames for writing and speaking gave ELs a framework to communicate and developed the capacity to use vocabulary around democracy and public life.</p>

Equity Considerations

Research conducted in a middle-school English classroom in the U.S. found that increasing student voice helps to re-engage students who may feel isolated (Oldfather, 1995). Another finding notes that including the students' voice in school decision making fosters a strong sense of ownership in schools and an increased sense of belonging. Similarly, Helo-Treviño (2016) and Korpershoek et al. (2019) highlight the positive impact of parental involvement on the academic progress of Latino ELs, arguing that a sense of belonging has been positively linked to family engagement in schools.

It is important for schools to recognize that EL students and their families can experience challenges, including language barriers, varying understanding and experiences with the school system, and cultural differences. Some well-intentioned programs tend to impose school agendas on EL families, for example, parenting classes that aim to "fix" practices, or programs in which families receive little information, without paying attention to what families want and have to say (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). To address these challenges, schools should [proactively reach out](#) to newcomer ELs and their families, recognizing the need for two-way communication and two-way learning. [EdResearch for Action](#) offers an informative guideline to learn more about the nuances and implications of engaging with immigrant-origin students and family.

Organizing family engagement events tailored to the specific needs that impact all ELs and their families, can contribute to a smoother transition and a sense of belonging within the school community.



When incorporating student and family voice strategies, educators should create a safe, open environment, understand the purpose of inviting students and families to share their voice, and make sure that this voice will lead to [action](#).

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

As we think about the best ways and strategies to amplify the voices of ELs and their families and foster [informed family decision making](#), it is essential to consider the local context – the things happening in the community and school. This includes factors that can affect strategies chosen to support students. We encourage educators to familiarize themselves with the characteristics of their school communities and programs offered within their schools, as school districts may offer different resources like programs or other initiatives aimed at fostering family and community engagement. Additionally, also consider including local culturally specific organizations that can support the development of inclusive and effective educational environments.

By keeping the voice of ELs and their families in the center of school decision making, the questions below can serve as a guide for understanding and respecting the unique characteristics of local contexts:

- What are the school/district student and staff demographics and how do they compare?
- How many English Learners does the school have and what is the language education program offered?
- What steps can be taken to understand and address potential barriers experienced by the families of English learners within the local community, ensuring their meaningful participation in school-related decisions?
- Are there specific cultural traditions or community practices that should be acknowledged and integrated into decision-making processes to make systems more accessible and relevant to the ELs and families?

What Can Educators and School Leaders Do: Strategies for Success

- To assist educators in identifying strategies, it is important to determine the level of responsibility and engagement the district has with ELs and their families. When looking at critical aspects of student voice, a good place to start is the [Institute of Education Sciences'](#) equity perspectives in student and family voice in the classroom.
- When looking into the barriers to increased ELs' parental involvement, consider [The Great Lakes Center for Education communications](#) activities that schools can use to address these barriers (p. 9).
- To help schools learn more about newcomer families and how to engage them in school decision making, the [Newcomer Academy](#) offers a set of factors and strategies that districts and educators can use to increase the understanding of the linguistic and cultural wealth of these families and their children.
- Another relevant resource is [Epstein's Model of Six Types of Parent Involvement](#) (Figure 1). Epstein's framework stands out from similar models due to its reliance on extensive descriptive examples. This model represents a more concrete approach grounded in real-life settings that

educators may use when deciding on which strategies to include in their plans to increase the voice of ELs and their families.

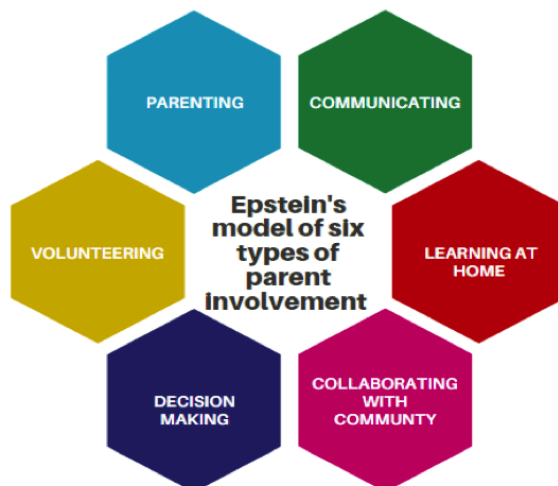


Figure 1. Epstein's Framework of Parent Involvement

Below, there are some strategies that can be used to establish initiatives that aim to increase the voice of ELs and their families within schools.

Strategy 1: Parent/Family/Caregiver Surveys

Primary audience: educators and students

Overview : This strategy can be a valuable tool for collecting diverse perspectives from ELs. This strategy provides families with a different way other than oral, to communicate their perspectives (Batel, et al.,2016). Educators can use surveys to address various topics like school and classroom climate, instruction quality, instructional materials, general concerns, and recommendations. The level to which student surveys can influence school decision making and improve student learning depends on the purpose of the survey and how the results are used. Additionally, this strategy has the potential to ensure a fair process for understanding opinions and provides additional context beyond traditional metrics (West, et al.,2018).

How to use it? Survey parents/families to obtain baseline information and assess the experiences of ELs. Use the collected data to set goals, measure growth, and inform decision-making processes. Maximize the strategy by incorporating it into a broader approach that empowers students as change agents.

Who benefits from it? Educators and students.

Systemic, comprehensive approach: This approach encourages active involvement, provides a platform for ELs to share their perspectives, and contributes to a more inclusive and effective decision-making process within schools.



Known or potential cautions? While these surveys can offer valuable insights, they represent only a snapshot in time and may not capture nuanced responses. The effectiveness relies on acting upon the survey data. Educators need to be cautious to prevent bias and ensure student privacy.

Strategy 2: Ensuring the Participation of ELs in Student Government

Primary audience: educators, school administrators, students

Overview: The strategy encourages educators to ensure the active involvement of ELs in student governments or councils, providing them with opportunities to contribute to school decision-making processes. Student governments typically consist of elected representatives who play a role in overseeing various school-related activities. Having the voices of ELs in student governments is a fundamental aspect of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the school community. It empowers these students, enriches the overall school experience, and contributes to a more representative and culturally aware educational environment.

How to use it? Educators can: (a) encourage ELs to be part of student governments, (b) establish a formal framework such as bylaws or a constitution outlining the responsibilities and (c) foster an inclusive environment by intentionally and responsibly integrating the viewpoints that foster leadership development.

Who benefits from it? Parents/Families, students, district/school staff

Known or potential cautions? [Misconceptions](#) about student leadership may limit the impact of the contributions of student government (Patrick, 2022), with the risk of normalizing ELs as political outsiders and perpetuating structural barriers. Concerns about tokenism and resource gaps may challenge the authenticity and effectiveness of ELs participation (Conner, et al., 2015).

Strategy 3: Parent/Family/Caregiver Empowerment Conferences

Primary audience: parents, families, caregivers, educators, students, districts

Overview: Studies have documented the effectiveness of parent-initiated efforts at the school (Auerbach, 2007). [Parent Empowerment Conferences](#) is a strategy aimed at engaging families of ELs in meaningful participation and school decision-making processes. It involves creating spaces where parents and caregivers can use their voice to share perspectives, build awareness, and collaborate with each other and with school representatives (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Rather than being a space of lengthy conversations, this strategy is parent-centered where educators act as facilitators.

How to use it? Identify and reach out to parents and caregivers interested in forming a committee, such as [Comite de Padres Latinos \(COPLA\)](#) and the [Asian American Center of Frederick](#) to provide a platform to share experiences, learn about the educational system, and support each other. Collaborate with advocates within the school district, including educators, special project directors, and education coordinators to facilitate workshops, conferences, and discussions addressing parents' rights, responsibilities, and strategies to help their children succeed in school.

Who benefits from it? Parents, families, caregivers, educators, teachers, administrators, counselors, staff, students, school districts, and schools.

How does it support changes in the systems? Addressing language barriers, promoting equitable involvement among parents and caregivers with varying levels of skills, and maintaining awareness of the diverse needs within the EL parent community.



Known or potential cautions? Efforts should be made to prevent tokenism and to enhance the effectiveness of the strategy over time (Saldana, 2021).

Implementation Considerations

As we embark on creating an implementation plan and proceed with implementation, it is useful to consider *topic-specific*, as well as *general* factors and guiding questions that can increase the likelihood for successful implementation. Also, consider learning about the different types of “student voice” described in [this article](#). Also consider checking more [evidence-based practices](#) to support English learners and EL families.

The following questions can support educators and school leaders to develop and implement strategies to ensure that the voices of ELs and EL families are included in school-decision making:

- How can schools effectively engage ELs and their families in decision-making processes, considering their specific cultural and linguistic backgrounds?
- What skills, cultural competencies, and resources do educators and school administrators need to foster authentic and meaningful partnerships with EL families?
- What are the primary barriers preventing EL families from actively participating in their students' education, and how can schools and districts address these challenges?

Local Context

- How does the local context influence the engagement of ELs and their families, considering factors like transportation, time constraints, and the sociopolitical environment of the community?
- To what extent is the implementation plan sensitive to the unique local challenges and opportunities in promoting engagement with multilingual and EL families?
 - Is the plan to elevate the voices of ELs and their families reliable and realistic in the long term?
 - What measures are in place to ensure the sustainability of the plan over time within schools and across the district?
 - How consistent is the implementation of the plan—both within individual schools and across the entire district—in fostering ongoing engagement with ELs and their families?

Also consider:

- Geographical Factors: How do the location and size of the district/school impact the practical aspects of plan implementation?
- Learning Mode: What considerations are needed based on the learning mode (in person/remote/hybrid/other) prevalent in the local context?
- Duration: How long is the plan designed to last, and what measures are in place for its continuous effectiveness?



- **Reliability:** Is the implementation plan reliable and realistic given the local context, and what factors contribute to its sustainability?

Implementation Plan and Process

The following questions and answers grounded in empirical research can further enhance clarity and provide practical guidance for educators and school leaders as they navigate the implementation process and monitor progress effectively.

- **What is our capacity for implementation?**

Schools should assess their readiness and resources for implementing strategies to involve English Learner (EL) families in decision-making processes. Capacity might include staffing, training, cultural competence, and community partnerships. For example, a study by Cohen et al. (2003) highlights the importance of assessing institutional structures and processes that may hinder family engagement, such as bureaucratic barriers and ineffective communication channels. Additionally, research by Epstein (2001) emphasizes the need for schools to develop organizational structures and policies that support family involvement.

- **How are families involved in the implementation of the plan?**

EL families should be actively engaged in the planning and implementation. This involvement can take various forms, such as participation in advisory committees, focus groups, or workshops. Carreón et al. (2005) emphasize the significance of building warm and collaborative relationships with EL families to foster meaningful engagement. For instance, schools can organize parent-teacher meetings with interpreters available to ensure that language barriers are addressed. Furthermore, research by Mapp and Henderson (2002) highlights the importance of creating multiple opportunities for family involvement that are accessible and responsive to diverse needs.

- **How will we know if the implementation is successful?**

Schools should establish clear indicators and metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts in engaging EL families. Success might be measured through increased attendance at school events, higher participation rates in parent-teacher conferences, or improved academic outcomes for EL students. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) stresses the importance of moving beyond programmatic approaches that impose school agendas on families and caregivers of ELs, highlighting the need for authentic and mutually beneficial engagement.

- **What resources do we need to implement the program(s)?**

During the implementation phase, various costs may arise, including expenses for additional professional development, materials, and administrative support (Lara-Alecio et al., 2010). Understanding these financial implications is crucial for effective resource allocation and program sustainability. These resources may include funding for interpreters, culturally relevant materials, professional development for staff, and outreach efforts to engage families. Research by Henderson and Mapp (2002) emphasizes the importance of allocating sufficient resources and support for family involvement initiatives to ensure their effectiveness. While funding may not always be readily available within school budgets, educators and school leaders can explore external funding opportunities. For instance, Oregon's Department of Education offers [grants and funding opportunities](#), and organizations



like [the Spencer Foundation](#) may provide additional financial support. Additionally, fostering financial stewardship and involving [District Equity Committees](#) in the budgeting process can help prioritize resources based on student and community needs. Also consider the Oregon Department of Education's [Guideline](#) to spending funds responsibly.

- **Are accessibility supports in place?**

Accessibility support is crucial to ensure that EL families can fully participate in school decision-making processes. This includes providing language interpretation services, translated materials, and accommodations for families with diverse needs.

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Learn More

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