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BRIDGING THE GAP: THE POTENTIAL OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



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Over the last decades, family engagement has emerged as an important strategy for improving student outcomes. Indeed, a growing body of research has highlighted a positive association between parent involvement and their children's social and emotional development and academic achievement (Biag & Castrechini, 2014; Epstein, 1990; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Harvard Family Research Project, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).¹ In practice, family engagement often encompasses a wide range of activities and initiatives, from parental participation in school governance to at-home learning activities to classroom volunteering. At the Gardner Center, I've worked on several

projects exploring the impact of family engagement on student and community outcomes. Each of these projects has caused me to reflect deeply on what family engagement really is and why it matters.

Defined broadly, family engagement most often refers to meaningful connections between schools and their students' families. A number of scholars and practitioners have identified ways that families may be engaged with their children's schooling, including supporting learning at home, maintaining communication with school, supporting the school, and contributing to decision-making at school (Epstein 2001). Many scholars and practitioners also consider family engagement a shared responsibility, in which schools and other community organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development. These scholars recognize that family engagement is continuous across a child's life, reflecting changing roles as a child matures. And ideally, engagement occurs in the multiple contexts where children live and learn (e.g. home, school, after school programs, faith-based organizations) (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010).

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¹ This article sometimes uses the word "parent", but is meant to refer to anyone who is the primary caretaker for a child or children.

Family engagement has become a particularly important strategy in low-income and immigrant communities, where parents have frequently been perceived as less invested and involved in their children's education than middle class families (Mapp & Hong, 2010). Research has repeatedly refuted these assumptions, suggesting that perhaps other barriers exist to parent's involvement in their children's schools (Best & Dunlop, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). For example, parents may have difficulty communicating with school staff due to linguistic differences, lack the confidence or training to provide their children with academic support, have limited experience with the U.S. education system, and/or encounter overwhelming socio-economic constraints—such as inflexible work schedules, limited transportation, or competing family obligations—that limit their participation. In sum, the opportunities for involvement schools offer to parents may not match families' life situations, expectations, or desired roles.

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Furthermore, while countless parents actively support their children's education, many of these activities may be invisible to school staff. Schools tend to define family involvement in school-centric terms; in contrast, students and families conceive of their involvement more broadly. For example, in a 2011 Gardner Center study, school staff described family engagement as parental participation in activities that occurred on the school site (e.g. volunteering in the classroom, attending family literacy night) whereas students and families described engagement as activities that happened at home (e.g. encouraging positive study habits, helping students get to school on time, telling their children the importance of education) (Westrich & Strobel, 2011). The ways parents support their children's education that are non-academic, culturally situated, or occur outside the school site may not always be recognized by school staff, but are nonetheless hugely important in students' life and learning outcomes (Zarate, 2007; Ramos, 2014).

The result of these different perceptions is a common disconnection between students' families and the institutions that support children's learning and development. Teachers seldom receive training on engaging parents as part of their formal education; class, cultural or linguistic barriers may exacerbate differences, literally disabling communication between school staff and parents. Additionally, many teachers already feel the demands of an extensive workload which precludes them from having the time necessary to effectively reach out to parents. In our own recent family engagement work in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, we asked over a hundred professionals at elementary schools, preschools, and other child-serving organizations to identify resources and trainings they thought would help them better support families' engagement. Dedicated staffing (e.g. family liaison, release time), language training (in students' home language), training in cultural sensitivity, and pedagogy support were all frequently cited.² Many youth-serving professionals recognize the importance of engaging families, but sometimes feel they lack the resources, skills, or support to do so effectively.

² More on this available in an upcoming Gardner Center issue brief on the Family Engagement Impact Project.

Family engagement initiatives offer a tremendous opportunity to bridge a gap between some of the most important entities in a child's world. Many family engagement programs are now offering dual-capacity training: on the one hand, supporting families to better navigate the institutions that influence their children's future and on the other hand, helping schools to better meet the life and learning needs of their students and their families. Programs that use innovative pedagogy, strength-based approaches, honor families' contexts and preferences, and support schools and providers to be more effective have the potential to not only improve student outcomes, but bridge an important community divide.

In its most aspirational sense, family engagement is about transforming our community fabric, through authentic partnerships between the entities that matter most in a child's life. What greater democratic dream than transformation of our social institutions to reflect the values, cultures, and hopes of our students, their families, and our communities?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[A Study of Family Engagement in Redwood City Community Schools](#)
[Redwood City Community Schools Evaluation](#)
[Family Engagement Impact Project](#)

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