

Parent Engagement 101

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The future belongs to those who see possibilities before they become obvious.

—John Scully

The concept of parent engagement is not a new one, but that doesn't mean that everyone knows everything there is to know. The reality is, most undergraduate education programs spend very little time focused on teaching incoming educators how to encourage families to engage in the academic world. Yes, most do agree that active parents help students be more successful, but how to get the less active parents to become more active still alludes many. Furthermore, with the additional focus on data and outcomes that come from federal and local legislation and school reform, there has been increasing attention on which variables in the educational world can best be “manipulated” effectively to have the greatest impact on students. It is my opinion that parent engagement is one of the most underserved areas of student support services.

I am often asked, as a so-called expert, what is my definition of parent engagement. Let me go on record as saying, in general, I hate that question. Mainly because it assumes that there is one all-inclusive definition that can be used to judge all schools that either receive the stamp of engagement or do not. In reality, engagement is like life; it's a practice. As the school's population changes or the community evolves, a school can go from having a strong parent presence to struggling. However, if I had to sum it up, I would describe parent engagement as a comprehensive system of connection between families and educational institutions that creates an effective environment for learning. S. Kwesi Rollins, the director

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of leadership programs at the Washington-based Institute for Educational Leadership, described the two categories of successful engagement practices as “consistent activities that build trust between educators and parents/families; and activities linked to learning that boost the capacity of parents/families to both understand and support their children’s learning goals and expectations” (as cited in Rubin, 2015, para. 11). Using this as a springboard, we can acknowledge that engagement must

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be addressed and assessed in a multifaceted approach.

Looking at the educational system, there are very polarizing views of what “good” parent engagement looks like. People don’t always agree on how it is created, monitored, or

enhanced. In one setting, parents who check e-mail once a week and donate to the school fundraiser might be seen as engaged. In another setting, parents may feel that they are disinterested if they are not in the building once a week. Though differences in opinion are not uncommon, let’s take a brief walk down memory lane with respect to the legislative history of parent engagement to get a general idea of the expectations as our federal government sees them.

Beginning in 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we were given the Title I portion of the bill (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This bill addressed the need for improvement in academic achievement of the “disadvantaged,” and parent *involvement* became a topic for discussion. The language of the act specified requirements for schools in regard to what interventions they were to introduce for students from low-income families. The exact goal for parent involvement comes from Section 1001, which requires schools to “afford parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, sec. 1001, para. 12). Let the vagueness of that sink in for a moment. The school only really needs to provide an *opportunity* to participate. There is no mention about quantifying “substantial and meaningful,” no details about what participation looks like, and, what most educators will quickly note, providing opportunities for participation has very little to do with actually *getting* parents to participate.

In 2001, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the mandate for engagement was expanded to include any schools who were failing to make adequate yearly progress, regardless of the financial resources of the student body (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Requirements under this act include a jointly created formalized parent engagement

plan, which must be distributed to parents. Federal legislation also provides a penalty for failing to provide proper opportunity and tools to parents.

In the last five years, an increasing number of states have also begun recognizing schools that are more successful at creating “family-friendly” environments. These states, including my home state of Indiana, have created programs that recognize the best and the brightest rather than holding schools accountable for not meeting the standard. Although funding is not necessarily linked to the classification, schools can gain valuable data through the process and ultimately should be able to expect better outcomes.

These state-sponsored initiatives seem to be directly in-line with federal opinion, given the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which essentially replaces No Child Left Behind. The focus on parent and family engagement is still a primary area for schools to devote attention when seeking to promote the educational advancement of all students. Many of the constructs, with regard to parent and family engagement, are consistent with No Child Left Behind; however, with terms such as “meaningful” and “evidence-based,” there is particular attention to incorporating parents as key stakeholders and tracking data linked to engagement.

ENGAGEMENT/INVOLVEMENT/PARTICIPATION

I don't remember when I decided parent engagement was my thing. Going back as far as I can remember, from my time working alongside my parents, serving breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner to hungry children in our church, all the way to my first days as a school counselor, I knew that empowered parents make things better for their children and teachers. But when I began looking for information, I found that the research and practice of these topics sometimes leaves too much up for interpretation. For instance, when researching parent “engagement,” you will find that the language can be confusing in and of itself. Although the most customary term to be used now is engagement, many educators still use the term “involvement.”

I like to be clear and use language that gives life to what I am trying to express. Looking at the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, we find a definition of engagement that is “emotional involvement or commitment.” Involvement, on the other hand, is the “condition of being involved or participating in something” (Engagement, 2015). I liken that difference to a romantic relationship. If one is simply involved, the connotation is casual. However, the idea of an engagement is more formal or consistent.

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In her book *Everyday Engagement*, Katy Ridnour described the process of engaging students as the moment when they are “involved in activities that spark a desire in them” (Ridnour, 2011, p. 11). My definition of authentically engaging families involves a similar view. Beyond expecting parents to just participate in school-sponsored activities, the goal is to move toward a shared passion for supporting children. I like to say if we are doing it well, parents will feel **competent, compelled, and committed** to supporting the emotional, academic, and physical development of their children. Table 1.1 shows a chart with examples of how you can comparatively view traditional levels of parent activities to determine the level of engagement.

This is often in stark contrast to what traditional schools define as engagement. Michael Lawson, professor, researcher, and advocate for strong parent involvement in school reform, notes that most schools hold a “school centric” definition of engagement, which basically asks the question, “How can parents support schools and teachers?” (Lawson, 2003). This is likely based on the research that supports the significant positive impact school-focused activities can have on student outcomes, which is strong. Statistically speaking, regardless of socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic background, when parents engage in activities that support the school, children do better (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

Unfortunately, many schools are finding it increasingly difficult to keep substantial attendance at events, beyond a consistent core group of parents. Often, this group has the resources and tools that would likely

Table 1.1 Participation/Involvement/Engagement Comparison

Participation	Involvement	Engagement
Parents regularly attend events	Parents plan events	Parents and staff use pertinent data to decide on interventions and events
Parents receive and review teacher communication	Parents share and act upon information with children	Parents have two-way communication with schools, advocating for needs and receiving responses
Parents volunteer in school activities when requested	Parent volunteers regularly seek opportunities to donate time, services, or goods	Parent volunteers feel connected to school and equally partnered with staff
Parents receive notice of school decisions	Parents receive notice of meetings to discuss decisions	Parents are regularly included in all levels of decision making, from discovery to implementation

lead to them being successful either way. When trying to reach families who are less frequent attendees, schools struggle, finding that there are many barriers to successful implementation. When parents are drawn to attend, the transfer of information is not as seamless as one would hope. Parents may not get what they need, or schools may struggle to present tools and strategies in a clear and concise manner and parents may feel less equipped to use the information that they do receive.

I'll give the example of a recent back-to-school ice cream social I attended. You know the type. Teachers have been frantically prepping classrooms and professionally developing for weeks; they are tired, eager, anxious, and overwhelmed, and at 6 p.m. they are to put on happy faces and greet whoever walks into the room hoping to ease those first-day jitters. Parents rush from work to pick up kids, find parking spaces, stand in line waiting for the doors to be opened, sign in at the front door, and check "the list," which tells the kids which class they will be in for the year. If you, like myself, have more than one child, you try and remember all the names and make your way from room to room to be met with supply lists, get-to-know-me activities, and student info cards. When it's all said and done, you meet in the cafeteria for an ice cream sandwich before you rush home to complete dinner or whatever other activities you have for the evening. Sound familiar?

Before you reach me on Facebook and share with me your glorious stories of ice cream social success, hear me out. I have no problem at all with these types of events, which we will discuss later in the book, and yes, they absolutely can have a place in your overall parent engagement plan. However, realistically, are these parents *engaged* or simply *involved*? Going back to our working definitions, we could easily say that they are participating and maybe they interact with the teacher enough to qualify for being involved, but it's a far cry from creating lasting emotional commitment. Is it possible to build upon these events and create relationships that are lasting? Sure it is. But that takes consistency and a plan, which unfortunately we may not always have.

A bigger dilemma still is the parents who may never step foot on the school soil or who will only do so when there is a problem: parents who come to sporting events but miss parent teacher conferences, or those who verbalize commitment but lack follow-through. Effectively engaging all families takes into account that the richness of relationship has multiple levels of connection woven together like a beautiful fabric. When we focus on creating this type of relationship, we are more likely to make the type of impact that will lead to sustainable success and less likely to wear ourselves out on ineffective activities.

If we are doing it well, parents will feel competent, compelled, and committed to supporting the emotional, academic, and physical development of their children.

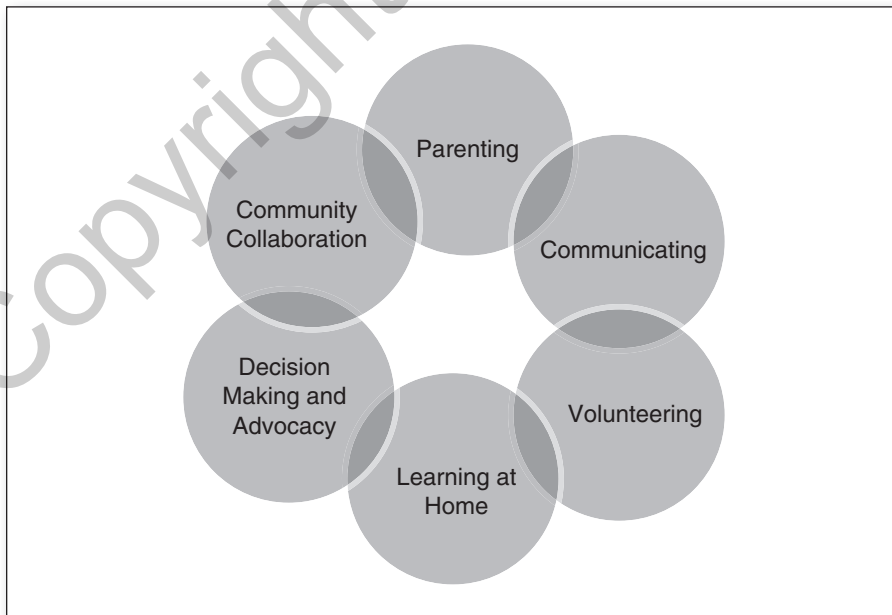
HISTORICAL DATA ON PARENT ENGAGEMENT BENEFITS

Building relationships with families is about honoring the hopes and dreams that they have for their children.

—Jackie Garvey

As much as we in education like to believe that politicians sit in an office somewhere passing laws to frustrate and stifle us, as far as parent engagement is concerned, many of the laws with a family engagement focus do have validity. For more than a few decades, we have been able to see substantial research to support the benefit of family engagement in schools. Teachers in schools with high engagement are 50 percent more likely to rate themselves as satisfied with their jobs compared to schools with low family engagement (MetLife Foundation, 2013). The research has been a great help in determining what does and does not work in terms of engagement practices and how they work to ultimately support student achievement. Most of the research has led to categories that are designed to give direction to those seeking to improve parent engagement. One of the most popular names you will hear in the work is Dr. Joyce Epstein. Her work on

Figure 1.1 Epstein's Framework Figure



Source: Adapted from Epstein, 2010, Figure 1.2.

the framework of engagement discusses six types of “involvement” necessary to create a foundation of connected parents. In Figure 1.1, you will see a visual representation of these categories.

The biggest takeaway from looking at this framework is that parents must be involved in multiple ways to be successfully engaged. One of the major challenges that many traditional schools face is that they focus on only one or two of these areas of involvement and do not intentionally include all areas systemically in the school functioning levels. Throughout this book, you will be challenged to explore, on multiple levels, all of the ways in which we can effectively engage families long term.

According to evidence by Henderson and Map as published in *Home, School and Community Collaboration: Culturally Responsive Family Engagement*, some of the benefits of strong family engagement include the following:

- Higher grades and test scores
- More accurate academic diagnoses where applicable
- Improved attendance
- Improved social skills
- Reduced behavioral referrals
- Higher graduation rates

Families may also report improved satisfaction with education and increased confidence as parents feel more capable to support their children academically. The benefits for educators have been researched as well. These include teachers feeling more supported and safer in the classroom (Grant & Ray, 2015).

Epstein’s model is not the only version currently available. The National Parent Teacher Association (National PTA) model cites six components for strong family partnerships. These components include the following:

- Being welcoming to all families
- Communicating effectively
- Reporting student success
- Including the needs of all children
- Shared power
- Collaboration with the community

The National PTA model includes research on schools with strong parent-teacher organizations; however, in schools with limited or strained parent-teacher relationships, these criteria may be harder to achieve. But remember we’re working for progress, not perfection (National PTA, 2015).

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For example, one of the schools that I work with is extremely successful in collaborating with the community. Enlace Academy, being a K–fifth-grade building with a population that is approximately 70 percent native Spanish speaking, has a particularly challenging job of connecting with families. While many in the building do speak at least some Spanish, I and other staff members do not, which poses an interesting dilemma, as you can imagine. During the first year of the school, it was identified that the needs of the families in and out of the school were greater than originally anticipated. By year two of the school’s existence, the school added a part-time social worker, me, to assist families with access to community resources. The next step was creating partnerships with local agencies with similar missions of family support. Thus began the process of expanding school services to share building space with this community organization. One of the organizations, LaPlaza, partnered to offer a summer camp that was available to both current Enlace families and the community at large. Obviously, these efforts were significant in improving parents’ connections to the school community; however, there were challenges in other areas like developing parent leaders and supporting parents with parenting at home. The attention to building this relationship was critical in addressing a need for the families and a great place to begin, but without targeting attention to the other areas like inviting parents to be decision makers or advocates leaves a gap that still needs to be filled.

Another framework is the Hoover Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parent Involvement, which was adapted by Ron Mirr in 2009 to address more of the “messages” that parents can deliver, in various formats, to encourage school achievement (Mirr, 2009). This model includes similar categories as the Epstein framework but goes a little further to break down perceptions and motivations that are needed to support the framework and how it ultimately connects to the success of individual students. Beginning strategies address behaviors we hope to see in parents, with attention given to the influence of parents. There is less attention given to specific activities that parents can engage in related to the school building and process and more focus on a pro-education atmosphere that is fostered by parents. Another important idea that this model addresses more thoroughly is the attention given to the goals of improvement, which shows that over time, parents lean into attitudes and perceptions of their children, increasing their own self-efficacy.

What all of these models have in common is that they include more than one facet of connection. Engagement is about relationship. Like any relationship, there are multiple dynamics that must be addressed. Would you want a friend who never listens to you but always tells you to listen to them? Would you want a family member who wants you to be at all of

their events but never makes it to yours? Would you want a work colleague who is talented but never shares their techniques for achievement with you? Of course not. One-sided, one-dimensional relationships do not build partnerships. Keep this point in mind as you read on.

CURRENT TRENDS IN PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Much of the current research that is used to direct parent and family engagement programs came into focus during the early 2000s and was based on data of that time. However, the drastic changes in the economy and social climate that have taken place in the last ten years have caused some shifts that impact what educators are faced with when they enter the classroom. Because of this, I have included some information on current data with relation to parent and teacher perceptions and behaviors. The newness of this information means that it is more current, but also that there has not been as much time to test implementation theories derived from this data. As we go through the current trends section, understand that the previously noted research still has validity. These new findings can be added to current practices as a method of enhancing program goals and outcomes.

One exciting piece of research that begins to broaden the definition of family engagement is that conducted in 2008 by Yun Mo and Kusum Singh. This research describes three distinct constructs of parents' relationships and involvement in their children's lives:

- Parents' direct involvement in school
- The parent-child relationship
- Parental educational aspirations for the child (Mo & Singh, 2008)

These data are beneficial because they give more direction to where schools can put their energy while investing in improving engagement. These constructs take the perception of parent and family engagement beyond the traditional volunteer model that we see most often. The concept that parents can be engaged solely in relationships with their children or in encouraging expectations without necessarily entering the school building has long been discredited.

In their research, Mo and Singh look at how these different constructs impact the outcomes for students. By polling students about their parents' involvement in areas such as how often their parents asked about school or assisted with school projects, they were able to correlate the findings with the students' performance in school. The research was clear.

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Significant impact can be seen, even in the upper elementary and middle school grades, when parents show interest in and support academic interests. The report also gives suggestions for how to create partnerships between school and home, stating, “Schools and parents can create formal and informal ways to have positive and ongoing two-way flow of information and care to support higher school engagement and achievement of young adolescents” (Mo & Singh, 2008, p. 9).

Additional data taken from a small study done by Michael Lawson in 2003 give some background on why these findings are important. The perceptions of parents and teachers are quite divergent. These perceptions lead to some of the inconsistencies in effective parent engagement programs. Parents and teachers from a Title I school with over 800 students and 60 staff were polled in interview and focus group fashion to determine the perceptions that impact the engagement of parents in the building (Lawson, 2003). Some key findings from this study:

- Parents have knowledge of expected involvement in schools.
- Parents have deeper core concerns for their children, which may not connect with these expected activities.
- Parents were reluctant to have honest conversations about schools, on school grounds, alluding to fear.
- Parents’ desire for academic success was outweighed, for some, by concerns for basic living needs and survival.
- Parents valued the school commitment to teaching more than academics.
- Some parents felt ignored when it came to the needs of their children.

These and other assertions lead to the necessity of relationships. Parents have a longing for deeper relationships with schools that are focused on holistic development. There is trepidation, especially amongst needy families, as they know the stakes are high. Without an education, the likelihood that their children will be able to achieve or even survive the modern world is unlikely. Parents know this and want a partner in preventing it from coming to pass.

Teachers, however, shared different opinions. Some of the findings of this study echo the sentiments that I shared when describing my parents. Here are some points of note:

- Parents should be there when teachers need them.
- Parents should volunteer regularly in the building.
- Schools need the support of parents through modeling of socially acceptable behaviors.

- Teachers view some parents as deserving of two-way support and others as not, based upon their personal circumstances, such as working hours.
- Teachers view common practices of serving food or offering incentives to parents as “bribery.”
- Teachers feel ill-equipped for and overwhelmed by the level of need.

For teachers, most of what they hoped to see in terms of parent engagement can be broken down into two categories: in-school or out-of-school support of school policy, procedures, and activities. Furthermore, the teachers typically acknowledged the needs of the families but felt untrained and experienced varying levels of commitment to addressing these high-level needs.

Some of the general themes were overlapping. For instance, parents’ desire for academic success being outweighed by basic living needs was also felt by teachers. The question that is raised is how can schools assist with these needs with shrinking budgets and limited resources, while still trying to overcome academic deficits? In the next chapter, we will look at various family types and begin to brainstorm how to address some of the needs in a thoughtful way.

Vision

- What historical data most surprise you? Why?
- Do you believe the current data about families reflect your building? Why or why not?
- Does your school have an official parent engagement plan?
- If so, what is your role? How effective are you at engaging families?
- As a unit, do you feel you are serving the best interest of the parents and families in your school? Consider 3–5 words you would like to be synonymous with the family engagement efforts of your school or classroom.
- Are you meeting your own expectation?

Plan

- How much time do you plan to devote specifically to parent and family engagement?
- How will you adjust your other duties to make room for this in your day?
- Where, or how, will you document your efforts?

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Action

- What is the first step you need to take to move toward a more engaging atmosphere?
- When will you have this step completed?

Notes/Brainstorming

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