# Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next Generation Family Engagement

## Engaging Families to Transform Education


A REPORT FOR

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Prepared by
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*This research consistently confirms that family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of children's development, educational attainment, and success in school and life.*

Carnegie Corporation of New York's Education Program seeks to bring together families, communities, students, educators, policymakers, and the public in support of an equitable and high-quality educational system. We need all of these perspectives at the table if we are to create and advocate for the kinds of student-centered learning experiences that will allow all students to master academic content aligned with the standards; gain future-ready knowledge, skills, and dispositions; and succeed in postsecondary learning and careers. We seek to empower these stakeholders to drive change and demand more equitable policies and practices that prepare all students to be active participants in a robust democracy and dynamic global economy.

We believe that investing in parents and families is an indispensable part of this process. Through its grantmaking, the Corporation has supported nonprofit organizations that work with parents in meaningful and empowering ways: listening to their needs and beliefs, informing and supporting their decision-making, building their capacities to help their children and their schools thrive, and enabling them to advocate and organize to improve student outcomes and educational systems.

Years of practice and research into learning have established an unquestionable insight: when parents are engaged in their children's education, students succeed. In the 1970s for instance, a long-term study of childhood interventions confirmed that a focus on a child's holistic developmental pathway, combined with family engagement efforts, can create lasting positive effects. Research has also taught us that children learn anywhere, anytime, and not just in school—and with this understanding comes the realization that the families play a central role in supporting learning and building learning pathways. Children are awake for about 6,000 hours a year, and only about 1,000 of those hours are spent in school. If we are to tackle the achievement gap and the inequities that contribute to it, we must pay attention not only to schools, but also to the places where children spend the rest of those 5,000 hours.[1] Studies by the Global Family Research Project and other organizations confirm that the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income students is largely tied to an "opportunity gap"—differences in families' ability to access learning and enrichment experiences both in and out of school.

Family and community engagement is complex and nuanced. While existing research points to promising and effective strategies, questions remain. We need to discover the best methods for enabling families, educators, and community practitioners and leaders to join forces, and to be cognizant of the kinds of commitments and support necessary to foster mutual trust and shared responsibility. We need to find ways to address the fact that culture and everyday community activities not only fundamentally shape family, school, and community engagement practices, but also are at their very heart. We need to learn more about how to integrate family engagement in the design of schools, policies, and practices. It is no longer enough for family engagement to be placed at the margins of our approach to children's development. A critical mass of research and practice shows that we should be looking for ways to place it at the center of our thinking.

In the past two years, we have seen growing momentum among funders, policymakers, and local and national organizations to support family engagement efforts. Carnegie Corporation of New York is part of this movement. In order to inform our grantmaking and begin a national conversation about an old truth gaining renewed interest, we commissioned Dr. Heather Weiss, codirector of the Global Family Research Project, to write a Carnegie challenge paper on family and community engagement. This paper highlights the fact that while family and community engagement is one of the strongest predictors of children's learning, overall development, and well-being—and of their educational and life success—it has not been central to conversations about educational improvement, equity, and reinvention efforts. Nor has it gotten the investment it warrants from public policymakers, grantmakers, and others. We hope this challenge paper will function as a call to action, stimulating an inclusive and growing national movement to place families at the center of our collective goal to ensure the well-being and success of our children.

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[1] H. Weiss, M. Elena Lopez and Margaret Caspe, *Carnegie Challenge Paper: Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next Generation Family Engagement*, Global Family Research Project, 2018.

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## Starting with Families

*Using their night-shift "lunch" breaks and weekends, over 500 Los Angeles janitors with young children ages 3–8 participated in parent engagement workshops led by parent leaders. These workshops—an adaptation of the Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors family engagement model and organized under the auspices of the UCLA Labor Center's Parent Worker Project—were designed and implemented with parents. They had the goal of empowering families to be their children's first teachers, to act as leaders and advocates, and to see themselves as the creators of learning pathways for their children across home, school, and community. Among other activities, families drew and shared maps of free resources at museums, libraries, the UCLA campus, parks, landmarks, and other sites in their community, and went on field trips to these sites, exposing themselves to new places and activities, and expanding their families' learning opportunities as a result.*

*This project began with a survey of the janitor members of the SEIU–United Service Workers West—mostly new immigrants and parents and grandparents—regarding their expectations for their children and priority areas for union work. When asked about their ideas for union projects, the janitors identified a good education as their priority—even over other important issues such as health and immigration reform. Families wanted their children to complete high school and get a further degree, but their children were attending under-resourced schools, where only 12 percent of students were meeting high school equivalency requirements, dropout rates reached 50 percent, and only 4 percent of students went on to enroll in higher education. Through the union's efforts, and with parents' active participation, parents have gone on to become workshop leaders and organizers, further developing the parent engagement program and expanding it citywide. Despite their long work hours—as many as 60–80 in a week—and low wages, these families are determined to build a better life for their own children and other children.*[1]

The families in this opening case study and many others around the country are acting on what 50 years of research tell us about the powerful roles families play not simply in what children learn, but also how they learn—especially when it comes to building equitable learning pathways for their children from birth through high school and beyond. This research consistently confirms that family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of children's development, educational attainment, and success in school and life. It underscores the clear benefits, both for children and communities, of prioritizing and investing in efforts to empower families to support their children's learning as a key strategy in achieving greater educational equity and social justice—goals that are now more urgent than ever.

As the Los Angeles story illustrates, family and community engagement is a shared responsibility. It asks families to prioritize learning, and communities (in this case the union) to foster the conditions that enable families to do just that. Here, as in many other places that have achieved robust family engagement, a trusted community partner listened to and worked with families to cocreate strategies that enabled families to be informed and involved in their children's learning in meaningful ways. Family engagement is arguably a public good: a public benefit results when every family can play a robust role in ensuring that their own children and other children get the 21st-century knowledge and skills they need to prepare for the workforce, for civic and community life, and for lifelong learning.

There is now a growing recognition of the value of family and community when it comes to school reform efforts, working towards educational equity, and closing achievement gaps. Carnegie Corporation of New York is providing philanthropic leadership in this effort to establish a broad, diverse, and inclusive national conversation about how family and community engagement can be a key strategy for building excellent and equitable education systems. This Carnegie challenge paper is part of that endeavor, and we offer it with the hope that it will spur others to bring their ideas and perspectives into the growing discussion and contribute to shared efforts to expand interest and support for family and community engagement.

Heightened attention to family engagement is occurring at a time when the field is particularly vibrant, with innovations emerging from a variety of disciplines: from neuroscience to behavioral economics to strategic and digital communication. The infusion of fresh perspectives, questions, and investments from foundations, social entrepreneurs, social venture funds, employers, and labor unions, as well as from the nonprofit and public sectors, is strengthening this work tremendously, not least because it is prompting useful reflection and debate about what the vision and goals for next generation family and community engagement should be and how to expand its power and impact.

We define next generation family engagement as moving from where we are now—a scattered, marginal, and unaligned set of programs and policies—to more strategic and systemic approaches to family and community engagement in and out of school and from birth through young adulthood.

We believe that the field is ready to move to the next level and to take on a big, next generation challenge, one with great potential payoff.

**How do we work with families and communities to cocreate the next generation of family and community engagement, providing equitable learning pathways—both in school and out of school and from birth to young adulthood—that will enable all children to be successful in the 21st century?**

## What Does It Take to Meet This Challenge?

Meeting this challenge requires ensuring that all families and communities—not just economically advantaged ones—have what it takes to build equitable learning pathways for their children, including high-quality schools and out-of-school learning opportunities. Achieving this requires a major shift in thinking—a shift from devaluing and doing *to* and *for* families to one of valuing and cocreating *with* them. The latter approach foregrounds asking questions, listening, empowering, sharing perspectives and information, partnering, codesigning, implementing, and assessing new approaches and solutions, and supporting parent leadership and advocacy for educational equity and change.

This challenge paper starts with a brief overview of what we have learned over the past 50 years of family engagement research, practice, and policy, and a look at how this work has guided the challenge we have laid out. We go on to suggest key design principles and processes for building next generation family and community engagement. We then describe what the idea of cocreation looks like in practice, and the multiple roles families can and do play in building equitable learning pathways for their own children and other children. This analysis is followed by a discussion of how families, schools, and community organizations are making the shift to cocreating family and community engagement, the innovations that result from this move, and the strategies being used to move away from one-off programs to more continuous engagement all along children's learning pathways, both in and out of school.

We next suggest five "high leverage" areas to consider in building family engagement strategies—areas that research and practice demonstrate are potentially transformative in individual and structural ways. These include: attendance, data pathways, academic and social development, digital media, and transitions. We conclude with suggestions for five areas of investment in next generation family and community engagement: community initiatives, capacity building and professional development, data pathways, public policy change, and public communication and engagement strategies. Throughout the following pages, we invite the reader to offer additional areas, objectives, and ideas in order to deepen and advance the conversation.

At the outset, it is crucial to recognize that poverty, racial discrimination, and immigration policies make it increasingly difficult for families and communities to build equitable learning pathways for their children. Without addressing these systemic problems and the inherent biases and stereotypes associated with them, it will be impossible to realize the fullest potential for all children and families, no matter how robust family and community engagement efforts become. Fair immigration, livable wages, health care, universal childcare, and paid family leave are all necessary policy reforms and crucial preconditions for enabling all families to engage with their children's learning.

## Looking Back and Around to Move Ahead

When we speak of family and community engagement today, we build on over half a century of developmental research, programs, practices, and policies designed to equalize educational opportunity that emerged during the War on Poverty. In this era, the framework or paradigm for understanding children's development broadened—shifting from studying children in labs to looking at their development

over time within an expanded ecology of home, school, and community. Widening the lens in this way allowed for three crucial insights when it comes to giving children the chance to learn to the best of their ability and get the skills that they need to succeed:

(1) from birth on, children learn anywhere, anytime;

(2) families play multiple, pivotal roles all along children's developmental pathway, from infancy to adulthood, and;

(3) communities and public policy are important players when it comes to enabling all families to create strong and equitable learning opportunities and pathways.

Since these observations were made, a steady stream of research has confirmed them, and many parent and community groups, schools, researchers, and others have successfully built, evaluated, and improved programs and initiatives that offer families the tools and support they need to nurture their children's learning and development.

## A brief history of family and community engagement

Looking at how developmental psychologists, educators, and policymakers used this new ecological understanding of children's development to create a strong research, policy, and practice base is instructive for two reasons. First, it offers specific insights and principles that could inform the design of next generation family and community engagement today. Second, it yields a powerful lesson about how meaningful change can take place. By taking a broader view, these stakeholders realized that good schools were a necessary but not sufficient part of equalizing opportunity and creating pathways out of poverty for children. Rather, it was essential to begin earlier—with early childhood programs incorporating strong family and community engagement—and to continue this engagement through high school.

As influential advisors to public policymakers in the 1960s intent on increasing educational opportunity, reducing poverty, and increasing social mobility for children, this group largely built the policy infrastructure for the kinds of family and community engagement that we have now. They were instrumental in designing Head Start, with its emphasis on the whole child in context; in supporting families as children's first teachers, as adult learners, and as leaders in program governance; and in establishing strong connections to the community so that low-income families could access necessary social and economic support.

They also played a major role in the landmark 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, reauthorized as today's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), succeeding in writing into the bill an enduring mandate and earmarked funding for family engagement. They urged research, development, and evaluation work focused on early childhood home visitation, leading to the creation of the 2012 Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Act, which set aside federal funds so that states could establish home visitation programs for low-income and immigrant families. In addition to establishing a solid knowledge base and sophisticated program models, these historical efforts put money on the table for family and community engagement that endures to this day. Some part of this funding could potentially be used to build next generation family and community engagement pathways from early childhood forward.

In the years that followed, researchers continually tested a key proposition: that high-quality early childhood education combined with strong family engagement would generate immediate and long-term benefits for children by reinforcing and supporting families' continuing and crucial role in their children's developmental pathways. They developed clinical trials to test this proposition, and over the years pushed for longitudinal evaluations to see

if there were enduring effects. A combination of private philanthropy and federal government financing played an important part in underwriting this work.

Three key interventions emerged from these efforts: the Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and the still extant and influential Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC). Each included high-quality early childhood services, frequent home visits, and other family engagement activities, and each fostered family engagement from preschool through the first few years of elementary school. Research confirmed that the guiding proposition was correct—that high-quality early education combined with strong family engagement would generate short and long-term benefits for children—and since then there has emerged strong longitudinal research to affirm that the experimental groups had greater immediate and enduring gains than did the control groups. Many other evaluations of major early childhood home-visit models, at the time and in the years since, have demonstrated the benefits of family engagement strategies alone as well as in combination with high-quality early childhood education, including Early Head Start.[2]

Such work in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s inspired a growing interest in family and community engagement and catalyzed a "virtuous circle" in local communities, states, and national arenas alike: human and financial investment, innovation and use of research to inform it, evaluation, and continuous learning for improvement. Today, we continue to reap the benefits of the investments in that work, as families, schools, and communities around the country develop and improve programs and initiatives that empower families to support their children's learning, and as educational researchers track the country's progress on increasing opportunity and decreasing achievement gaps. Indeed, national data show that the gaps in early learning readiness between children from upper- and lower-income homes are decreasing, and these shrinking disparities are due in large part to children being exposed to more books and reading in the home, having greater access to educational games on computers, and engaging more with parents both inside and outside of the home.[3]

Recent groundbreaking longitudinal studies reveal the benefits of these early investments and the importance of continuing robust and multifaceted family and community engagement during the transition to school and through the elementary years. The investigations provide strong evidence for educational leaders' calls to build continuous family and community engagement into any and all school improvement and reform efforts.[4] These studies, including a long-term follow-up of the Child-Parent Centers (CPC) noted above, examined data on the performance of schools serving low-income elementary school students in Chicago and found that integrating sustained family and community engagement was a key contributor to the schools' substantial improvement in literacy and math achievement.[5]

Importantly, these studies are among the first to look at family engagement not alone, but in relation to its integration and interaction with other core aspects of school quality, including school leadership, professional development, learning climate, and curriculum. The CPC study demonstrates that when family engagement pathways are forged in early childhood and continue through high school, participating children have higher graduation rates and college attainment than those who do not take part—and the mechanism responsible for these long-term impacts is parents' sustained and consistent engagement. A longitudinal evaluation of the aforementioned Perry Preschool, which incorporated a once-a-week home visit to families as part of its programming, established that students in the program group outperformed students in the control group when it came to the highest level of school completed, and those students were also more

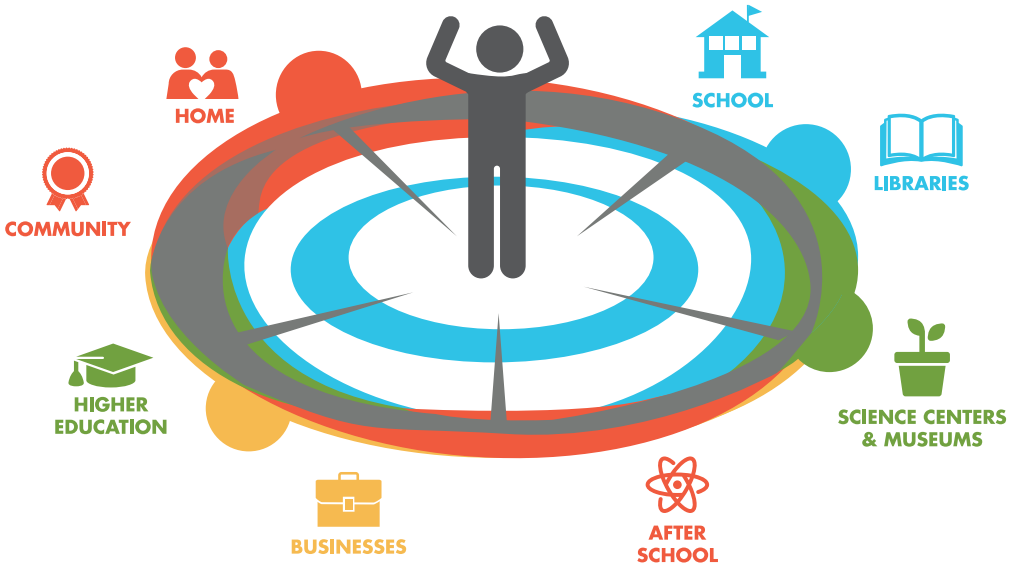


**Figure 1:** Ecology of Learning as conceptualized by the STEM Learning Ecosystems Initiative.
SOURCE: TIES Teaching Institute for Excellence in STEM

likely to be employed at age 40. This statistic represents the economic equivalent of a 3 percent return to society.

## A renewed focus on racial and economic inequities

Using a wider lens to look at consequential differences in learning opportunity, economists are also able to identify disparities in spending on out-of-school learning for children between more and less advantaged families, disparities that are increasing and contributing to achievement gaps. Their work makes clear that if we are really going to decrease educational inequities and ensure all children succeed, especially those living in poverty, we have to pay attention to the whole learning ecology, not just to schools alone. Children are awake for about 6,000 hours a year. They spend only about 1,000 of these hours in school—spending the remaining 5,000 hours at home and in the community, at after-school and summer programs, and in lessons, sports, and other enrichment activities. (Figure 1.)

By sixth grade, economically advantaged children have spent 6,000 more hours learning out of school than their counterparts born into poverty, according to ExpandED. (Figure 2.) Income plays an important role in accounting for this difference. A recent analysis indicates that as of 2005–06, low-income families spent about $1,400 on these extracurricular learning activities, while higher-income families committed about $9,300.[6] As income inequality increases, so will such spending gaps. The reasons have little to do with families' priorities: the account of the Los Angeles families with which we opened this paper and many other examples make clear that lower-income families are acutely aware of the importance of out-of-school learning and of using advocacy and other means to ensure their children have access to such resources. In 2018, parent leaders from PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) in Washington, D.C., have likewise identified lack of access to out-of-school time opportunities as the biggest missing link in their children's education and developed an organizing strategy to increase funding for such opportunities in under-resourced areas and reduce barriers to participation. Their activism resulted in an increase in funding for out-of-school time opportunities in the proposed fiscal year 2019 budget by $10.56 million—and over $20.25 million in total investments.[7] As we will note many times in this report, parents, along with the network of organizations and services involved in out-of-school time opportunities for children, are actively addressing these disparities, identifying creative and effective solutions, and finding the means to engage lower-income families and their children. The result is an emerging web of "anywhere, anytime" learning for children and families, one that actively reinforces and supports families' roles in closing opportunity gaps by creating robust learning pathways for their children.

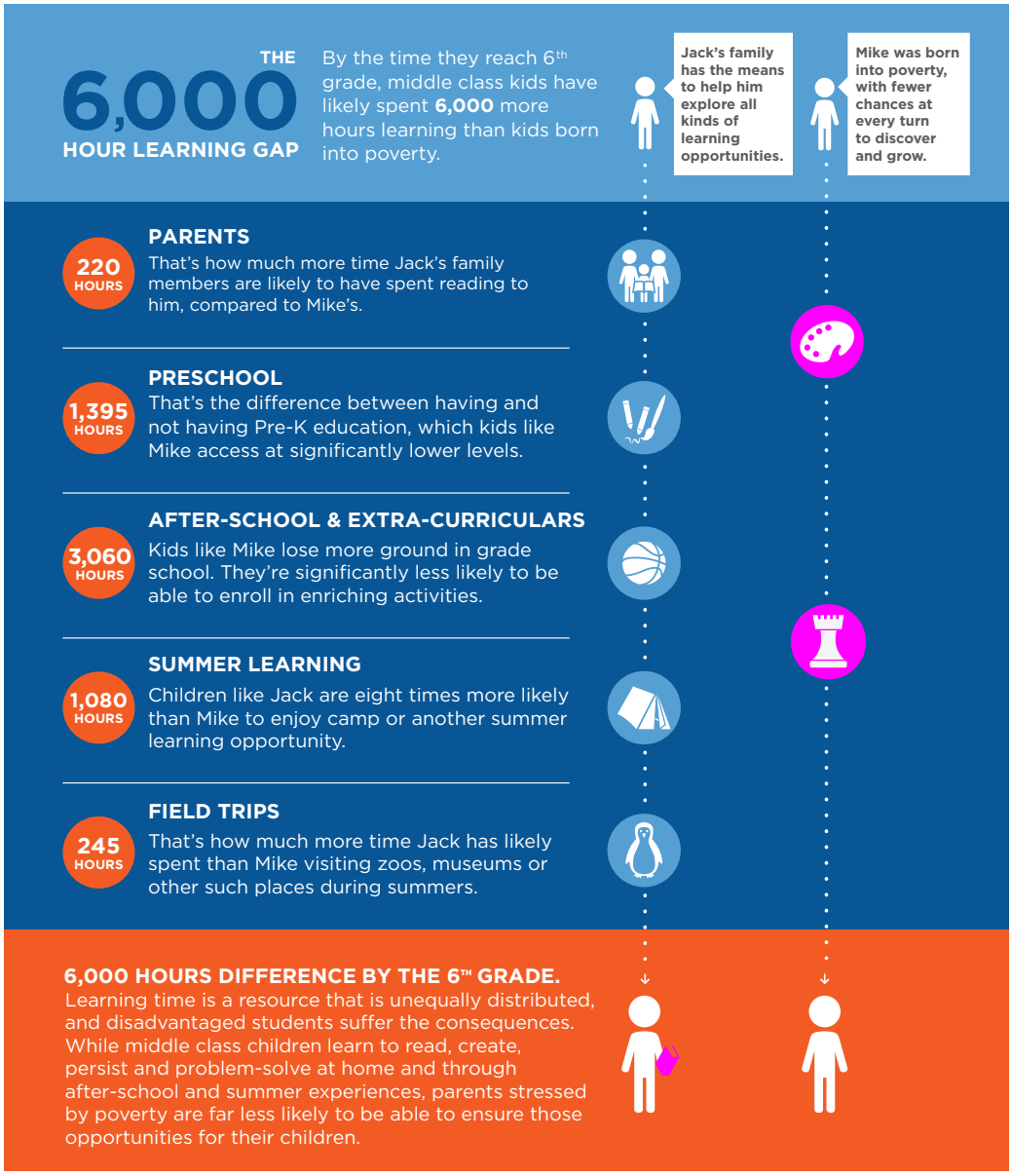


**Figure 2:** The 6,000 Hour Learning Gap by ExpandED Schools

At the outset of this short run through the history of family and community engagement, we suggested that in addition to offering specific insights to consider when codesigning the next generation of family and community engagement, this history offers a larger insight into how to achieve such goals. People saw enormous inequality and addressed it by setting up a policy base for action and conducting research and evaluation to inform it. The investments in this effort led to a proliferation of community-based innovation and yielded a substantial body of research and practice knowledge—one that will create a strong platform as we work to develop next generation family and community engagement for the future. We would like to lay out what we think are some of the important lessons and design principles that resulted from this foundational work, and ask readers to consider, critique, and build their own set of lessons to inform future endeavors.

**Principles of Research and Practice for Building Family and Community Engagement**

1. Families matter when it comes to children's development and learning, from birth into and throughout adolescence.[8]

2. Family engagement is a shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities, and is an essential ingredient—along with leadership, coherent instructional systems, professional learning efforts, and student-centered learning climates—in any effort to ensure the success of low-income children.[9]

3. Family engagement pathways must begin early, persist across time, and transform according to age and context.[10]

4. Family engagement takes place across a variety of settings, including homes, schools, and community spaces, as well as libraries, after-school programs, and museums.[11]

5. Family engagement builds on families' strengths and culture and creates equity.[12]

6. Family engagement interventions, when part of a larger, comprehensive initiative, can make a difference for children and families.[13]

7. Family engagement recognizes that families play multiple roles in students' development and learning.[14]

8. Family engagement is most effective when it brings families, educators, and communities together to cocreate strategies that achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes for children, families, schools, and communities.[15]

9. Family engagement requires shifts in the mindsets of families, teachers, and others who work with children, changes in organizations' policies, and broader public understanding of the importance of family engagement and what it entails in their community.[16]

## What Does Family Engagement Look Like in Action?

As is clear from this overview, there is strong research to support and expand public policies that take up the challenge of developing and funding the next generation of family and community engagement. But what does a process that foregrounds asking questions, listening, empowering, sharing perspectives and information, partnering, codesigning, implementing, and assessing new approaches and solutions, and supporting family leadership and advocacy for educational equity and change look like in practice?

While there are many examples to choose from[17], the case of Zavala Elementary School in Central East Austin, Texas, deftly illustrates the many roles that families and communities play in building more equitable pathways for their own children and other children.[18] The roles depicted in Figure 3, evident in the Zavala example, are drawn from developmental research and evaluations of interventions, as well as from the substantial body of practice knowledge about effective family and community engagement. Figure 3 is a living illustration, as readers and emerging research and practice may suggest additional important roles.

In the early 1990s, the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (Texas IAF), an organization committed to helping predominantly Hispanic and black families living in poverty gain power to improve their lives, turned the school around. Zavala went from being a school with high teacher turnover to one experiencing low teacher change, from a rank of 33rd out of 63 schools in the district for student attendance to first place, and from a pass rate on state-mandated reading and mathematics tests that was half the district average to one that exceeded the citywide

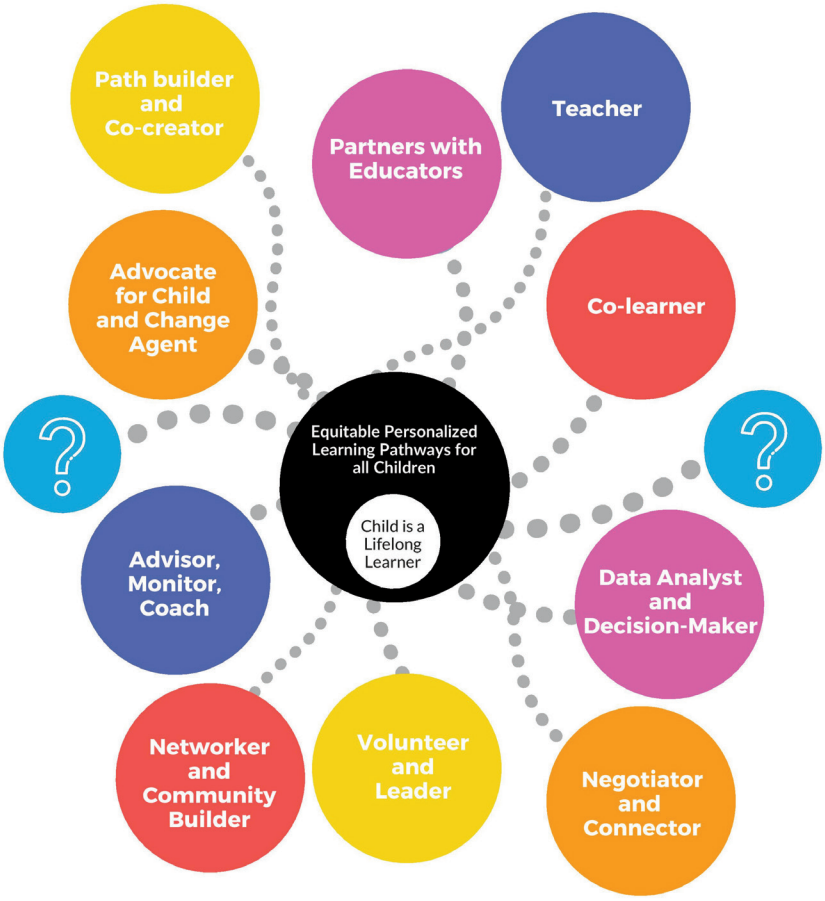


**Figure 3:** The multiple roles families play in building learning pathways.

average. From start to finish, parent leadership and advocacy played a key role in this success. How did they do it?

**Ask and Listen:** The process began with the organizers identifying parent leaders and asking about parent concerns. Out of these conversations, they identified three critical areas of concern: inadequate health care, neighborhood crime and security, and lack of after-school activities and jobs for teenagers to counter gangs. The organizers also met with the local school's principal and teachers, and as a consequence were made aware of problems with staff morale and low student achievement.

**Empower:** With support from parents, Texas IAF entered a formal partnership with the school to work on school improvement, including creating opportunities for parents to participate in school governance. The parents first called for the creation of a student health clinic. Teachers supported them in this effort, participating in a neighborhood walk to gather support, attending hearings before the school board, and holding the mayor accountable to deliver on the promise.

**Share Perspectives and Information:** Building on the trust and relationships established between parents and teachers through this collaboration and bolstered by the principal's leadership and commitment to change, Texas IAF held a workshop intended to share information with parents about student achievement. To the dismay of many, parents discovered that while their students were getting As and Bs on their report cards, they were only in the bottom quartile on state tests, which meant they would be disqualified from competitive middle schools and high school magnet programs. Armed with this alarming new information, parents dug in and demanded change.

**Partner, Codesign, Implement, Assess, and Improve:** In response to parents' demands and clear support, the principal and teachers raised their expectations for the students, worked on improving instructional practices, introduced new language arts and mathematics curricula proven to improve the performance of children with economic disadvantages, and eventually reported on progress.

**Lead and Advocate:** With support from the school, parents successfully advocated for a health clinic and, later, an after-school program with 30 different course offerings, as well as a special science program that attracted many community resources and put students on the path to the junior high magnet science program. At the parents' request, teachers also identified ways parents could support student learning at home, including fostering a growth mindset; identifying and building on children's interests and strengths; monitoring homework, attendance, and performance; and holding high expectations for achievement, school success, and postsecondary education and work.

## Meeting the Challenge Through Changing Mindsets and Cocreation

Meeting the challenge laid out in this paper requires a commitment to ensuring that all families and communities, not just economically advantaged ones, can build equitable learning pathways for their children—pathways that include high-quality schools as well as out-of-school learning opportunities.

This demands a major shift in mindset, from one of devaluing and doing *to* and *for* families to one of valuing and cocreating *with* them: asking questions, listening, empowering, sharing perspectives and information, partnering, codesigning, implementing, and assessing new approaches and solutions, and supporting parent leadership and advocacy for educational equity and change. It means building on family strengths and working with families to cocreate and dive deeper into their beliefs, norms, and practices. It means setting policies for schools and other organizations that combat racial and economic inequalities, and creating opportunities for teachers to hone their understanding of how inequality manifests itself in children's and families' lives. It means rejecting old scripts about families and seeking a true understanding of how families experience their children's learning and growth and the conditions that enhance or inhibit those aspirations.

### Cocreating family-school relationships

When relationships with educators are characterized by mutual respect, trust, open communication, and inclusion in decision-making, families are more likely to feel confident about their roles as advocates and become more engaged in their children's learning. Positive relationships between educators and families even benefit children's health, social and emotional well-being, and cognitive skills.[19] Yet these relationships do not happen overnight, nor do they exist in a vacuum. They are fundamentally shaped by and built upon a community's culture—its beliefs, goals, social norms, practices, everyday routines, languages, and economic resources.[20]

We begin with a focus on the relationships between families and teachers because this is the essential connection between families and schools. Yet there is often a mismatch between the expectations, beliefs, and practices held by teachers and families, which can result in the false belief that ethnically diverse and low-income families are less engaged and invested than middle-class white families when it comes to taking responsibility for

their children's learning and establishing school-home partnerships. A robust body of literature debunks this myth, and as that research and the stories in this paper suggest, there are a range of tacit and often unrecognized ways that families are engaged in children's learning. The most effective family engagement initiatives build upon and transform families' strengths—their funds of knowledge—in ways that connect families and schools meaningfully to enrich student learning.[21] This approach does not attempt to replicate and transmit school values and activities to the home; rather, it reframes relationships by creating programs, initiatives, and strategies *with* instead of *for* families.[22]

Changing this narrative requires two interrelated approaches. First, it requires understanding the context in which families live. Poverty influences family investments in their children's learning.[23] Many families living in poverty reside in neighborhoods where safety issues, social isolation, noise, and the presence of lead paint are not conducive to learning. Neither do poor families have the discretionary income to buy books and educational toys or to expose their children to enrichment activities in the after-school hours. Jobs performed by poor families often involve long hours and little flexibility, making it difficult for them to participate in school activities. Immigrant families often face the additional challenges of limited English proficiency and differences in cultural expectations regarding families' roles in both school and out-of-school learning. Schools and community groups must recognize these constraints and create conditions and opportunities for families to build learning pathways for their children, regardless of socioeconomic status or linguistic or cultural background.

Second, changing this narrative requires developing empathy—putting oneself in another's place and imagining what that person feels and experiences. This is another way to move from family engagement practices that *educators* think families need and want to ones based on what *families* desire and value. As in the Los Angeles janitors' story at the beginning of the paper, this requires schools and community institutions to take the initiative to listen to families, support what they want to learn and do, empower them to make informed decisions and actions, and develop their capacity for community leadership. The institutions can also encourage open dialogues about race and ethnicity among students, families, and educators with the help of skilled facilitators. Bringing these issues to the table can clarify misconceptions and pave the way for cocreated and from-the-ground-up family, school, and community partnerships.[24]

A number of cutting-edge initiatives are working to make these shifts in mindset possible at a systemic level. For example, Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is a comprehensive training program developed by and for Latino parents with children ages birth to 5 years. Parent input shapes all aspects of the Abriendo Puertas curriculum, which engages parents in lessons that reflect the culture of the families who take part, including the importance of reading and understanding how language develops. Participation in Abriendo Puertas increases educational activities at home, parents' approaches to reading with their children, and library use.[25] These shifts begin in the home, move into schools as children age, and eventually lead to advocacy at the community level—parents who have participated in Abriendo Puertas have gone on to take part in campaigns to increase early childhood funding, promote immigrant policies, and improve the public school curriculum.[26]

Another example of codesign comes from Dr. Marta Civil at the University of Arizona, who builds the capacity of teachers to partner with families by changing the contexts in which teachers come to know, understand, and interact with families. In her work, preservice and in-service teachers of mathematics learn to understand that

mathematics is cultural, that families have mathematical strengths, and that math learning is most powerful when families, students, and teachers are co-learners. Teachers conduct home visits to discover mathematical strengths within the community and then integrate those strengths into classroom curriculum and parent meetings. Parents participate in teacher-hosted math "tertulias" and get-togethers, where groups of families and teachers talk about math.

Teacher home visits are proving to be a valuable tool for addressing teachers' implicit biases, especially about students of color and those from low-income households. The Parent Teacher Home Visit program was co-created by parents, teachers, and community groups in Sacramento, California, in 1988. Parents from a low-income neighborhood used community organizing principles to build trust and accountability between parents and teachers and disrupt a cycle of blaming each other for low student achievement by putting in place a home visit system. They worked with teachers and community groups to refine the idea, and today the program operates in more than 20 states. In this model, educators are trained to focus on what is positive—families' and educators' shared aspirations for their students—and to dispel inherent biases about families as a "problem" that needs to be fixed. The model has been shown to support shifts in mindset that improve home-school partnerships. Families learned that their relationships with educators need not be negative or uncomfortable, and many educators came to recognize their mistaken assumptions and develop an understanding of and empathy for students and their families.[27]

Building the skills and capacities for collaboration that families, teachers, and organizations need in order to cocreate family and community engagement is a priority. Deriving from coursework and professional learning opportunities, several methods that foster empathy and changes in perspective are being used in and across different learning contexts:

- Using family engagement cases in the training of preservice and graduate teachers is an effective tool for creating dialogue around teachers' implicit biases and assumptions about families, especially when paired with a tool like an empathy map.[28] Deepening the mutual understanding between people involved with children's learning is not simply a matter of concern for parents and teachers, however: community groups and city organizations like the Family Policy Council in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have effectively used family engagement cases for the collective training of everyone working with families—family outreach workers, teachers, health providers, public housing staff, police, and more—using cases created from dilemmas in their own work.[29]

- Human-centered design thinking is an effective tool for building strong relationships between families and educators.[30] Design thinking provides an opportunity for educators to listen and learn from families and cocreate action steps to address parents' concerns. For example, in a design-thinking exercise in San Diego, families felt empowered when they spoke in their own languages—Somali, Karen, Vietnamese, etc. School personnel had to listen to translations of the families' discussion, a reversal of the more common practice whereby families have to listen to school personnel talk to them via translators. Families shared their stories, and educators were not allowed to speak but asked only to listen. Both families and educators felt that this experience established trust. For educators, it also gave them a better understanding of students and their families.[31]

- At the Cleveland Public Library, librarians participate in the Community Action Poverty Simulation offered by the Ohio Association of Foodbanks. The simulation

focuses on the experiences of individuals moving from one public agency to another, trying to gain access to resources. After the role play, librarians discuss how to ensure that the library not become another unfriendly bureaucracy but rather an institution that bolsters people and communities. In this way, librarians learn to build nonjudgmental relationships so that families are drawn to the library.[32]

## Changing organizational narratives

In order for families to share responsibility and play all the key roles in children's learning and development, it is necessary to change not only individual but also organizational approaches and underlying attitudes. Schools and other organizations working with families to support children's success must shift from devaluing families to valuing and creating the organizational conditions that enable their engagement. This happens when organizations build relational trust—ties and bonds among all community stakeholders. In schools, relational trust is built upon a fundamental belief that family engagement is a shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities.[33] From this perspective, as emphasized in both the National Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and the U.S. Department of Education's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, family engagement is not about families supporting school goals and priorities. Rather, it is about creating a mutual responsibility for supporting students' academic success. It requires codesigning coherent instructional systems, investing in the development of strong parent-community-school ties, fostering student-centered learning, and building strong leadership. A critical component of this process is building professional capacity for family engagement and helping teachers overcome their own implicit biases.

A recent *Harvard Business Review* article offers some insight into how organizations might achieve the goal of creating a culture of shared responsibility. It focuses on a different, but analogous, situation: how some companies are transforming their organizations in order to retain talented women in the workforce.[34] Building on research that shows that differences in workplace behavior are not due to inherent gender traits, some companies are moving from trying to "fix" women—encouraging them to act more like their male counterparts—to examining and changing their own organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction to support their success. They are looking more deeply at how preconceptions, assumptions, myths, beliefs, and policies create gender differences in behavior, and are taking a new, four-step approach to changing organizational cultures. With the goal of creating a more supportive workplace and maximizing the chance of women's success in the workplace, these companies are beginning to: (1) question the dominant narrative; (2) generate plausible alternative explanations; (3) change the context, including behaviors, expectations, and opportunities, and assess results; and (4) promote continual learning and improvement, recognizing that stereotypes hurt their goal of retaining talent.

Changing narratives and mindsets around family and community engagement is likewise necessary, and several important and interrelated national efforts to do so are underway. The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) is developing a communication campaign to shift public attention to the power and potential of family engagement and build a countrywide movement to support it. NAFSCE is developing and testing approaches that replace current thinking with more productive messages about what family engagement entails and how it works in communities. Learning Heroes, a nonprofit organization dedicated to equipping parents to support their children's learning, has done a series of illuminating surveys and studies of how parents perceive schools, understand their children's academic performance, and think about their own educa-

tional priorities and roles in their children's education.[35] The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has put together a growing coalition of national parent-facing organizations—the Changing the Narrative Coalition—to interrupt negative perceptions of low-income parents and parents of color, and build public understanding of their essential role in achieving positive outcomes for their children.[36]

## Transforming mindsets through new research agendas

Changing attitudes also means taking research in new directions. The kind of research that informs our view of family engagement is multidisciplinary, complex, and nuanced, and, as with all fields, evolves as contemporary methods and practices reveal new ideas and approaches. There is still more work to do, however, to clarify and make robust the existing evidence base around family engagement.[37] In our view, there are three important directions for future development to consider.

First and foremost, we need to rethink and reimagine what counts as evidence. Although randomized control trials are often considered the gold star in evaluation, when it comes to family engagement, research is often more complicated than simply isolating effects and practices. Family engagement is a dynamic process existing across time and space. It requires that we not simply "stack" interventions on top of one another or evaluate tiny clusters of a larger system to find a perfect family-school-community engagement panacea. Instead, it challenges us to expand our understanding of the kinds of research that will help families, schools, and communities cocreate services, strategies, and initiatives, determine whether they work in a local context, and decide what needs to be tweaked, changed, and scaled. Network Improvement Communities are one promising avenue. In this approach, families, researchers, community, and school educators join together to specify a problem that needs to be solved, understand the system that produces the current outcomes, gather data about the problem, measure progress, and create improvements. This type of work is quick and collaborative, much in the spirit of design thinking, and has the potential to aid families and communities in finding fair and meaningful fixes for immediate problems.[38]

Second, we see tremendous value in mixed-method approaches to studying family-school-community partnerships. From this methodological perspective, both qualitative methods (for example, ethnographies, interviews, and focus groups) and quantitative methods (such as surveys, polls, and questionnaires) are used so that a community's culture and values help to contextualize and interpret findings.[39] For instance, in a mixed-method study exploring family engagement practices among low-income Latino families of preschool children, researchers worked with those families to construct focus groups. This allowed the researchers to recognize culturally specific domains of family engagement. They were then able to apply this empirical data into a survey of families' engagement practices across the home, school, and community. Their work suggests that cultural and linguistic minorities in the U.S. may have a unique relationship to their children's schooling, and that culturally contextualized measurement can capture nuances in parent engagement. This has important implications for designing family-school connections.[40]

Finally, given the importance of family engagement over time and across contexts, there is a pressing need for more longitudinal studies that capture parents' efforts to build pathways for their children's learning. There is also a need for instruments that describe and detect family engagement practices at more than just one point in time in one location. Innovative techniques like pulse surveys—short surveys, repeated at regular intervals, usually through digital devices—and social networking modeling—investigating social structures through networks and graphs—offer some promise in this regard.

## Maximizing Impact: Five High-Leverage Areas

We recommend five promising high-leverage areas that might be considered core building blocks for next generation family engagement strategies, and propose that families, schools, communities, and others use them as a lens to look at what exists now and what could exist in the future when it comes to empowering families to support their children's learning. By "high leverage," we mean practices that create a cascade of broader effects, have the most impact on family engagement and student outcomes, and can be built upon, with additional levers added as a strategy evolves.

The areas we suggest are: attendance, data sharing, academic and social development, digital media, and transitions. We also explore connections across schools and other community organizations to boost the combined power of levers and create more equitable access to anywhere, anytime learning opportunities in and out of school. These high-leverage areas hold the promise of creating continuity in family engagement across time and settings, and are areas where families, schools, and communities can join together in concrete ways to build family engagement to promote children's success.

We have chosen these areas because robust research demonstrates their importance in children's development. There are also a number of strong examples of community-based family and community engagement initiatives built around each of them, with clear demonstrations of the ways such engagement has supported children's learning, development, and school and life success. When families are engaged around these high-leverage areas, they are more effective at building learning pathways and keeping their kids on track. We suggest that there are synergies across these areas, and that "braiding" them together creates more equitable learning pathways for all children, particularly those living with economic and other disadvantages. (Figure 4.)


**Figure 4:** Building and Braiding High-Leverage Strands of Family Engagement for Successful Learning Pathways

## Attendance

Chronic absenteeism is a widespread problem, and addressing it is a national priority: one out of seven students, many of them living in poverty, missed three or more weeks of school in 2013–14, jeopardizing their chances of success in school and of graduation.[41] The research is clear: attention to attendance is key all along the learning pathway and is particularly important in early childhood and pre-K, because children who are chronically absent in the early school years continue in this pattern. They are thus more likely to miss early learning milestones (such as reading at grade level by third grade), fall behind in class, and eventually drop out of school. Given that attendance and chronic absence are now a top national and state education priority, there is a huge opportunity to cocreate and test not only targeted efforts, but also broader family and community engagement efforts, which have been shown to improve attendance as one of a number of learning-related outcomes. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act and its subsequent reauthorizations hold states accountable for academic performance and high school graduation rates. Thirty-six states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have chosen "addressing chronic absenteeism" as a benchmark for measuring their schools' quality and accountability.[42]

Families can play a crucial role in combatting absenteeism, first by making clear that they expect their children to attend school and then by monitoring to make sure this expectation is met. We are just beginning to understand the range of ways in which family and community engagement can improve attendance, and the benefits for children and for schools that follow from it. Evaluations of targeted efforts to engage families around attendance—providing them with the means to address the issue from early childhood through high school—show that investing in family engagement is a high-leverage way to decrease absenteeism substantially.

As mentioned above, there is evidence that attendance improves as a result of both family engagement efforts targeted at ending chronic absenteeism, as well as of those not explicitly designed to do so. The latter include whole-school reform efforts like that of Zavala Elementary School, as well as parent-teacher home visits, which establish relationships and trust early on; there may well be others. It is worth noting that the study examining what distinguished high- from low-performing Chicago public schools showed that the high performers had more family and community engagement. This increased regular attendance, which in turn enabled improved instruction and led ultimately to better literacy and math outcomes in sixth grade.[43]

This focus on attendance often leads to work in another of our high-leverage areas: data sharing with families—providing families with accessible, understandable, and actionable information about their children's progress and performance. Behavioral economists and others have been conducting a range of experiments testing innovative uses of digital media, in particular communication via regular text messages to alert families when there are problems with attendance. These experiments from early childhood through high school, which involve frequent "nudges" to families via text messages, are contributing not only to improved attendance but also to other family engagement practices that are key in children's learning and school success.[44] One recent experiment sent parents automated text messages that alerted them when their teenagers missed classes or assignments and were getting low grades. The results were promising: the texts sparked more informed conversations between parents and their students, and prompted improved class attendance, reduced course failures, improved in-class exam scores, and increased parental contact with schools.[45]

Efforts so far suggest that combining data delivered by text message with other, on-the-ground efforts, and then following up with more text messages that suggest ways of improving students' performance may be fruitful. The texts from the "air" prompted "ground" effects: better informed, more expansive, and regular conversations between parents and children about the importance of school, school performance, and ways to improve. As noted in our research summary, as of now some of the most consistent and positive relationships between family engagement and student outcomes result from the things families do that are directly connected to children's academic achievement and learning, including setting high expectations, communicating with children about school, and encouraging and supporting their efforts. The results of a recent experiment testing a peer-to-peer support model for improving attendance in Head Start programs suggests that efforts to build and use parents' social connections and social capital may also hold promise.[46]

## Data Sharing

As the attendance "nudges" demonstrate, making data about students' performance available to parents from early childhood on and then helping them take action on these data are powerful ways to help families build their children's educational pathways.[47] Billions of dollars are now spent in the education sector compiling and sharing high-quality data for an array of purposes, including school accountability and quality improvement, school choice, improvement of instructional practices, and advocacy. At the same time, The Data Quality Campaign notes on its website that families are often not getting enough value from the student data that schools collect.[48] Data are the bedrock on which families can build their children's learning pathways, but it is only useful if that information is accessible, understandable, and actionable. There has been little investment in the latter issue to date, making it both a big problem and a high-leverage opportunity for attention and innovation.

EdNavigator, an employer-supported organization, has helped many low-income families in New Orleans and Boston navigate the school system and keep their children on track. Its navigators make sure that parents understand the meaning and implications of data they receive and know the actions they can take to ensure their children's success. They also work to ensure schools play their part in this process, a responsibility that, in EdNavigator's view, many are not meeting: schools rarely provide clear and complete performance information, often fail to follow up when problems are identified and parents ask for help with them, or offer little by way of in- and out-of-school supports to help high-performing students continue to succeed. Even gathering these data has been a challenge for EdNavigator and families alike. To counter these issues, EdNavigator successfully advocated for a Parent Bill of Rights in Louisiana. This policy provides parents with electronic access to school records and data such as attendance, academics, discipline, and Individualized Education Plans.

As EdNavigator recently noted in a reflection on what they are learning about sharing data, economically advantaged families start mapping out their children's long-term education pathways through high school and into college very early on, and there should be support for lower-income families to do the same.[49] While there is a long way to go to make data accessible, understandable, and actionable for families and students, there are a number of examples of organizations that are effectively sharing data with low-income families from early childhood forward that provide important models and lessons for achieving this goal. Head Start and other early childhood programs, for example, afford families the opportunity to have important conversations about their

hopes, goals, and expectations for their children and how to achieve them, and provide opportunities for mutual sharing of information about how children are doing and what parents can do to support them.

The Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) model uses both individual and classroom student data in family-teacher conferences to encourage deeper parent engagement in student learning.[50] In group and individual meetings, parents and teachers discuss ways that learning at home and elsewhere can accelerate progress. The model provides the scaffolding that the Zavala Elementary School parents demanded, a scaffolding that is necessary if families are to come to a nuanced understanding of what all the complex performance measures—grades, test scores, and rankings—mean, and how they might impact children's likelihood to stay on the path to graduation and college. The evaluation of the APTT model showed increases in parents' sense of effectiveness and desire to be involved in their children's education, more positive teacher perceptions of families' willingness to support the school's learning goals and assist in achieving them, and improved reading outcomes for children.[51]

New Visions for Public Schools in New York City also has many years of experience working with families to help them keep their children on track during the transition to high school and then on to graduation and college.[52] It, too, has learned that educators must be well versed in explaining not simply what data point or progress snapshot is important (such as attendance or graduation rate), but also why it is relevant and how parents can take action on the data. And as with the APTT model, New Visions is reframing success not just as immediate performance, but more broadly in terms of what is necessary to achieve the student's longer-term goals, such as selection for a middle school science magnet program or a successful transition from high school to college.

New Visions also provides students and parents with information about after-school and summer learning opportunities. In addition, there are promising efforts underway to share data across schools and after-school programs. A data sharing agreement between Metro Nashville Public Schools and the city's after-school program, Nashville After Zone Alliance (NAZA), for example, gave NAZA access to real-time data on attendance, behavior, and performance that it can then use to tailor activities around individual student needs (improvement in reading, for example).[53]

### Academic and Social Development

The trend towards a more equitable learning ecology is gaining ground in several key areas, including literacy and reading, math, and STEM subjects. With the growing recognition that learning takes place anywhere, anytime, not just in schools, family engagement strategies that focus on these content areas enable families to play crucial and multiple roles in their children's education (such as teacher, co-learner, or coach). They also allow us to recognize the ways in which other learning sites, such as libraries, after-school programs, and museums, can be effective partners, collaborators, and support networks when it comes to ensuring children's learning progress.

For instance, evidence shows that when families read together at home and have everyday conversations, younger children enjoy stronger language and emergent literacy skills, and older students are more able to use text to learn new ideas, integrate information, and form critical opinions.[54] Family engagement might be particularly critical for dual- and English language learners as they attempt to maintain their native language while also learning English, a competency linked to more advanced executive-control and perspective-taking skills.[55] When it comes to STEM subjects, families can increase children's

competencies by creating STEM-rich home environments, encouraging their children to think of themselves as STEM learners and consider careers in STEM fields, and supporting STEM interactions with their children in and out of school.[56]

Beyond subject-specific support, families also offer important social and emotional learning opportunities. When families talk with their children about their feelings, relationships, and friendships, and emphasize effort over performance, children and youth are more likely to problem solve in emotionally charged situations, develop a growth mindset, and learn perseverance. These skills are important predictors for how students will do in school, and they allow children to avoid risky behaviors. Over the long term, they lead to higher educational attainment and the capacity to stay with a job.[57]

Among the many roles that families play in supporting children's mastery of content areas like STEM and literacy is orchestrating the spaces where their students' learning is best served. When families enroll their children in after-school programs, children have a safe space in which to enrich their cognitive and social and emotional skills. After-school participation is related to academic improvement, especially in math, and with closing achievement gaps in the elementary years.[58]

A number of initiatives and collaborations have been successful in enabling parents who might feel anxious about targeted subjects (perhaps because they learned this material differently) to adopt these roles, while at the same time deepening parent-student relationships. Interestingly, in nearly all of these examples, libraries have become a powerful hub for linking community agencies and organizations.

Projects like the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and the Neighborhood Literacy Initiative in New York raise awareness among families about the importance of reading by creating rich networks of organizations and information about and access to promising practices that families can use. STEM Ecosystems seeks to create a rich array of STEM learning opportunities across a variety of community settings, including science centers, museums, and after-school programs. Similarly, Remake Learning in Pittsburgh is a network of 300 organizations, including schools, museums, higher education partners, professional development agencies, workforce initiatives, and others, that is developing a collaborative vision, goal, and metrics for improving STEM and STEAM learning opportunities, especially in underserved communities, all while bringing parents to the forefront. And the Chicago Pre-College Science and Engineering Program (ChiS&E) provides highly engaging, age-appropriate hands-on science and engineering activities for K–8 students in Chicago Public Schools and their parents. The program develops students and parents as co-learners to build STEM careers, and helps families advocate for high-quality STEM teaching.

### Digital Media

Digital media and technology offer unprecedented opportunities for children and families to literally learn anywhere, anytime, on their tablets, smartphones, computers, and other tools, as well as for families and children to stay connected in ways never experienced before. Families can play an active role by helping children and youth develop safe and healthy digital media habits. For example, in the youngest years, when parents use digital media alongside their children (joint media engagement), the educational value of the experience is enhanced.[59] Among older youth, families support their youth in developing technological fluency, learning how to use technol-

ogy safely, assessing whether information is factual and relevant, producing new content, making social connections, and working collaboratively with others to solve problems and develop innovations.[60]

A variety of programs have emerged to support families as they navigate learning in the new digital society and to build more equitable opportunities within the digital world. For example, the Finding Our Way Around project, developed by researchers from Education Development Center (EDC) and SRI International, and the public television station WGBH, consists of a set of digital (iPad) and hands-on activities for preschoolers, teachers, and parents that focus on cultivating children's spatial vocabulary and navigational skills. An assessment of the project found that preschoolers absorbed more spatial knowledge when they did these activities with their parents. Encouraging this type of learning experience necessitates that digital and hands-on activities should be enjoyable for both parents and preschoolers.[61]

As they become hubs of digital access and learning, public libraries play a "bridging" role between parents and children in the use of digital media. At the Marathon County Public Library in Wisconsin, members of the teen advisory council shared with their librarian that parents did not have a good understanding of their kids' online activity. This honest conversation opened an opportunity for the library to develop a parent-focused presentation on cybersecurity. Parents learned about the different facets of cyberbullying and the ways their teens' online engagement might differ from their own. For example, teens are more likely to use platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat than ones like Facebook and Twitter. The parents left the library with a new understanding of teen online use.[62]

Among immigrant Latino families, digital media and technology might also take on other important functions. They are often used to access resources for improving English language skills. Older children, at the request of their parents who may not be fluent English speakers, might be asked to use online tools to search and find information related to health and immigration and become exposed to information they ordinarily would not explore on their own. While youth learn by supporting family needs, these requests can become stressful when youth encounter complex information that is difficult to translate.[63] This role points to the need for stronger shared responsibility, with schools and communities expanding educational and social supports for immigrant families in order to ease the path of their children.

Digital media are also important in parents' educational decisions. As discussed earlier, text messaging has gained widespread use in alerting parents to student attendance and performance. These nudges change parent perceptions about their child and increase monitoring. Results from various studies generally tend to be positive and show improvements in student attendance, grades, and retention as well as parent-school communication.[64]

### Transitions

It is particularly important to focus on family and community engagement during transition points—starting kindergarten, entering third grade, moving into middle and high school, and going to college. These are the moments when families need more information and tools to support and guide their children. As children get older, their worlds broaden, too, so that family and community engagement in transitions to after-school, clubs, and other learning contexts becomes increasingly important.

Strong relationships are especially crucial during transition points. We know that family engagement tends to drop off as children go through the school system, which poses a problem—continuity is necessary to support student learning throughout the school years, even beyond graduation. Transition activities focused on reaching underserved students and families can play an important role in reengaging families at crucial moments in their children's education (entry into kindergarten, middle school, high school, the workforce or college, etc.). When schools and community institutions work together to provide information and peer support during moments of transition, family engagement becomes a regular and continuous part of children's learning pathways.

When students are part of a quality transition process in the early years, they have improved academic achievement, more positive social and emotional competencies, fewer problem behaviors, and more rapidly developing skills.[65] And while it is often assumed that family engagement wanes after the transition is complete, it is actually the case that it persists and even increases.[66] In the later years, youth start high school in higher-level math classes when parents and middle school and high school educators are in contact with each other, and they enter colleges more suited to their academic talents when families are engaged in the selection process.[67]

Paying attention to transition is also important because it is during these periods that systemic population-level socioeconomic and demographic disparities in educational achievement become amplified.[68] This has important implications for policy and intervention, as it suggests that acting to reduce transitional difficulties is one way to reduce inequalities. Research shows that children and families with increased social and economic risk benefit the most from district and school policies that promote quality transitions.[69]

A number of examples highlight the importance of giving parents and youth a voice to advocate for their needs when it comes to designing effective transition practices. For example, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, parents asked the Department of Human Services to provide guidance in choosing after-school programs for young children entering kindergarten.[70] Through focus groups with parents and conversations with the school district and other agencies, the department developed an informative brochure that addresses parents' questions about choosing an after-school program. At the opposite end of the developmental spectrum, the Cambridge Youth Council provided the opportunity and structure for teens to add their voices to the discussion around how students and families could best navigate transitions together, such as through mentorship programs and open houses.[71]

### Braiding high-leverage areas has a cumulative effect on outcomes

These five high-leverage areas form strands that are braided with each other. The combined action of several of these strands produces a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. These synergistic actions are likely to happen when families believe that they have a role to play in their children's education, trust that they can be effective advocates for their children, and are invited by educators to be partners in their children's academic and social development.

To illustrate the concept of braiding, we use several strands of research that have demonstrated the benefits of family engagement. Family engagement in academic content (literacy, math, and STEM) is one of the strongest predictors of children's school readiness and school performance. It is supported when families can share their own observations with teachers and have access to data that are meaningful in terms of their student's attendance, progress, and needs. These dual-data sources lead

to parent-teacher conversations about the actions that families, teachers, and students can take to ensure that students attain their attendance and learning goals. In those conversations, teachers can also share information about the many out-of-school opportunities available for family engagement and co-learning around STEM.

We believe that the five high-leverage areas we've identified are fertile ground for networked improvement communities to find innovative approaches to family engagement. They also have great potential for bringing together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to create new pathways for families and students.

**What other high-leverage areas for family engagement have you identified in your work? How might you braid together some of your existing initiatives to maximize their impact?**

## Conclusion: Joining Together to Build the Bold Vision

We have looked at the strong evidence about the value and potential of family and community engagement, described some of the field's many innovations, and highlighted progress on key leverage points. Now we ask readers to engage.

As the conversation about strategies to build family and community engagement and ways to position it as a key and effective building block for achieving educational equity grows, we step back to the paper's guiding challenge and question: How do we cocreate the next generation of family and community engagement *with* families and communities to provide equitable learning pathways—both in school and out of school and from birth to young adulthood—that will enable all children to be successful in the 21st century? What does it take to meet this challenge?

What do you think is necessary to build the bold vision of family and community engagement on local, state, and national policy agendas and attain adequate and sustainable resources for and commitment to it? Beyond sustained public, private, and philanthropic leadership and broad-based advocacy to get and keep it on the policy agendas, what else will it take? And how do we come together to do the work?

We offer five suggested areas to stimulate further thinking and discussion and to address the crucial what-else question. We believe these five areas are important in building the vision and moving ahead: (1) local family and community engagement initiatives, (2) capacity building and professional development, (3) creating data pathways, (4) public policy change, and (5) public com-

munication and engagement strategies. We believe that together, these five areas can move the field ahead.

First, we believe local communities are where the most exciting developments are emerging, and that the field has learned and will learn a great deal from them about how to cocreate next generation engagement. Local communities are labs for innovation, provide cases and sites for capacity building and professional development, and, when linked together, can accelerate change. As a case in point, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's national grant competition for local funding received over a thousand applications, drew a great deal of attention to family and community engagement, and created an important set of leading-edge cases about ways to empower families.[72]

One of the most frequent comments we hear from educators is, "I never received any pre- or in-service training for family and community engagement." Indeed, the lack of such training has been holding educators and the field back for decades. It is time to invest in strategies to build innovative pre- and in-service training and organizational capacity building for educators and others involved in family and community engagement. The strategy must support the transition to anywhere, anytime learning pathways, cocreation, and the shifts in mindsets on which next generation engagement is based.

We have described some of the challenges and innovations taking shape around data sharing to support family engagement. So much of building learning pathways for children and keeping them on track depends not just on having access to data, but on being able to understand it and act upon it. Billions of dollars are being invested in *gathering* data, but very little is going towards helping families, the most important learning path builder, to *use* the data. We also suggest it is time to consider assessing and rating schools on their family engagement practices, including data sharing, so these factors can be taken into account by families making decisions around school choice, and to keep schools accountable to families and their communities.

In addition, when it comes to family and community engagement, attention by policymakers—and the federal, state, and local funding that goes along with such attention—has been scarce for many years. The U.S. Department of Education, for example, has few staff members dedicated to the issue. Attention to policy is essential for building sustainable family and community engagement initiatives. Bringing the field together at the national, state, and local levels to discuss legislative priorities, ways to build policymaker interest in and commitment to family and community engagement, and strategies to garner more resources and attention are high priorities. Last, investing in public communication strategies to generate interest in and excitement about family and community engagement are key in engendering public will and policy change.

**We welcome and encourage readers to suggest additional areas for investment to build the public commitment to family and community engagement, and to strengthen the field's capacity to codesign next generation approaches. Send your ideas to info@globalfrp.org.**

# Authors

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**Margaret Caspe**, PhD, is Director of Research and Professional Learning at the Global Family Research Project. Her research focuses on how families, early childhood programs, schools, and communities support children's learning. As part of the GFRP team, she coleads the Libraries for the 21st Century: It's a Family Thing project and develops materials to prepare educators for family engagement. She is coeditor of *Promising Practices for Engaging Families in STEM Learning* and author of a variety of reports and articles, including *Engaging Families in the Child Assessment Process* and *Ideabook: Libraries for Families*. She received her PhD in applied psychology from The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University, and she holds an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She was formerly a senior research associate at the Harvard Family Research Project. Dr. Caspe is based in New Jersey, where she and her three daughters count going to the library among their favorite family activities.

**Global Family Research Project (GFRP)** is an independent, entrepreneurial nonprofit organization that supports effective engagement practices and policies so that all children find success in and out of school. GFRP creates a worldwide exchange of ideas that furthers the understanding and implementation of anywhere, anytime learning for all. With more than 30 years of leadership, GFRP provides a research base and proven expertise for capacity building in schools, community-based organizations, philanthropic entities, and other related ventures. GFRP is known for its established track record in defining and advancing the fields of family, school, and community engagement. Heather B. Weiss is the founder and director, M. Elena Lopez is the codirector, and Margaret Caspe is the director of research and professional learning of GFRP.

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