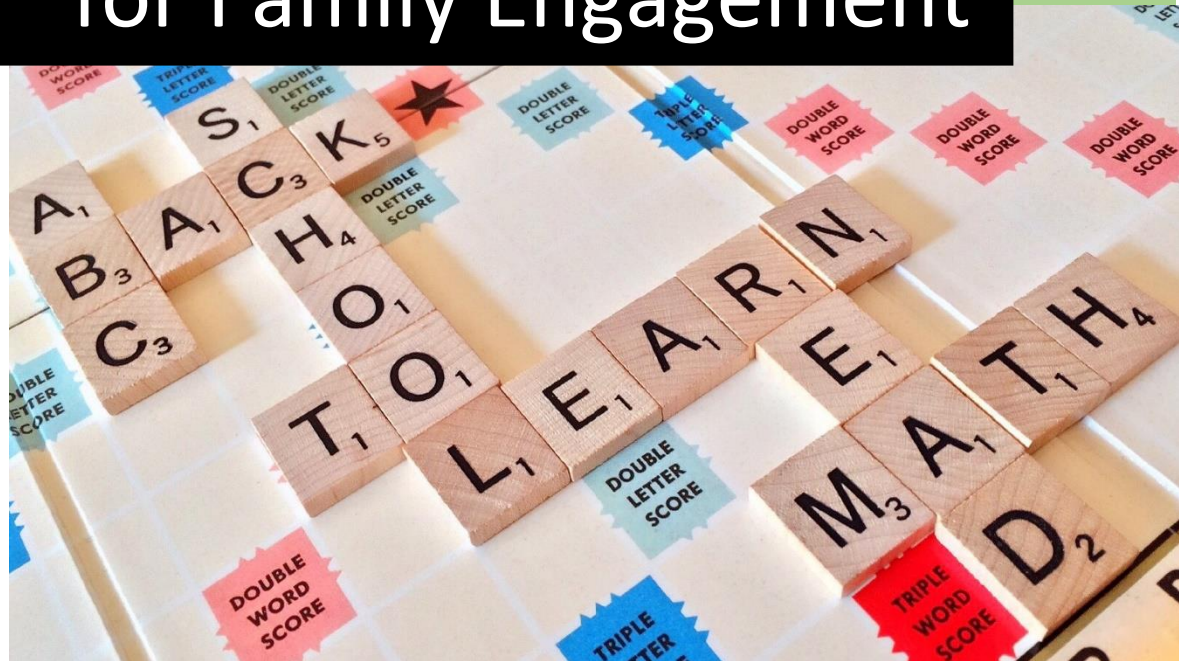


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# Building School Capacity for Family Engagement



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Partnerships  
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# **Building the Capacity of School Personnel for Family Engagement**

## **Introduction**

In this brief handbook, we present some principles about building the capacity of school leaders and staff for family engagement. These are based on our learning during the course of a four-year partnership with an urban district, in which we worked together to improve how middle and high schools were working to engage families during the critical transition of students to high school. These principles build on the foundation of both the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships<sup>1</sup> and the work of the National Network of Partnership Schools (nnps.jhucos.com).

The dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships that has been adopted by the U.S. Department of Education emphasizes the importance of building capacity among educators as well as families for the goal of partnering together to improve student outcomes. It outlines the challenge (lack of opportunities to build this capacity), the process and organizational opportunity conditions for building capacity, the goals (building capacity in capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence), and the desired outcomes of capacity building for educators and families. In particular, it emphasizes the need to develop school staff capacity to “honor and recognize families’ funds of knowledge, connect family engagement to student learning, [and] create welcoming, inviting cultures.”<sup>2</sup>

This framework fits closely to the work conducted by the National Network of Partnership Schools over the past couple of decades. NNPS has long addressed the opportunity conditions emphasized by the dual capacity-building framework - work that is systemic, integrated, and sustained - through its emphasis on district leadership guiding schools to create systematic action plans for school-family-community partnership activities that are directly linked to student academic outcomes emphasized in the school improvement plan. The work of the school’s family engagement action team (or Action Team for Partnerships) is necessarily integrated with that of the School Improvement Team and other school teams. The NNPS approach has long emphasized the type of relational, collaborative, and interactive opportunity conditions that help to develop the capacity of both educators and families.

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<sup>1</sup> Mapp, Karen L., and Paul J. Kuttner. "Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships." *SEDL* (2013), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Mapp & Kuttner. p. 8.

## **Capacity Building Goals**

We seek to improve schools' family engagement efforts -- shifting their practice from ad-hoc and random to planful and systematic -- by improving how they:

- Listen to the voices of families as they consider their family engagement work
- Formulate detailed family engagement action plans that link all their activities and strategies to important student outcomes
- Implement family engagement activities and strategies in ways that honor families' knowledge and skills and create welcoming environments for all family members
- Evaluate their family engagement work in ways that lead to continuous improvement

### **Key Roles of District Family Engagement Leaders**

- ❖ Build community among school teams through a day-long workshop and several cluster meetings throughout the year
- ❖ Provide guidance through group meetings and individualized coaching with school leaders/teams around:
  - ❖ Planning
  - ❖ Implementing family engagement strategies and practices
  - ❖ Reflection and evaluation to improve practice
- ❖ Share research-based practices and resources through e-briefs and web-based sharing platforms as well as face to face
- ❖ Encourage school teams to share their learning and experience with each other

## **Questions to Consider in Planning for Building Educator Capacity for Family Engagement**

What do school leaders and staff believe about families and school-family partnerships?

*Is there reliable survey evidence? What other evidence is available?  
What beliefs can we reinforce?  
What beliefs can we help to transform?*

How much confidence do school leaders and staff have in their ability to engage families in ways that will help to improve student outcomes?

*Is there reliable survey evidence? What other evidence is available?  
How can we help increase their confidence?*

What capacities do school leaders and staff have already to engage families?

*How would we gauge this?  
What are they already doing well?  
What capacities do they still need, and how can we help to build those?*

How can we help build connections/networks among schools and their leaders and staff to help move the work of family engagement forward?

*What resources are available to facilitate connections among schools?  
Are some schools already working together to strengthen partnerships?  
What resources are needed to create or expand connections among schools?*

## Capacity Building Strategies

Build educators' capacity for family engagement through a systematic district plan that includes:

- Yearly day-long workshops for school teams that:
  - Focus on beliefs and values and on skills and knowledge
  - Build networked learning communities of educators across schools
  - Involve lots of interactive learning
  - Share tools and ideas for schools to use
  - Schedule in time for reflection on past work and writing of family engagement plans for the year
- At least two shorter regional networked learning community meetings
- Coaching (by district family engagement facilitator) for individual school teams/leaders around improving their family engagement work
- Regular email communication by district to school teams with encouragement and ideas for teams to use

## **Building Capacity in Particular Areas**

Our own partnership work was focused on family engagement during the transition to high school, which research has shown is a particularly critical time for students as well as a time when schools' efforts to engage families typically drop off. The following is a list of areas (by no means exhaustive) that our experience identified as needing particular attention as districts seek to build educators' capacity for family engagement.

Middle and/or high schools need help to:

- Coordinate planning between sending and receiving schools for informing and supporting families during students' transition to high school
- Consider ways that families who cannot attend meetings can obtain the information shared at meetings
- Increase the number of families who opt in to receive text messaging from school and/or teachers
- Plan ways to actively listen to families' ideas and concerns
- Ensure that all families (especially immigrant families) understand how the parent portal can help them monitor student progress and how they can get access and use it regularly
- Leverage school events attended by families to increase dissemination of important information (including how to access the parent portal)
- Encourage timely entry of data by teachers into the parent portal so that it is a useful resource
- Plan in advance to ensure that parent-teacher conferences can occur early enough in the first semester of ninth grade to help prevent course failure (and the need for credit recovery efforts)
- Ensure that historically underserved families are receiving communication from the school and feeling welcome at the school



## **Designing and Implementing the Day-Long Family Engagement Workshop**

Over the course of our four-year partnership work, we designed and delivered a different day-long workshop each year as well as two other smaller meetings per year for school teams.

The NNPS One-Day Workshop for Action Teams for Partnerships (available with *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Corwin Press, 2019, by Joyce Epstein and Associates) is a good starting workshop for schools that have not previously attended that workshop. Our first workshop was a slightly adapted version of the NNPS version, providing an audience from middle and high schools with a focus on the importance of the transition to high school and ideas for including that emphasis in their action planning.

As districts work with the same group of schools over many years, it is important to vary the workshop each year, building on the prior knowledge of returning participants while also building foundational knowledge and skills of new participants each year.

Examples of Day-Long Family Engagement Workshop slides focused on the transition to high school are available on our website: [ADD HERE](#)

### **All day-long workshops should provide blocks of time for:**

Discussing how family engagement relates to student outcomes

Emphasizing the importance of listening to and learning from families

Thinking about ways to communicate with families who can't attend meetings (and may not use email regularly)

Sharing of family engagement ideas across schools (20-30 minutes)

Guidance in engaging in evaluation and continuous improvement reflection (15-20 minutes)

Team reflection about past family engagement efforts (30-45 minutes)

Development of a family engagement action plan for the upcoming school year (60-90 minutes)

**Topics that can be included (but not necessarily in every day-long workshop or meeting) include:**

Interactive homework strategies for engaging families

Using smart phone APPs for communicating with families

Increasing effective use of the parent portal

Using text messaging with families

Using “nudge letters” to help improve student attendance

Holding family meetings at community centers or other locations outside of the school building

Particular strategies for communicating with families whose first language is other than English

Organizing family meetings by language group

Leveraging student clubs and/or affinity groups to increase family engagement

Sharing information effectively with families on the school website

**One can use a variety of presentation methods, including:**

Short video clips (with questions for small group discussion afterwards) presenting

Compelling vision of family engagement

Or

Image of family engagement that needs to be critiqued

School leader Panel discussion

Family member panel discussion

Interactive presentation using group polling methods

Brief case study presentation with small group discussion questions

Skit (modeling a family engagement team reflecting on a recent activity to evaluate)

**Tried and tested interactive activities include:**

Writing and sharing of “fortune cookie” family engagement ideas/principles

“Web of connectedness” activity to share learning about family engagement (<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/2017/08/16/web-of-connectedness/>)

Bingo Icebreaker activity (to find schools that have implemented a certain type of family engagement activity)

## **Regional (Cluster) Networked Learning Community Meetings**

Here are some lessons learned from our four years of implementing these meetings in our partner urban district:

### **Timing:**

Near the beginning of second semester and end of third quarter seem to be particularly good times if the full-day workshop is in the fall

A good meeting length is 90 minutes (people may be willing to stay a little longer)

Late afternoon tends to work best, but it may be good to vary the starting times

Checking district calendar helps to prevent conflicts in scheduling

Offering two dates in different parts of the district for the same meeting agenda helps increase participation (particularly in large districts where travel time and afternoon traffic are a problem) – schools are often willing to host these meetings

### **Format:**

School representatives particularly value the interaction and networking opportunities with those from other schools.

They also value presentation of specific family engagement ideas to try out.

There can be valuable discussions that help to problem solve difficulties that schools are having on particular dimensions of family engagement.

These are good times for schools to share upcoming plans and get ideas and feedback from others.

School representatives are often willing to publicly share their reflections about past family engagement activities – both successes and disappointments – in the spirit of continuous improvement with those who are working on the same issues.

Examples of slides for networked community meetings of school family engagement team members are available on our website:

[www.sfcp.jhucosos.com/efhss](http://www.sfcp.jhucosos.com/efhss)

## Example Tool for Tracking School Family Engagement Capacity Building Activities

District leaders can use a form such as the one below to keep track of steps schools are taking in organizing their school family engagement work.

School	Attended workshop	Created FE Plan	Has a FE Team	Team meets monthly	Implemented monthly FE activities	Evidence of Self-Evaluation	Attended other network meetings	Add additional elements...
School 1								
School 2								
School 3								
And so on...								