

Family Engagement

An Institute for Education Innovation Position Paper

Introduction

The Institute for Education Innovation (IEI) is a national network of innovative K–12 educational and corporate leaders who gather twice yearly to talk about big ideas in teaching and learning. We engage in discussion, share our best practices, and help one another to be better at what we do: helping all students achieve successful outcomes during and after their public school careers.

IEI’s policy briefs are the outgrowth of our national convenings—a summary of the group’s thinking about the main topics discussed at our conferences, guided by thoughts from our members and partners. We publish these position papers to provide thought leadership to our colleagues in school districts and in the K–12 marketplace.

Our winter 2019 summit centered around the theme of family engagement, and this policy brief outlines IEI’s position on the topic.

In summary, we believe that:

- engagement is a two-way street;
- families are the single biggest influencer on a child’s education; and
- we must acknowledge and address implicit bias, document and share success stories, and create meaningful community partnerships.

Our Guiding Principles

Communication is a one-way street; engagement is a two-way street

Since the beginning of formal public education, schools have used various tools to communicate with their students' families:

- Traditional events like “Back-to-School Night” have for years given schools an opportunity to invite parents into the building and share with them what happens every day when their children are there
- The invention of the ditto machine, and later the photocopier, made it easy to send home by U.S. mail and in students' backpacks messages about school activities and academic progress
- In the last twenty years, email and SIS parent portals made it even easier to share information with families about what is going on at school
- More recently, messaging solutions have adopted SMS technology to text families, particularly in cases of school closings or emergencies

In general, schools have done a good job communicating with families. However, **communicating is not engaging**. Engaging involves a two-way back-and-forth between families and schools—it involves both speaking and listening.

We urge both the K–12 industry and school district leaders to seek opportunities for two-way engagement. These could include adopting technology solutions, restructuring existing communication opportunities like “Back-to-School Night,” or rearranging the layout of school offices.

Every interaction with a student's family member provides an opportunity to build a relationship that could improve a student's outcomes, or, in some cases, save a student's life. We need to seek these engagement opportunities and leverage them on behalf of the students we serve.

Families are the single biggest influencer of a child's education

Our work in schools to educate students and prepare them for success as adults is and always will be important and challenging. But no matter how hard we work or how effective we are at school, a student's family will, in most cases, always be the single biggest point of influence on that child's success.

As educational leaders, we must remember our role in this process and honor students' family members as partners in our work. Moreover, we must work tirelessly to engage every family and develop a philosophy of family efficacy, which we define as a family's belief in its capability to help ensure a desired outcome for their children.

Being purposeful about family engagement will require many of our teachers and staff members to change how they think about their work and jobs, and leaders will need to help focus staff on re-prioritizing time and tasks. We should develop a family engagement plan, then work with partners within and outside our districts to support the process of change management.

Finally, districts who are serious about family engagement should work to create meaningful partnerships across their school systems and communities. This can include:

- working to sync the community culture with the school culture;
- asking disengaged families how we can better engage them;
- partnering with experts to learn and apply research-based methods for strengthening the school-home bond; and
- seeking and piloting services and solutions that can enhance family engagement efforts.

When searching for such solutions, some general guidelines include:

- full integration with the district's SIS;
- tools that save staff time rather than create more work; and
- tools that truly engage families, with a proven track record of facilitating two-way communication between school and home.

The Elements of a Successful Family Engagement Program

1. **Buy-in from every level of the school system**, from support staff to superintendents.
2. **A plan that explores and addresses implicit and personal bias**, including:
 - developing strategies for engaging immigrant families;
 - engaging non-English-speaking families in discussions about their children and what is happening at school; and
 - demonstrating sensitivity to cultural and socioeconomic differences.
3. **Opportunities to document and share family engagement success stories**, including:
 - highlighting the quantitative and qualitative improvements that stem from more deeply engaging families;
 - crowd-sourcing high-leverage strategies for engaging families with limited resources;
 - learning from peers how to have difficult, yet productive, conversations with families;
 - creating a strategy roadmap for other districts on how to help families find and use their authentic voice; and
 - setting and tracking progress toward measurable family engagement goals, including:
 - the number of family engagement touchpoints per month or per week;
 - the response rate of families to engagement touchpoints;
 - the role-specific engagement touchpoint goals per week or month (e.g., teachers vs. administrators); and
 - the percentage increase in families who are responsive to school outreach versus unresponsive.

Conclusion

Family engagement is a process, not an event. Back-to-school night is one example of engaging families, but we must go far beyond this annual ritual to reach the families who may not be inclined or able to participate in any singular opportunity for school–home interactivity.

Successful family engagement requires:

- leadership and change management from educational leaders;
- a systemic approach that prioritizes two-way communication at all levels, from the district office to the bus drivers;
- setting goals and measuring progress against them, including for frequency and type of communication to and from families; and
- a relentless commitment to reaching all families, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or spoken language.

We are passionately committed to the students we serve, but we also must remember we are only one part of a child’s daily life. Families will always have the biggest impact on a child’s success or failure. By purposely and strategically engaging with each student’s family members, we best position our students for happy and successful lives, both during their school years and in adulthood.

Good work around family engagement can quite literally save lives. We must lead our districts to engage as many families as possible!