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## How Districts Can Lay the Groundwork for Lasting Family Engagement

Family engagement in a student's education can lead to improved student academic achievement, attendance, and behavior. Yet many districts and schools still struggle to form strong partnerships with the families they serve. Having a supportive district-level infrastructure is key to the success and sustainability of family engagement initiatives. This issue of *SEDL Insights* outlines district supports that can lay the foundation for high-impact family engagement.

**F**amily engagement is increasingly recognized as the "missing link" in school improvement.<sup>1</sup> As observers have noted, however, there is still a gap between acknowledging the importance of family involvement and implementing strategies to facilitate that involvement.<sup>2</sup>

In SEDL's 4 decades of family engagement work, we have learned that family engagement initiatives

### SEDL Insights on How Districts Can Lay the Groundwork for Lasting Family Engagement

1. Provide training and supports for both educators and families.
2. Integrate family engagement standards and measures into educator evaluation systems.
3. Leverage funds and resources from multiple sources.
4. Create staff positions dedicated to family engagement.
5. Focus on school improvement instead of procedural compliance.
6. Make student and school data accessible and meaningful to families.



are not going to succeed unless they have buy-in, training, and policy support at the district level. Districts should see family engagement as an area of practice, not an individual strategy—with the goal of supporting school improvement and improving student outcomes. Although the insights below are not intended to be a comprehensive list, they offer some key ways that districts can support systemic, integrated, and sustained family engagement activities. They are based on recent research, as well as SEDL staff members' experiences participating

<sup>1</sup> Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hardy, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Cavanagh, 2012.



in the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group and our work leading the Family Engagement State Leaders Network and the National PIRC Coordination Center.

In our examples, we discuss practices used at the state, district, and school levels, with the understanding that they can be employed at different levels in the education system. Although we discuss systemic, district-level strategies, we believe that these insights will be informative for all stakeholders who support lasting, high-impact family engagement initiatives.

## Insight

### 1 Provide training and supports for both educators and families.

Many educators express a desire to work with families to develop stronger home-school partnerships but report that they do not know how to accomplish this. Similarly, many families, especially those in high-need areas, say that although they want to support their children, they do not know what to do to engage in their children's

learning and school improvement.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the need to help “families, schools, districts, states, and the broader communities to build capacity for student achievement and school improvement,”<sup>4</sup> the U.S. Department of Education released the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. The framework calls for creating opportunities for *all* adult stakeholders—district staff, educators, and family members—to develop the skills, knowledge, relationships, networks, sense of comfort, self-efficacy, and worldview to engage in effective family engagement.<sup>5</sup> It also calls for educators to create the right conditions for adult learners to come away with not only the knowledge but also the ability and desire to apply what they have learned. This includes linking initiatives to student learning; building respectful and trusting relationships between home and school; building stakeholders’ intellectual, social, and human capital; providing collective and collaborative learning situations; and giving participants the opportunity to test out and apply new skills.<sup>6</sup>

An initial step in developing structures that support effective family engagement is to train educators and staff in creating an environment in which they can warmly receive family members into the school and help them support their children’s education. This will include developing a strong, positive front-office staff with a consumer orientation and ensuring *all* teachers and staff have respectful attitudes toward family members, students, and visitors. In areas with histories of low family engagement, professional development can focus on rethinking what benefits students’ families can contribute—even in poor, underserved, or low-resource neighborhoods and schools.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent professional development sessions can address more complex topics like how to integrate family engagement into school improvement planning and how to collaborate with families on instructional issues. This could also include modeling how to conduct and maintain respectful interactions during difficult conversations and continuing the momentum of discussion and contacts during and after contentious sessions; familiarizing educators

<sup>3</sup> Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Boethel, 2003.