

5 Essentials for Engaging Families and Community Partners in Decision Making



A colorful array of backpacks and stools in a classroom at J.M. Ullom Elementary in Las Vegas.

Decades of research show that when schools partner with families and caregivers, students benefit—academically and otherwise. It’s a lesson the COVID-19 pandemic only reinforced, during a time when schools faced unprecedented challenges: it takes an entire community to ensure that every child has the support they need to be successful. As systems and schools develop strategies for helping students recover from the pandemic and accelerate forward in the years ahead, engaging families, caregivers, and a wide range of community organizations should be a top priority. Below are five key steps for kicking off the engagement process:



1. Reach Out

Start a dialogue with families, caregivers, and community partners right away, while plans are still being developed, and before any reopening decisions have been made.

Establish strong two-way communication with every parent and caregiver in the school system.

Don’t assume that families and caregivers are visiting websites or checking email for information. Instead, use every available means of communication to share key dates, timelines for making decisions, and opportunities for families and caregivers to provide input. Implement processes that ensure caregivers have a way to ask questions and receive timely answers from both the school system and the school—and then address frequent areas of concern in upcoming communications. Many schools and districts are leveraging technology to establish ongoing communication with families. Several platforms have emerged that allow

districts, teachers, and caregivers to make use of texts, apps and online messaging to create dialogue and establish partnerships that support student learning.

Share information transparently with families, caregivers, and community partners, and begin to set expectations as early as possible. Identify what is known and what has yet to be decided. Inform families and caregivers early on of potential changes to school curricula, routines, or procedures. Ensure that these stakeholders understand the possible impact on services received and the expectations for student learning, in school and at home. If additional support is required, provide families and caregivers with access to trusted community partners as resources. The more time communities have to plan, the more likely they will be able to create a strong support system for children.

Develop a comprehensive plan for connecting with students and families who have not been easy to reach. If possible, work with community organizations or school and school system staff to contact high-need families and those where students have had poor attendance. When possible, arrange for a personal touchpoint from school system or school-based staff, like a virtual or in-person home visit, or wellness checks for students. For example, Metro Nashville Public Schools launched a new “Navigator” program to combat chronic absenteeism. In the program,

Navigators (e.g., teachers, school support staff, administrative staff) are paired with up to six students and talk weekly. Data is input into a district database and alerts sent to administrators share specific student needs.



Stop and Reflect

Do all families and caregivers have access to consistent, transparent updates, and a means of getting answers to their questions and sharing what they need?

2. Listen

Collect input on student and caregiver needs and preferences, as well as resources and support that are available from the broader community.

Collect data on student, family and caregiver needs and preferences. (e.g., health concerns, socio-emotional needs, childcare needs, access to technology, scheduling considerations, etc.), as well as students’ and families’ experiences in and out of the classroom.

Set up a diverse stakeholder advisory committee to provide more detailed feedback during various stages of the planning process. Pay special attention to ensure you include traditionally marginalized subgroups and families with students who have special needs. [KIPP Massachusetts](#) has established weekly meetings with the Families and KIPPsters Together Council, comprised of 10 families from a variety of backgrounds: immigrant, Black, Latinx and more, and developed a protocol for collective decision making.

Engage parents, caregivers, and community partners (e.g., government agencies, community organizations, philanthropic organizations) to better understand who caregivers rely on for information and which trusted partners are already supporting high-need students and families. Map community assets as well as existing touch points for families, caregivers and students. These touch points will look dramatically different in urban versus rural areas.



Stop and Reflect

Do families and caregivers have a variety of ways to connect with you, receive accessible, easy-to-understand updates, and give feedback about what is and is not working?

3. Assess

Review data about existing needs and engage community partners in addressing resource gaps:

Map assets and potential partners within the community using a tool like [this one](#) and begin to strategically match student and caregiver needs with community partners. Pay particular attention to resources and infrastructure gaps at the neighborhood and feeder-pattern levels. For instance, if many families in a given neighborhood need structured learning opportunities after school, is there a place of worship or a trusted community organization that could support?

Share feedback trends with families, caregivers, and community organizations, and partner with internal and external stakeholders to address gaps. For example, if food insecurity is a major challenge, craft a detailed plan for identifying the appropriate community partners to provide support, as well as a plan for addressing that need with students and families.



Stop and Reflect

Are you actively sharing and discussing what you learn with families and caregivers, ensuring it is understandable? Are you partnering with community organizations to address any gaps in support?

4. Plan

Develop a comprehensive plan that leverages resources, addresses gaps, and includes roles for students, families, and community members—as well as schools and school systems. Key considerations will include family and caregiver preferences; support for addressing inequities; socio-emotional support, mental health, basic needs; and technology access.

Highlight metrics that will be used to gauge the success of the plan and ensure that those metrics are tied to the values that matter most to students and families.

Summarize the plan in accessible language and provide additional opportunities for families, caregivers, and communities to provide feedback before finalizing it.



Stop and Reflect

Is every department required to make decisions with families and caregivers, and incorporate their ideas, perspectives, and priorities into their plan?

5. Engage

Share the plan with the community and work together to strengthen supports available to students, families, and caregivers.

Partner with trusted community leaders who are in close proximity to families to share the plan, make sure that families have access to existing resources, and gather feedback about what families need.

Provide a regular forum for sharing information about priorities and students and family needs with new and existing community partners.



Stop and Reflect:

Have you identified the assets and community organizations that support your students and families? Are you sharing data, resources, and training with community partners, and engaging with them in the planning to support students and their families?

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