



Family and Community Engagement

Family Efficacy and Family Support

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Keywords: family support, family involvement, school decisions, family efficacy, trust, relationships

What Is the Topic

Research consistently shows that many classroom educators in the U.S. need support to effectively work with English Learners (ELs) and multilingual students and families. Since schools are legally responsible for the success of all students, educators are increasingly looking for help to better support ELs (Chen et al., 2008). Besides seeking help to improve the learning experiences of ELs, educators are also trying to find ways to engage with families, as they play a [critical](#) role in their children's education. When educators understand the role that families play in schools, they are more empathetic and better prepared to strengthen family efficacy and support, as well as student success (Genao, 2021). In this brief, we discuss the significance of family efficacy and family support, describe the importance of this topic, and present models, frameworks, and strategies that have proven to be effective for educators as well as school staff and administrators. 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.

Within the context of ELs, we consider [family support](#) as the assistance, encouragement, and involvement opportunities provided to families that help contribute to the success of their children. Family support also recognizes the important role that parents play in reinforcing the academic and social development of their children. For instance, parents helping with homework, attending school events, and fostering a positive learning environment at home (Weiss, et al., 2009). On the other hand, [family efficacy](#) refers to the belief and confidence that parents and caregivers have in positively impacting their children's education, emphasizing that their actions and involvement make a meaningful difference in the overall educational experiences of their children within school and at home (Kao and Caldwell, (2017). Family support and family efficacy are important components that can foster a [collaborative partnership](#) between schools and families, empowering them to work together.



What Is the Evidence Base

[Research](#) consistently shows that [family involvement](#) is one of the strongest predictors of ELs' academic success (Carreón et al., 2005; Weiss, et al., 2009). However, Vera et al. (2012) argues that when parents and caregivers experience language barriers, they may not feel comfortable helping with school programs or events such as volunteering in the classroom or joining field trips, reducing opportunities to foster family support and family efficacy.

Successful involvement of EL families relies on the [trusting relationships](#) with schools and educators, which form the basis for family involvement and engagement (Mapp, 2003). Establishing [trust](#) requires educators and schools recognizing the barriers that impact EL families' ability to efficiently support their children's education. One of the challenges may include past negative experiences with schools, such as not feeling included because of language and cultural differences. Other barriers also may include a negative school climate toward EL parents, work responsibilities and lack of childcare (Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003). Additionally, educators often face challenges in getting EL families and communities engaged in schools as they may not have had enough training on how to interact and engage these families. Moreover, educators' own cultural beliefs may also impact how they interact with EL parents and caregivers (Berg et al., 2006; Dean and Parsley, 2010). In this sense, Chavez-Reyes (2010) suggests that schools need to redirect their focus from how EL families participate in preexisting school practices and instead, prioritize the co-construction of family support and efficacy by empowering parents/caregivers to be actively involved in their children's education.

- [The REEd Framework for Bilingual Family-School Partnership](#) prioritizes leveraging and honoring multilingual families' home languages and cultures to build relationships, communicate, and involve families as key decision makers. This framework consists of three components: communication, relationships, and advocacy which work in synergy to enhance student Learning. Carreon et al. (2005) found that EL family engagement increases families' confidence and self-awareness, improves educators' knowledge of diverse families, and enhances educators' ability to use knowledge about families and communities to improve instruction.
- Mapp and Kuttner's (2012) [Dual Capacity Framework](#) for Family-School Partnerships offers a foundational structure supporting specific strategies, policies, and programs. This framework has been used to foster meaningful communication between parents and caregivers of ELs with disabilities and schools. Although not tailored specifically to families of ELs with disabilities, this framework has been recommended by the U.S. [Department of Education \(2016\)](#). The dual capacity framework (Figure 1) outlines four competencies—cognition, capabilities, connections, and confidence (The 4 c's)—that educators and families need for effective partnerships, often addressed together in the [literature](#).
- A [toolkit](#) developed by The Michigan Department of Education suggests three strategies to promote engagement with EL families:
 - Provide resources, materials, and staff (such as a family liaison) to communicate in culturally responsive and comprehensible ways (translated resources) with EL families.



- Provide information regarding adult education and family literacy programs that can improve academic and language skills, if needed.
 - Provide structured opportunities for parents and caregivers of ELs to provide feedback to schools and state agencies on EL policies, programs, and practices.
- In the research exploring parental attitudes toward education, a study conducted by Ramirez (2010) shows that EL parents often hold even higher aspirations for their children's educational success compared to non-EL parents. Based on these findings, it is recommended that schools promote opportunities for EL families to develop family support and efficacy (Vera et al., 2012).
- In a study conducted by Cheng et al. (2008), a professional development project called [Sheltered Instruction and Family Involvement](#) (SIFI) aimed to familiarize K-12 educators with effective strategies for improving English language learners' education. The project encouraged educators to prioritize family involvement practices and develop intentional plans. Survey responses revealed significant changes in educators' views and practices regarding family involvement. As a result, educators adopted new approaches, connecting instruction to students' background knowledge and overcoming associated challenges.
- [A 2012 NCFL study](#) (download the report following the link at the end of the website) examined seven high-performing [Toyota Family Literacy Programs](#) (TFLP) nationwide and found a positive impact on parents' self-efficacy. TFLP participation correlated with increased parental confidence in supporting their children's learning and heightened involvement in school programs.

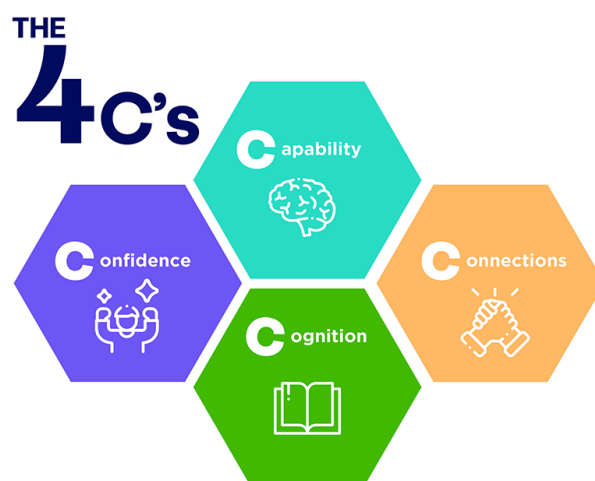


Figure 1. Dual Capacity Framework



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
Dual Capacity Framework helps create strategies and programs for involving families in schools. It fosters the creation of goals and conditions needed for effective family engagement.	Some recommendations for implementation: arrange group meetings for parents to ask questions; share ideas for future meetings; include parents in school decision groups.	Drawing from the dual capacity framework, Cheng et al. (2008) fostering school communication, and relationships with EL families showed significant changes in educators' views and practices.
The REEd Framework for Bilingual Family-School Partnership prioritizes families' home languages and cultures to build relationships and foster communication.	The California Department of Education offers an asset based tool (p.84) for engaging with EL families.	Carreon et al. (2005) found that engagement efforts centered on EL families' home language(s) increased parents' confidence and self-awareness, and improved educators' knowledge of diverse families.

Equity Considerations

Recognizing the unique needs and challenges experienced by [English learners with disabilities](#), establishing trust and fostering active participation of parents or guardians in educational decision-making becomes crucial. This proactive approach not only serves to build a foundation of trust between educators and parents but also ensures that educational strategies are tailored to the specific needs and cultural context of each EL student with disabilities, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment (Thurlow et al., 2022).

Another equity consideration is the emotional well-being and academic success of all students and the affirmation of those students who claim an LGBTQ2SIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirit, Intersex, and Asexual) identity, including English learners. This approach might serve as a protective factor against negative mental health outcomes and suicide among students, especially when families are included in such endeavor (Russel et al., 2011). Limited research shows the experiences of English learners and multilingual students who identify as LGBTQ+. In the 2017 [National School Climate Survey](#), the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network ([GLSEN](#)), used data from this survey to document the unique barriers LGBTQ students face. For more than a third of the



LGBTQ students in the survey (35.1%), English was not one of their native languages, and 12.2% of these students felt unsafe because of their level of English language proficiency. The findings show that immigrant LGBTQ students have similar experiences to their non-immigrant LGBTQ peers at school with regard to their LGBTQ status, but they then have added safety concerns related to their language barriers (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

When educators want to make sure that EL families have a say in school decisions, we need to think about what is going on in our community and school. This includes considering things that might affect how we help students. These questions can help us understand and respect what makes our community and school unique:

1. How can we more deeply involve EL families in discussions about school decisions, considering the unique aspects of our community and school?
2. What factors in our local context might affect the strategies we choose to support ELs and their families?
3. How will you support LGBTQ+ EL students whose families are not supportive, in order to offer care and support to both the student and their family to increase supportive behaviors?
4. In what ways can we cultivate trusting relationships with parents, families or caregivers of ELs in the community, taking into account their background, their child, and home culture?
5. What opportunities can we create to increase and deepen lines of communication between families and educators to enhance family participation in their child's success, especially for students with disabilities?
6. Considering the cultural, social, and human capital that parents, families or caregivers offer, how can we best direct attention to these resources to enhance the success of EL students with disabilities in our school?

What Can Educators Do: Strategies for Success

The strategies below are recommendable options and not absolute recommendations. The appropriateness of each approach depends on factors unique to the school or district. To identify the most effective strategies for the district, educators could consider the following research-based strategies and recommendations:

- [The US Department of Education](#) advocates for and requires school districts to ensure meaningful communication with ELs families in a language they can understand.
- The California Department of Education developed an [asset based tool \(p.84\)](#) for engaging with EL families that can help educators challenge some of their potential



biases in order to better engage with these families. [Hanover Research](#) (p. 210) offers additional recommendations on this topic.

- Using practice-based evidence, [The Institute of Education Sciences](#) describes 6 Strategies for effective school-family engagement events that can help educators and school staff increase family support and family efficacy. Similarly, [Hamilton County Schools](#) offer a set of resources for EL parents and caregivers.
- The following list of [recommendations](#) can also be a good place to start to assess and identify the best strategies for schools and educators to foster EL family engagement:
 - Arrange Group Meetings for Families to Ask Questions
 - Share Ideas for Future Meetings on Different Topics
 - Include Parents and Caregivers in School Decision Groups
 - Rotate Staff to Work with Families and Share Information
 - Customize family support to the specific population in your area

Consider that English sometimes may be a barrier to establish communication with EL families. So, educators may need to have translation/interpretation support to better engage with families. Below, there are some strategies to assist schools and educators to foster family support and family efficacy in the homes of ELs.

Strategy 1: Two-way family engagement workshop

Primary audience: educators, families

Description and How to use it: This workshop can be designed to foster EL family efficacy and support aimed to create a collaborative space for educators and families. This workshop is designed to be an ongoing series of interactive sessions that go beyond traditional parent-educator meetings. It focuses on building a bridge between the home and school environments, emphasizing the importance of consistent communication, cultural understanding, and the preservation of home languages. Drawing from O'Donnell and Kirkner's (2014) research, this strategy incorporates key implementation elements:

- **Communication in Primary Language:** Workshops emphasize effective communication in the primary language of the families involved, ensuring sustained engagement over time.
- **Multilingual Staff Involvement:** Inviting multilingual staff to facilitate workshops addresses language barriers and ensures a nuanced understanding of cultural contexts.

Example from the Field

"Schools are not always as informed about dual language family strengths as we would like. So, one of the things that we know...all families, particularly Latino, dual language families—have very high educational aspirations for their children"

[https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/elwestFiles/pdf/Video Transcript Structuring Meaningful Home School Partnerships 1.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/elwestFiles/pdf/Video%20Transcript%20Structuring%20Meaningful%20Home%20School%20Partnerships%201.pdf)



- Accurate and Supportive Translation/Interpretation: Providing accurate and supportive translation during workshops guarantees that information is effectively conveyed and comprehended by all participants.
- Cultural Implications: Recognizing the cultural implications of language preservation, the strategy aims to strengthen a child's connections to their family and cultural identity.

The following resources can help educators to develop a successful workshop: [family communication reflection](#) (p.5), [communication ideas for parents and caregivers](#) (p.6) and an [action plan template](#).

How is it beneficial? How does it support changes in the systems? This strategy can promote positive systemic changes by actively involving English Learner (EL) parents and caregivers in their children's education. This activity can potentially foster inclusivity and break down language barriers, empowering EL families to actively shape educational practices (Reese and Goldenberg, 2008).

Known or potential cautions? What not to do? As educators use this strategy, be mindful of the following:

- Avoid ignoring the existing power dynamics within educational institutions. Recognizing and addressing these dynamics is essential for fostering genuine collaboration with EL parents and caregivers.
- Avoid overlooking the intersectionality within the EL community. Recognize the diverse experiences of EL families based on factors such as socio-economic status, race, and immigration status.

Strategy 2: Parent-to-Parent Support Group

Primary audience: educators and school staff engaging with parents/caregivers of students with disabilities

Description: This is a recommended strategy for educators to foster family efficacy and support, particularly for parents and caregivers of ELs with disabilities. The support group can be a meaningful strategy for educators who want to promote family engagement of ELs with disabilities. These families experience additional barriers compared to other groups such as navigating specialized terminology related to their child's disability and understanding school policies (Liu et al., 2017). Since there's not much research on effective ways to support parents and caregivers of EL with disabilities, this strategy becomes even more important. The application of this strategy also involves creating a platform where experienced parents and caregivers of children with special needs provide one-to-one emotional support and information to parents and caregivers who are newer to raising a child with disabilities.

How to use it: Recommended steps include: identify experienced parents and caregivers willing to volunteer as mentors, and carefully match them with families seeking support; encourage informal, one-to-one relationships to develop, allowing parents to share experiences, resources, and coping strategies; Set up regular meetings for the support group; providing a consistent and reliable platform for families to connect. These meetings can be in-person or virtual, depending on the preferences and accessibility of those involved. Provide additional resources and training sessions, if possible, to equip



both experienced and newer parents and caregivers with valuable information. This may include workshops on navigating the education system, understanding special education terminology, and addressing cultural considerations.

For educators using this strategy, the Oregon Department of Education's [guidance on ELs with disabilities](#) may be of help. In planning this strategy, keep in mind the power of personal connections in addition to professional advice.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do? Professionals play a crucial role; the Parent-to-Parent Support Group is not a substitute for professional services but serves as a complementary and emotionally supportive resource. Ensure that the support group remains a positive and constructive space, avoiding any form of judgment or unwarranted advice.

Implementation Considerations

As we embark on creating a plan and proceed with implementation, it is useful to consider topic-specific aspects as well as general factors and guiding questions that can increase the likelihood for successful implementation. Consider answering the following questions as educators and school leaders develop plans and implement strategies to foster EL family efficacy and support:

- What are the predominant work schedules of parents and caregivers in the community, and how might this impact their availability for family engagement activities?
- How can technology facilitate communication and engagement with parents and caregivers who may have limited availability for in-person meetings?
- How can the strategies align with and contribute to any ongoing initiatives or priorities within the local school district?
- What types of accessibility resources are available for students with disabilities who also are English Learners?
- What types of information do families of EL students receive and what information would increase access and opportunity for increasing efficacy and support??

Local Context

- How does the local context influence EL family efficacy and support, 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 support for EL 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?**

Assessing the capacity for implementation involves evaluating the readiness of the school and its staff to effectively execute plans and strategies. Schools can enhance their capacity for implementation by evaluating their [organizational culture](#), fostering a culture of continuous improvement, providing resources for professional development, and leveraging community partnerships to support EL families effectively (Farley, 2021).

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

Involving and engaging families as partners acknowledges their expertise and strengthens their sense of ownership, efficacy, and support in their children's education (Weiss et al., 2009). Strategies for involving families may include establishing parent advisory councils, conducting regular communication through multiple channels (e.g., newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, virtual platforms), and providing opportunities for families to participate in decision-making processes.

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

Measuring the success of the implementation requires establishing clear goals and objectives aligned with the desired outcomes for family efficacy and support for ELs. Schools can use a variety of [quantitative and qualitative measures](#) to assess progress and impact. These may include academic achievement data, parent surveys, attendance rates at school events, qualitative feedback from families and staff, and observations of family-school interactions (Carreón et al., 2005). Regularly collecting and analyzing data allows schools to identify areas of success and areas needing improvement, leading to informed adjustments to implementation strategies.

- **What resources do we need to implement the program, plan, or strategies?**

During the implementation phase, various costs may arise, including expenses for additional professional development, materials, and administrative support and understanding these financial implications is crucial for effective resource allocation and program sustainability (Lara-Alecio et al., 2010). 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 should 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?**

Ensuring accessibility support for EL families is critical to promoting equitable participation. This includes providing translation and interpretation services, offering flexible scheduling for meetings and events, and addressing barriers related to transportation and childcare, when possible (O'Donnell and Kirkner, 2014). Schools should also consider the cultural relevance and appropriateness of resources and materials to ensure they are accessible and inclusive for all families.

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Learn More

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