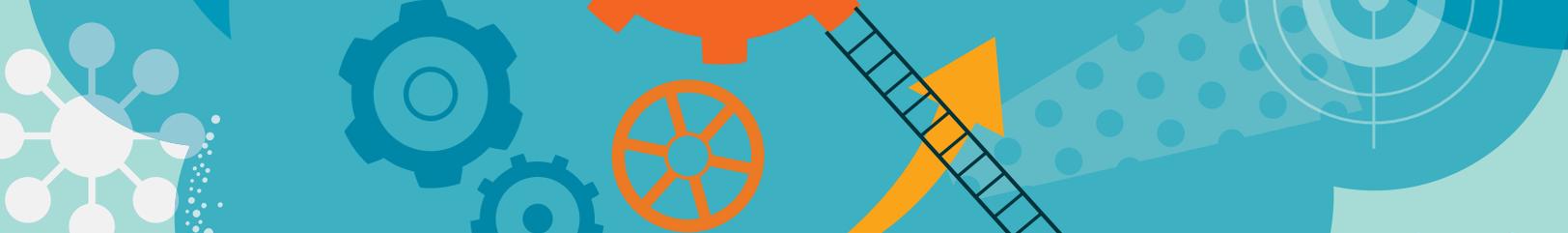


# Taking It To the Next Level

**Strengthening and Sustaining  
Family Engagement through  
Integrated, Systemic Practice**



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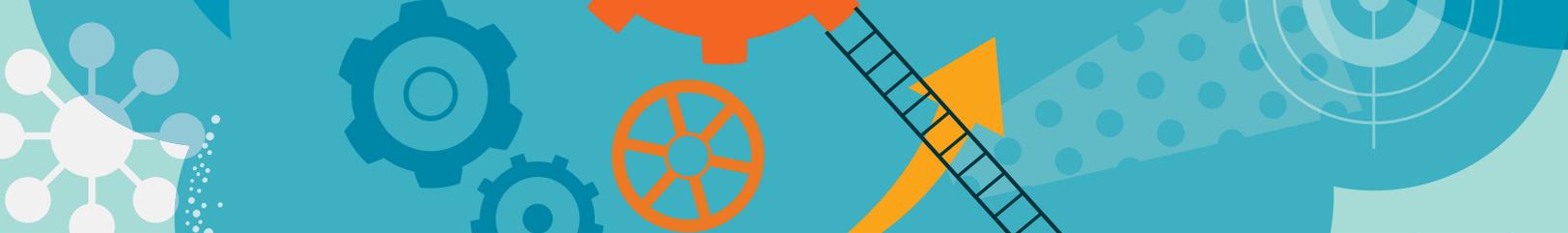


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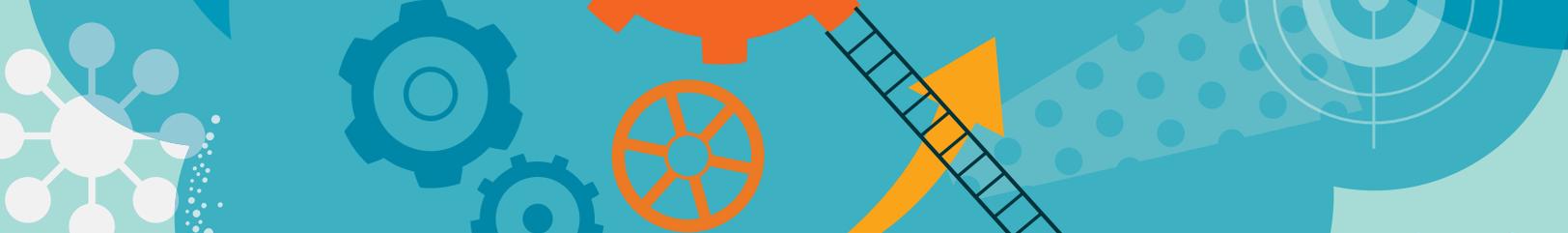
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- Road Map Project
- Community Center for Educational Results

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# Introduction

All youth need the support of parents, family members, and other caring adults. Parents and families are children’s first teachers and, in many respects, their most influential role models and motivators. Among the varied efforts to ensure that children succeed and thrive, there is growing acknowledgement of how critically important it is to engage parents and families and to intentionally create connections between schools and other community resources.

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) is the home for the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement, a peer learning and action network devoted to deepening implementation of effective systemic family and community engagement efforts.

## Snapshots from the Field

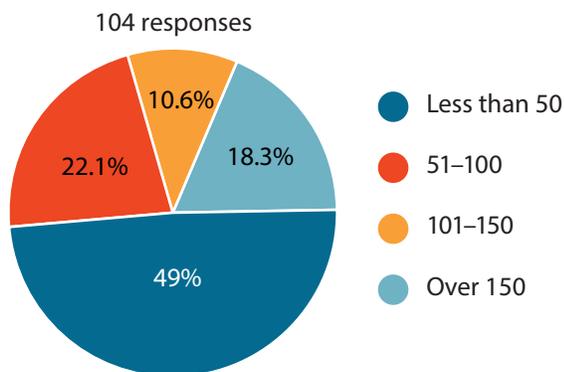
One of the ways IEL supports the field is through a biennial survey of the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement. The 2017 District Leaders Survey of the field was completed by family engagement leaders in over 100 school districts across the country. Participating districts ranged in size and demographics.

Survey results uncovered a wide variety of activities and strategies along with a range of challenges that point to the need for ongoing support and a common understanding of what systemic engagement looks like.

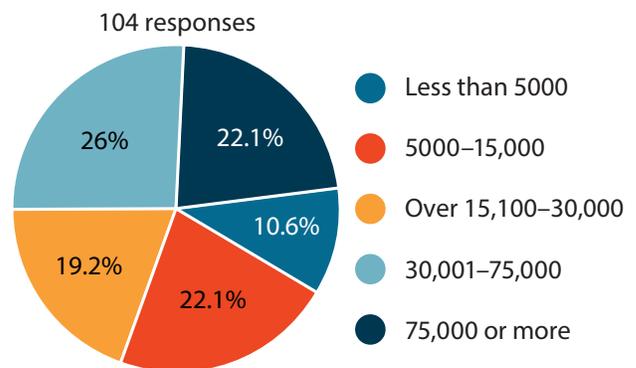
Coupled with ongoing feedback from participants in IEL’s national and regional family engagement convenings, the survey served as a catalyst for a deeper examination of regional and district family engagement practices that highlight systemic exemplars and strategies from across the country.

## A WIDE RANGE IN SIZE OF DISTRICTS

Number of Schools in Your District

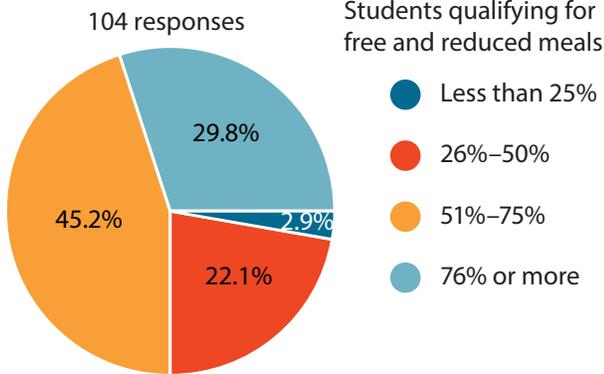


Number of Students in Your District

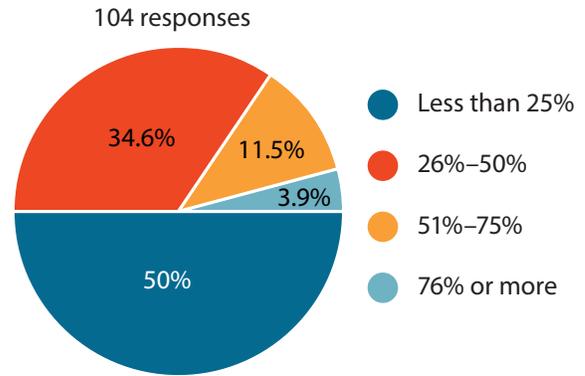


## DIVERSE STUDENT BODIES

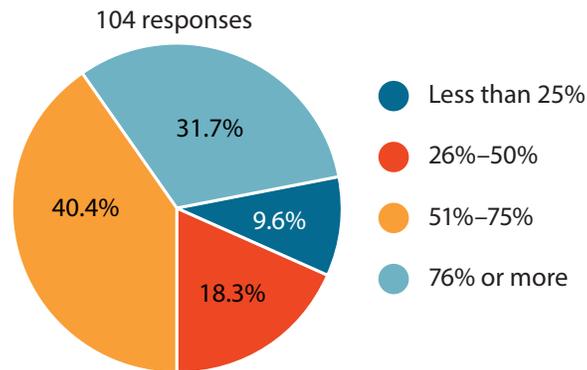
### Percentage Free and Reduced Meals [FARM]



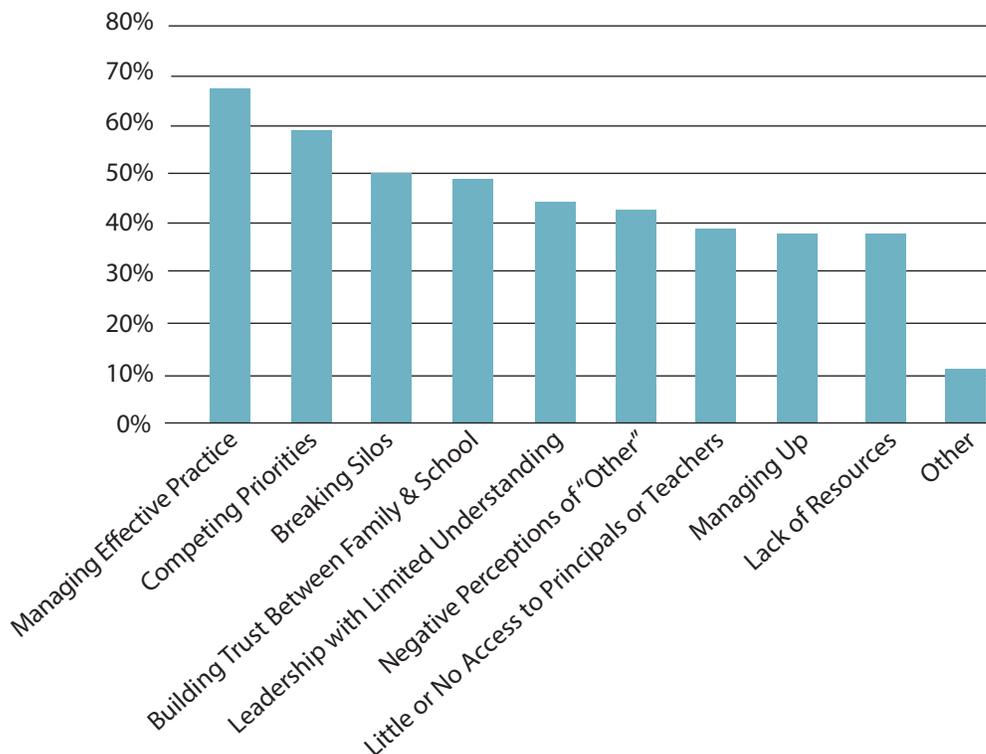
### Percentage English Language Learners



### Percentage Students of Color



### What are the Greatest Challenges You Face in Your Work?



This publication is designed to:

- Provide clarity on what systemic engagement is and what it looks like in practice;
- Provide an analysis of how systemic practices are being implemented in the family and community engagement field through exemplars of systemic engagement (district engagement briefs);
- Share promising practices that promote systemic engagement while leveraging engagement to advance equity (regional capacity-building models); and
- Provide insights and recommendations to practitioners, funders, policymakers, and other key constituencies regarding family engagement practices and potential areas for additional research.

## Defining Family Engagement

For the purpose of this engagement brief, family engagement is defined as **“a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement; it is continuous from birth to young adulthood; and it occurs across multiple settings where children learn”** (National FSCE Working Group, 2009<sup>i</sup>). Where there is a shared responsibility, there must be open communication, shared learning, and shared decision-making power. When educators’ expertise on curriculum is partnered with parents’ knowledge of how their children learn best, great things can happen. Educators across the country are finding that “programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children’s learning at home are linked to higher student achievement.”<sup>ii</sup> Also, “parents with high involvement ratings, compared with those with low or median

ratings, tended to have children with higher grades and scores. This finding held across all family income levels and backgrounds.”<sup>iii</sup> For this to occur, educators and school staff must consistently reach out to families and learn how to partner with them, not just when there’s a problem. “The higher parents’ feeling of efficacy, the more their children reported doing better in school and feeling happy, safe, and stable. When students report feeling support from both home and school, they tend to do better in schools.”<sup>iv</sup>

Under the right conditions, families and community members can be a school’s strongest and most natural allies. When leadership changes and cuts must be made, engaged families and communities protect what they value most, pressuring decisionmakers to ensure that their schools receive the required resources and funding. According to *A New Wave of Evidence*, “organized initiatives to build parent and community leadership to improve low-performing schools are developing in low-income urban areas and the rural south. These community organizing efforts use strategies that are aimed at establishing a power base to hold schools and school districts accountable for low student achievement. They have contributed to changes in policy, resources, personnel, school culture, and educational programs.”<sup>v</sup> Taken together, these efforts can ultimately lead to success across a range of academic indicators.

Despite a plethora of evidence on the positive results of strong parent, family, and school partnerships, educators often lack the necessary capability to engage their parents and families. In the final MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (2013)<sup>vi</sup> both teachers and principals acknowledged that engaging parents and families was one of their biggest



challenges. This dynamic is a contradiction that leaders must learn to navigate — in order to improve outcomes, building the capacity of educators, parents, and families is key.

## Defining Systemic Engagement

In the Six Types of Parent Involvement (1995), one of the first major frameworks of its kind, Dr. Joyce Epstein outlined types of involvement, asserting a connection between involved parents, caring educational environments, and student outcomes.<sup>vii</sup> Evidence confirming the importance of these connections continues to build since this early framing.

“The most important thing that children need to thrive is to live in an environment of relationships that begins in their family but also extends out to include adults who are not family members... Children need that entire environment of relationships to be invested in their healthy development. What could we be doing to strengthen the capacity of everyone who interacts with children?”<sup>viii</sup>

The notion of family and community engagement as a systemic practice began to emerge in 2009<sup>ix</sup> and was solidified when the U.S. Department of Education released the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp, K., Kuttner, P. 2013<sup>x</sup>). This framework detailed conditions for simultaneously building capacity of staff and families and has served as a guide for districts working to create and sustain effective family-school partnerships while staying in compliance with federal education mandates.<sup>xi</sup> The framework identified *Process Conditions* (Linked to Learning; Relational; Collaborative; Interactive) and *Organizational Conditions* (Systemic; Integrated; Sustained) that represent various types of capacity-building

opportunities. While most attention has been given to the process conditions which shape engagement strategies, it is the organizational conditions which provide an overview of systemic engagement at the district level. Systemic engagement practices and supports are critical for successful districtwide implementation and sustainability.

In this climate of high-stakes testing in education, there is a clear challenge in finding the proper balance between family and community engagement practices and other efforts to reform education and improve academic outcomes for children. As a result, engagement activities are too often random, disconnected events rather than a set of systemic actions flowing from an evidence-based framework and informed by current conditions on the ground and data about real needs.

Successfully engaging families and strengthening family-school partnerships requires building the capacities of key players in the teaching and learning enterprise to collaborate across a variety of roles, including superintendents and their senior team, district staff and partners, principals, teachers, and other school staff as well as parents, families, and caring adults.

For the purposes of this document, systemic engagement is defined as **the establishment of systems and structures that promote and embed engagement principles into a district’s core priorities, policies, and practices.**

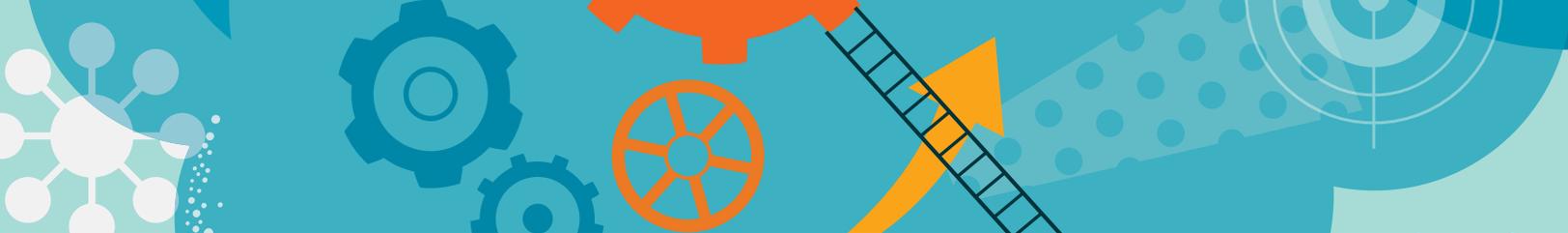
What does systemic engagement look like in practice? After conducting a national scan of districts, IEL identified a set of criteria for systemic engagement along with exemplars of effective practice.

### Key Elements of Systemic Engagement:

- District leadership champions and deeply values engagement, which is evident in how families and community are leveraged as assets.
- Policies, plans, and protocols contain clearly-defined expectations and accountability for engagement across all levels of the district.
- Systems of support are in place to build capacity for district and school leaders and staff to meet expectations.
- Systems connected to the district's overarching goals and targets monitor engagement practice, measure outcomes, and assess impact.
- Engagement practices are integrated across departments, and there are structures to support collaborative efforts to ensure long-term sustainability.
- Engagement structures, goals, and practices are aligned to the district's strategic vision, goals, and targets.
- Time and resources allocated for engagement are aligned to provide sustainable support and coherence.

### Leadership Drives Systemic Engagement





# Systemic Engagement: An Exemplar

**T**he 2017 District Leaders Survey provided rich information regarding current systemic engagement practices across the country. Using the Key Elements of Systemic Engagement, IEL leveraged data from the survey to perform a scan of districts across the country to identify exemplars of systemic practice. Washoe County Public Schools (WCSD) stood out as a prime example of effective districtwide systemic engagement implementation. WCSD has embedded family and community engagement throughout the fabric of the district: from the strategic plan to district and school improvement plans to how data is shared with families. In WCSD, systemic engagement is a key ingredient in the overarching change efforts for school improvement. The following brief provides a concrete example of systemic engagement in practice showing how WCSD embeds engagement throughout the district.

## Washoe County Public Schools

### District Demographics:

The Washoe County School District spans 6,342 square miles in northwest Nevada, an area larger than the state of Connecticut. WCSD has 104 schools that serve 64,574 students in a mix of rural, suburban, and urban (Reno and Sparks, NV) settings.

Approximately 17% of the students in WCSD are English learners and 45% of the students qualify for free and reduced meals.

### District Structure and Policy:

The district strategic plan “Every Child, By Name and Face to Graduation” serves as a roadmap to achieve the “90 by 20” goal of a 90% graduation rate by 2020. Implementation of the plan has resulted in graduation rate increases from 66% in 2012 to 84% in 2017 across ethnic groups. The plan is grounded in a set of core values that include engagement:

---

### Student academic success and character building require family, student, school, and community engagement.

At WCSD, “family engagement is a districtwide endeavor; we deeply believe in family engagement” says Superintendent Traci Davis. The WCSD Department of Family-School Partnerships is primarily responsible for building district capacity for effective engagement as detailed in the U.S. Department of Education’s Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. Additionally, the Family-School Partnerships team collaborates with other district departments as they implement initiatives and supports for WCSD’s engagement efforts.

Data collection includes indicators for engagement and social-emotional learning that span across departments to measure effectiveness and inform practice. WCSD has embedded engagement and social-emotional learning into a structure that is grounded in equity and racial/social justice.

### **Problem of Practice:**

In most districts the implementation of effective family and community engagement is siloed with responsibility either residing in one department or fragmented across multiple areas. This fragmentation impacts the consistency and effectiveness of implementing engagement in ways that are impactful and sustainable.

### **WSCD Solution: Systemic Engagement**

Washoe County School District is implementing a systemic model that successfully establishes conditions for engagement and systems that are embedded across the district to support effective engagement practices. WSCD's Superintendent is a fervent believer in the engagement of families and actively engages in the district's key strategies. Affirming home visits as a core relationship-building strategy, Superintendent Davis also visits the homes of WSCD students. Davis believes that "If you have a value around family engagement, then everyone from the top to the bottom must fulfill a set of expectations for family engagement."

Every central office department is required to submit a performance plan describing how they will engage families in achieving their departmental goals. Each school performance plan includes a family engagement component. The role of the district's Department of Family-School Partnerships (DFSP) is to review the plans using a rubric aligned with WSCD Family and Community Engagement Standards and to ensure equitable access to opportunity and resources. DFSP provides the supports and resources necessary to build engagement capacity for educators, staff, and families across the district for successful plan implementation.

In WSCD, the onus for supporting every family and providing opportunities to connect with schools sits squarely with the district. According to Superintendent Davis, "our internal moral compass is to look at the why: to ensure every child has an opportunity to have their families engaged."

### *WSCD Engagement Structure*

Using the Dual Capacity-Building Framework as a guide, the WSCD Department of Family-School Partnerships is primarily responsible for building district engagement capacity. Led by D'Lisa Crain, the staff of 10 oversees the implementation of: Parent University; Family Graduation Advocates; professional learning for school staff; and WSCD's cornerstone engagement strategies of [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#) and [Academic Parent Teacher Teams](#). The staff is augmented by a teacher on special assignment who provides support and guidance to strengthen academic-aligned content and practice. Crain saw the addition of a teacher to the staff as a way to bolster the Parent University curriculum, align strategies to the district's academic focus, and bring a higher level of credibility to family engagement efforts.

The Family-School Partnerships team works collaboratively across departments on a number of district priorities and initiatives. It is staffed by three coordinators who each oversee initiatives, two Administrative Support Secretaries, a Special Program Coordinator who oversees outreach, and two Clerical Aides who focus on connecting data from the department's programs to the district's student information system and data warehouse. In addition, the department has nine Family Graduation Advocates placed in high schools throughout the county and more than 50 on-call childcare providers and interpreters that support daily programming.

### *WSCD Engagement Standards*

WSCD has adopted the six [National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#) and added what they view as a critical seventh standard: “Building the Capacity of Staff to Engage Families.” Superintendent Davis views this as the most important standard because “if the capacity isn’t built with the staff you cannot stretch it out to the masses.” This seventh standard explicitly embeds the Dual Capacity-Building Framework into the district’s approach to engagement. The central family engagement focus is grounded in an ongoing capacity-building strategy that includes families, staff, educators, and central office personnel: everyone who has a role in the engagement of families.

### *Accountability and Supports*

Expectations for family engagement are embedded across the district. The superintendent provides an annual “State of Education” address which includes data on the district’s strategic goal for family engagement. WSCD requires each school to detail how families will be engaged in its annual performance plan. Plans have measurable outcomes that feed into the district’s data systems where staff can review real-time data. School plans are guided by a rubric that details the seven standards for family engagement and the vision for each school’s meaningful engagement practices.

Districtwide engagement requires a coherent approach AND systems of support. WSCD has clear expectations regarding how every school and department will achieve its goals and contribute to the district’s goal for family engagement.

---

**District Strategic Goal 3: To engage family, staff, Trustees, and community members in strong relationships, provide meaningful opportunities to increase their educational expertise and trust, and to share responsibility for student success.**

WSCD has developed systems that integrate family engagement indicators into the district’s data collection process. WSCD’s Professional Growth System includes teacher performance standards and clear indicators for family engagement. The Department of Family-School Partnerships, in collaboration with the district’s Council on Family Engagement, developed a 15-hour professional learning opportunity for teachers and support staff to become highly effective in this area.

### *Data Systems*

WSCD is a data-driven district that prides itself on how data is leveraged and the story it tells. Schools, families, and students are not just data points — through deeper analysis and connection they tell the story behind the data. “Behind every data point is a child,” states Ben Hayes, Chief Accountability Officer. The personal stories of children and families are at the core and “when people share their stories and speak their truth there is a level of authenticity.” This holistic approach to student achievement leverages data as a component of the student’s story and provides insights into the supports needed for student success. Good data collection has required an investment — two half-time data clerks support programmatic data collection.

### *Strengths and Impact*

The Washoe County School District approach to implementing effective engagement practice is grounded in the premise that engagement is a shared responsibility and everyone has

a role in ensuring families are engaged in student learning and school improvement. Specific strengths identified in WCSD's systemic approach include the following.

- A Superintendent who serves as a champion for engagement, has clear expectations, and models effective practice, making a difference in how family and community engagement is received and embraced in the district.
- School and departmental plans that include family engagement strategies, aligned to performance goals and reviewed against a rubric to ensure effective practice.
- Family engagement data collection that informs practice and strategy: Data-sharing with families provides detailed information on strengths, challenges, and progress toward grade-level/graduation achievement.
- A Department of Family-School Partnerships, which serves as a capacity-builder for staff and families, monitors progress towards performance goals, provides support in the form of resources, tools, and professional learning, and serves as a connector across the district.
- A comprehensive, holistic strategy that has resulted in reduced transiency and an increase in the graduation rate from 66% in 2012 to 84% in 2017.

### Lessons Learned:

Implementation of WCSD's family and community engagement strategy has been a journey that spans more than a decade and is filled with both accomplishments and lessons learned. D'Lisa Crain, a 2016 [Education Week Leader to Learn From](#), has led the department's

efforts to build districtwide capacity for effective engagement practice and offers the following insights.

- *Engagement is a shared responsibility:* This is not work that can be done by one person or department. Collaboration is critical; leaders must include stakeholder voices and build capacity for allies and stakeholders both inside and outside of the district.
- *Lift up the successes:* Share the stories of success across the district to acknowledge those who are succeeding and encourage others to step out of their comfort zone.
- *Work efficiently and demonstrate value-add:* It will move the system to adequately value and fund family engagement as a strategy for improving student achievement.
- *Don't give up:* Ground yourself and remind yourself that children's lives and teachers feeling connected to their students and families is at the core of student success.
- *Internal structures and alliances are critical to this work:* Quarterly cross-departmental meetings provide the opportunity to map out what is happening and assess where families and teachers needs are being (or not being) met.
- *Stay open and listen to the criticism:* Leverage it to think outside the box for solutions and improvements.
- *Strong administrative support is necessary:* This will ensure the work is documented and data is collected.

The WCSD exemplar provides a clear picture of what the [Key Elements of Systemic Engagement](#) look like in practice.

Superintendent Davis serves as the district champion for family engagement, valuing families as assets and establishing a level of accountability. District leadership for engagement is distributed with the Department of Family-School Partnerships serving as the capacity builders to ensure efforts are aligned to effective practices. The integration of engagement into the district's overall strategic plan and policies as well as in individual school improvement plans are a clear indicator of the value and the expectations for engagement. Lastly, key systems are in place to provide ongoing data for progress monitoring and measuring impact.

### Key Questions for Implementing Systemic Engagement

- Has our district clearly and publicly articulated family engagement as a core value and lever for student achievement and healthy development, and school improvement?
- Is engagement a districtwide responsibility or does responsibility reside in one department?
- Do our policies and protocols provide clear expectations for engagement? Are there supports aligned to expectations to ensure positive outcomes for staff?
- Are our engagement efforts aligned to our district goals and targets? Is engagement embedded in the planning and data collection process?

### Additional Systemic Strategies

Districtwide family and community engagement requires systems and structures of support and alignment to district goals and strategic direction. Implemented effectively,

systemic engagement continuously builds district capacity. The exemplars below provide district context, demographics, structures, and policies, followed by a description of the identified problem of practice, and insight into the processes and challenges for implementing specific strategies to address the issue.

- Albuquerque Public Schools (NM): established a Family Engagement Collaborative to provide a vehicle for a cross-departmental approach to planning and implementing engagement strategies.
- Cleveland Metropolitan School District (OH): embedded family engagement into its Academic Achievement Plan process and provides tools and supports for schools.
- Arlington Public Schools (VA): developed a comprehensive approach to school engagement capacity building.

### ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

#### District Demographics:

Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), is located across a 1,200-square mile area between the mountains and the mesa. It includes a range of schools in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods.

APS has 84,000 students and 7,863 school-based staff in 141 schools. Student demographics include 73% eligible for free and reduced meals, 17% English language learners, 15% students with disabilities, and 7% students in the gifted program. Of the 141 APS schools, 102 (72%) are designated Title I schools.

While APS's student population is predominantly identified as Hispanic (67%), they serve a growing population of diverse students; 21% Caucasian, 4% American Indian,

2% Black/African American, 2% Asian, 1% Other (Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, etc.), and 3% multi-race.

### **District Structures and Policy:**

The Student Family and Community Supports (SFCS) division is within the Office of Equity, Instruction and Engagement and is led by Dr. Madelyn Serna Mármol, a cabinet-level Assistant Superintendent. The Executive Director of SFCS, Dr. Kristine Meurer, provides oversight for the Coordinated School Health Department, which includes Family Engagement, Community Schools, Attendance/Tuancy Prevention, and Volunteer/Special Project Programs. Other departments in the SFCS division include the Counseling Department (oversees school counselors, prevention/intervention, and restorative justice); Nursing (oversees school nurses and health assistants); Student and Staff Supports (oversight of Threat Assessments, Crisis Management, and the Employee Assistance Program); Accountability Operations (oversight of departmental data systems, Medicaid services) and points of contact for Foster Care and Refugee supports.

In 2017, Superintendent Raquel Reedy unveiled the Academic Master Plan, developed through a process that included family and community input in conjunction with [Mission: Graduate](#) (an initiative of the United Way of Central New Mexico) and the Office of Equity and Engagement. The plan clearly articulates shared values for educating all students and defines a profile of a future APS graduate. The profile prominently highlights an engaged family and community as foundational to success. In addition, Superintendent Reedy

identified her “Big Five Priorities” [Attendance, Early Learning, Whole Child, College and Career Readiness, and Parent and Community Engagement] as the key focus areas for moving the Academic Master Plan forward.

APS’s family and community engagement definition is “meaningfully engage families and enhance partnerships with community to maximize student achievement.” The APS Family and Community Engagement Procedural Directive details district expectations to actively build partnerships with families and the community by:

- Fostering safe and welcoming environments;
- Strengthening relationships and capacity with families, teachers, school and district administrators, and community partners;
- Expanding communication between families, community partners, and schools; and
- Cultivating equitable and effective systems.

These structural and policy elements provide the context for APS’s family engagement efforts that are documented in the following pages.

### **Parent and Community Engagement — an APS Big Five Focus Area**

**Families are our students’ first teachers. They play a vital role in the education of their children, so it’s important that we listen to them, keep them informed, engage them in the classroom and school, and support them.**

### **Problem of Practice:**

Having multiple departments responsible for implementing family engagement strategies to ensure compliance and provide supports to schools to build capacity has caused duplication of efforts and silos within the district.

### *APS Solution: The Family Engagement Collaborative*

In 2013, the Executive Director of the School Family and Community Supports division and the Executive Director of Title I, whose departments had resided in different reporting lines, began to convene their teams. As Director of Title I Laurie Everhart recounted, "They saw their work as very separate, were really working in silos and they really wanted to address that. So, it just started with our two teams really understanding the work of each other's departments. Then it grew from there to be more of a true collaborative, with representation from departments that we felt were important to be at the table.... Family engagement is everybody's work."

In 2014, the group became an expanded cross-section of departments whose work included family engagement in some way. Participants from the following offices began to meet weekly to discuss potential opportunities to collaborate and/or to align family engagement efforts in the areas where their work overlapped:

- Equity and Engagement Office
- Student, Family, and Community Supports Division
- Family Engagement/Parent University Unit
- Coordinated School Health
- Language and Cultural Equity
- Curriculum and Instruction

- Student, School, and Community Service Center
- Title I
- New Mexico PTA
- Counseling
- Indian Education
- Nursing
- Special Education
- Early Childhood
- Truancy Unit

The Family Engagement Collaborative's priorities include: strengthening relationships and capacity with families, schools, communities, and district administration; utilizing data to support schools; and expanding communications. The official purpose of the Family Engagement Collaborative is to work together to design and implement programs and projects to help meet district family engagement goals through:

1. Sharing what each department is doing for family engagement;
2. Determining ways to work more collaboratively on family engagement;
3. Determining how to move the dial for more positive family engagement; and
4. Identifying how family engagement activities are linked to learning.

### *Family Engagement Collaborative (FEC) Structure*

- *Meeting Structure:* Initially, the FEC met weekly to identify points of overlap and areas of potential collaboration. In 2016, the bi-weekly meeting was structured to

allow for both collective work and small group work on specific areas.

- *Project Identification:* Collectively, the team identifies projects that are aligned to district/departmental priorities and/or compliance. The collaborative has access to district data such as climate surveys and annual school plans, which are reviewed as part of the project identification and/or monitoring process. In some cases, the FEC provides feedback to the state regarding policies and participates in districtwide community engagement efforts.
- *Strategy/Tool Development:* The FEC develops collective solutions and tools for use by schools and/or the district to support more effective and efficient implementation of engagement practices. The most tangible outputs from the FEC are products used by schools and/or other departments. For example, one of the first projects of the collaborative was the creation of customer service training for front office staff. The trainings are conducted by members of the FEC.

Most recently, the FEC developed a “best practice rubric” to provide schools and the district with a tool to assess and support effective family engagement practice. The development of the rubric was a collective effort that was vetted not only within the FEC but also with key internal stakeholders outside of the team. The team identified family engagement practices and performed a cross-walk with [Domain 4](#) of the state’s educator evaluation system, [NMTeach](#), to ensure alignment and effectiveness. The Best Practices Rubric and Assessment Tool completed by the FEC has been used by the Student, Family and Community Supports division in the implementation of School Training for

Engagement Planning (STEP), a day-long workshop where school teams are grounded in family engagement best practices and guided in developing school-based engagement plans. Schools are supported with site-based technical assistance and coaching to promote implementation of their plans.

During the development of the rubric, the team identified data collection as a major challenge — more specifically, they noted a need for more data on exactly what schools were doing and the effectiveness of their efforts. Due to the autonomous nature of APS schools, the FEC began to identify sources of data to inform the team on which practices schools were employing. The primary source of school engagement data became the EPSS (Educational Plan for Student Success), annual plans in which schools identify the engagement strategies they propose for the school year (in the 2017–18 SY EPSS was replaced with 90-day school plans). The team reviewed school plans and categorized engagement strategies in order to paint a picture of engagement at the school level. The next phase of work for the FEC will be addressing the engagement strategies in the EPSS to ensure measurable outcomes.

### *Strengths and Impact*

- Collective ownership by a cross-departmental team for development and monitoring progress:
- Leverages multiple perspectives and approaches;
- Promotes efficiency by reducing overlap and eliminating silos;
- Establishes common language that facilitates common understanding;

- Identifies clearly defined outcomes and measures that are aligned across departments; and
- Provides data-focused solutions and tools for schools and the district.

### Challenges

- School autonomy can be an asset or a challenge — it is a challenge when there is lack of clarity on expectations and misalignment on measures.
- Maintaining focus and relevance to ensure the FEC adds value to districtwide priorities.
- Ensuring that new members have opportunities to understand the role, current context, and accomplishments of the FEC.
- Ongoing data review and progress monitoring of multiple FEC “projects” implemented by a department.

### Lessons Learned:

“When we started this, we had a vision of moving the needle on engagement... but to what end? So, we ended up building the plane while we flew it,” recounts Dr. Kristine Meurer. Since its inception in January 2014, the FEC went through numerous “growing” pains. Lessons learned through this experience include the following:

- *Bring as many players to the table as soon as possible:* APS began the collaborative with two departments (Title I and Student, Family and Community Supports division). It became clear early on that in order to make an impact on family engagement more players had to be at the table. Building the collaborative took time and had many growing pains that may have

been avoided by having the right people at the table from the start.

- *Identify your champion(s):* To keep the collaborative active, a couple of people had to step up and champion the FEC. APS underwent multiple changes in administration, but the FEC survived due to the advocacy of the champions.
- *Develop common language upfront:* Until the APS Board of Education adopted the Family Engagement Policy and Procedural Directive, there was no common definition for family engagement. It was critical that all members of the FEC operate under a common definition. Without a common definition there was a hit or miss approach to engagement and it was hard to have clarity on whether FEC actions were headed in the right direction.
- *Set a clear vision:* As with a common definition, a clear vision or purpose for the FEC was critical. Why ask individuals from multiple departments to focus on family engagement together? APS sought to answer this question early on by looking at federal, state, and local requirements around family engagement.
- *Collaboration can be really messy:* It is difficult to break down silos, and individuals have to see the benefits of working in collaboration. Collaboration work is truly messy and can be hard. Everyone has to see the benefits as outweighing the work to maintain collaboration.
- *Let go of turf:* This may be the hardest thing to do, especially if individuals and/or groups are used to working in silos. The notion that “it’s not about any one person or group but about APS’s students and

families” had to stay central, and the norm had to change from this is “mine” to “how can I contribute” to shared goals/actions.

- *Quick wins are key:* Finding something that the FEC could do and accomplish together early on was important. Being able to work together on a common project gave everyone a sense of accomplishment and provided for collaborative bonding among the FEC membership.

As an additional coherence measure, APS restructured under the guidance of the Assistant Superintendent of Equity, Instruction, and Engagement (OEIE). During the 2017-18 school year, the Title I department was moved under OEIE and the FEC re-structured to meet quarterly and include principals. The goal is to focus on school-level family engagement strategies.

## CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

### District Demographics:

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) is the second largest district in the state of Ohio. The district is 82 square miles and serves Cleveland, Bratenahl, Linndale, Newburgh Heights, and parts of Brook Park and Garfield Heights. CMSD serves approximately 39,000 students who attend 105 schools. One hundred percent (100%) of CMSD’s students are eligible for free and reduced meals, which makes every school in the district a Title I eligible school.

Students that identify as Black make up the majority of the school population (65%) with 16% Hispanic, 16% Caucasion, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander and 3% multi-race or other. CMSD specialized programming includes supports for

students with disabilities (22%) and students with limited English proficiency (9.2%).

### District Structure and Policy:

CMSD’s Office of Family and Community Engagement (OFCE) is responsible for oversight and capacity building for parent and family engagement. Until recently, OFCE was under the purview of the Chief Academic Officer and connected to the district’s academic team. Currently, the office resides under the Chief of Engagement and Communications where it continues to be connected to the academic side of the organization.

Led by Tracy Hill, Executive Director of the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Team and a [2014 Education Week Leader to Learn From](#), OFCE has an Office Assistant, Director of Community Engagement, Volunteer Manager and Program Manager. The Program Manager supervises five FACE Coordinators.

CMSD schools are organized in a network structure supported by district-level central office teams that include representation from essential departments including OFCE. Network teams are responsible for providing guidance and support for schools in their specific area of expertise. The Academic Achievement Plan (AAP) process is designed to mobilize the resources of the district in support of school priorities and strategies. School plans are reviewed and approved by the academic team and supported by the network teams from central office departments.

### Problem of Practice:

Family engagement planning at the school level was disconnected from school priorities and goals and as a result, schools struggled to plan impactful engagement strategies.

### *CMSD Solution: Academic Achievement Plans and a menu of school-based supports*

The CMSD school improvement process involves the development of an Academic Achievement Plan (AAP), which uses a continuous improvement cycle to develop and implement a focused plan for school improvement. The plan is developed by schools using student performance data and other pertinent indicators to identify a priority, address a critical need, and establish an overarching strategy with additional sub-strategies for sub-groups and parent engagement. Principals, along with their school-based teams, develop a plan to guide curriculum, assessment, instruction, parent engagement, and intervention decisions for the school year. Stakeholders including parents and students must be involved in specific areas that require their engagement and direction.

Plans are reviewed and approved by the CMSD Academic Team to ensure that strategies are evidence-based, monitoring actions are in place for each strategy, and resources are aligned to demonstrate the school's ability to effectively implement the plan. Numerical targets are set that gauge progress in priority areas and are used to review plans at the AAP team district-level check-in meetings in September, November, and February. During these check-in meetings, principals and school teams present on their progress to their network, which includes other school teams and central office support staff, such as family engagement coordinators. These AAP check-in sessions serve as a consultancy for school teams to generate ideas to address challenges, adjust practices, and share successes.

### *AAP Family Engagement Component*

The AAP template is designed to identify "Priority One," the overarching priority identified by the school planning team, based on school performance data and other indicators. Specific strategies are identified in the plan to address the priority for academics, for a specific sub-group, and for family engagement.

During the AAP design phase there was an opportunity for the FACE team to influence the process and embed language around family engagement strategies linked to learning. As a result, parent and family engagement — how the school will communicate and engage families in support of the priority — is included in the template.

The Family Engagement Coordinators attend the AAP check-in sessions throughout the school year to provide support and serve as a resource to schools. In between sessions, they connect with schools to offer support, share strategies and tools, and collect data on family engagement strategies and district requirements for Title I. Additionally, OFCE has developed a menu of supports aligned to the district's six priorities that include evidenced-based strategies and supports for effective engagement implementation.

### *Strengths and Impact*

Generally, the main strength of the AAP process is that it provides a coherent approach to school improvement planning. Specifically, for parent and family engagement it creates an opportunity for building capacity for effective school-level engagement. This includes:

- The planning process allows OFCE staff to offer engagement supports and strategies that align with the schools identified priority. OFCE has compiled a menu of strategies and supports for schools based on level and priority.
- Participating in the AAP sessions provides an opportunity to be a part of a team that provides a collective approach to support.
- Engagement is linked to learning and delivered in a multi-tiered system of supports (universal, targeted and intensive).
- Supports Title I, Part A Family Engagement requirements and ensures that strategies are evidence-based and tied to school improvement.
- As a result of this targeted approach, CMSD has seen gains in achievement and graduation rates.
- Most significant in the area of engagement, 94% of CMSD parents have connected with teachers to discuss student progress through some form of conferencing.
- Schools are using conferencing approaches like APTT (Academic Parent Teacher Teams) and student-led conferences which focus on specific student data and home supports.

### Lessons Learned:

- *Provide differentiated supports:* Based on the unique characteristics of schools and their staff's capacity for family engagement, identify what individual supports they need.
- *Offer professional development on the curriculum utilized, academic language, testing and data interpretation:* OFCE

staff benefit from training to understand and support educators in their family engagement approaches to support classroom learning.

- *Be prepared to deal with personnel changes:* Staff turnover and changes in principal leadership will occur.
- *Be flexible and minimize frustration over competing priorities.*
- *Hire staff who understand training:* When choosing OFCE staff, ensure that they have the ability to facilitate capacity building training for both school staff and parents in order to provide an even playing field for all parties.
- *Family engagement must be part of an integrated approach to school improvement:* Improvement plans connect the dots between achievement, social-emotional learning, school climate, and attendance with a focus on building and supporting relationships and trust between educators, scholars, and their families.

## ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

### District Demographics:

Arlington PS covers a 26-mile radius in northern Virginia within the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. While it's predominantly a suburban area, it is the 13th largest among Virginia's 133 school districts.

With 26,190 students and 3,919 school-based staff, Arlington PS has 37 schools and programs: 30.1% of its students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 19% are English language learners, 14.5% have a disability, and 19.1% of students are identified as gifted/talented. Of their 37 schools, eight are designated Title I schools. *Note: Arlington PS*

uses an early intervention Title I schoolwide model through which only grades K-5 are served.

While almost half of students self-identify as White (46.9%), Arlington PS students represent 122 nations and speak 100 languages. Other ethnicities include: Hispanic 28.0%; Black/African American 10.0%; Asian American 9.1%; Indian/Alaskan Native 0.3%; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 0.1%; multi-race 5.7%.

### **District Structure and Policy:**

Arlington's Family and Community Engagement (FACE) policy is an exemplary document recognizing that students are more likely to succeed when families and the community are involved. The policy defines family and community engagement as "a shared responsibility of families, schools, and the community to support students and their learning and to nurture students' intellectual, personal, social, and emotional development to help them achieve their full potential." The policy embraces the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships directing Arlington PS to actively work to achieve the following goals:

- Welcoming all families into the school community
- Communicating effectively
- Supporting student success
- Advocating for every student
- Sharing responsibility
- Collaborating with the Community

Within Arlington PS, school leaders are primarily responsible for ensuring that effective family engagement practices are in place at their schools. At the central office level, FACE support is spread across departments.

Dr. Rosa Briceno serves as the Family Engagement Specialist in the Department of Teaching and Learning. This position was created in 2014 to support implementation of the new FACE policy. The Family Engagement Specialist collaborates with staff across offices and departments in initiatives that support the engagement of Arlington PS's diverse families and builds the capacity of both families and educators to partner in support of student learning. The Department of School and Community Relations and the Department of Planning and Evaluation each have a full-time Community Engagement Coordinator responsible for managing the broader public engagement process for the district.

### **Problem of Practice:**

Effective family engagement practices were inconsistent across the district and often implemented by schools in isolation.

### *Arlington PS Solution: FACE Professional Learning Strand*

The FACE team's analysis of their problem of practice revealed that there were no professional development opportunities for school staff and administrators to strengthen their capacity to engage families in ways that impacted student learning. To address this, the FACE team leveraged the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework](#) as the foundation for strategically crafting a capacity-building experience for educators. The main goal of the FACE Professional Learning Strand is to intentionally produce mindset shifts, foster an engagement culture, and build both individual and school team capacity to implement high-impact strategies that engage every family in support of student success.

While Arlington PS implements many successful initiatives to engage its families and



communities, their strategy for building the capacity of teachers, staff, and administrators is especially noteworthy. The FACE Professional Learning Strand is offered through the district's Professional Learning Framework, which is a comprehensive framework designed to better support student learning and professional development opportunities for staff, ultimately creating better alignment throughout the district.

### **FACE Professional Learning Strand Structure**

The FACE professional learning strategy consists of the following components which, when bundled together, result in a more robust, comprehensive approach:

- Learning opportunities for staff and administrators, including a Seminar Series on High-Impact Strategies for Engaging Diverse Families;
- FACE High-Impact Checklist and Partnership Rubric for school teams to assess their practice around the six FACE goals;
- FACE Mini-Grants for schools to implement high-impact projects in schools;
- FACE Dialogues for participants to continue meeting and consulting with peers; and
- A Showcase webpage to share practices and tools across schools.

The FACE Seminar was designed for school teams comprised of four to seven staff members who commit to participate in six monthly two-hour seminar sessions after school hours. Arlington contracts with local organizations and experts in the field who work with the FACE specialist to plan and deliver an interactive workshop series that engages participants in rethinking their assumptions

about family engagement, provides them with a new lens through which to view the work, and offers examples of effective practices they can use in their own settings to revamp engagement activities and forge stronger ties with families.

In between sessions, school teams utilize a FACE Checklist aligned to Arlington's FACE goals to reflect on their school practice, share observations, identify areas of need, and decide on a plan of action. The team develops a project that revamps or designs family engagement activities based on their learning about high-impact strategies. The FACE office provides school teams with \$500 mini-grants to help implement FACE projects that have high-impact elements in their design.

Arlington PS has developed an online School Showcase to highlight strategies and tools created by schools doing high impact projects. As an added bonus, participants receive 32 recertification credits for completing the FACE Seminar.

### *Strengths and Impact*

The establishment of the FACE office in the Department of Teaching and Learning created the possibility to provide learning opportunities, technical assistance, and other supports for staff to forge stronger partnerships with families to help students succeed. The creation of a FACE Professional Learning Strand as an official part of the new Professional Learning Framework for the district will facilitate the effort to make family engagement more integrated and systemic.

Bundling the FACE professional learning strategy components has made the professional learning strategy much more impactful. These components build both individual and team capacity to develop



**Key Elementary School** (*Escuela Key en Español*) is a K-5 Spanish immersion school where grade-level teaching pairs work together to teach content in both Spanish and English as students rotate between English and Spanish teachers. After much thought and deliberation during the Seminar, the Escuela Key FACE team decided to redesign their 2017-18 Back to School Night as their project. From the outreach to the actual format for the night, their design focused on relationship building as the cornerstone to starting off the year right with families.

Their Back to School Night mirrored the immersion teaching format, shifting the previous practice of individually-prepared teacher presentations to co-developed presentations by grade level teacher pairs. Parents chose whether to participate in the presentations on student learning in Spanish or English. The event started with a Cafecito where families were encouraged to participate in a human bingo activity to meet and interact with staff and other families. The team also held a raffle with prizes including educational books and school paraphernalia. At the end of the night, families who turned in their exit tickets were thanked by staff at the doors with a smile and a sweet treat from Latin America.

Another new and creative component of their strategy was bus outreach. Staff knew there were certain pockets of the community where families tended to be the most disconnected, so they took those buses with the students (and the school mascot, which delighted the students) early on in the year to salute the parents and hand out personal invitations to the redesigned Back to School Night. As a result, not only did the Cafecito surpass expectations with a standing room only

crowd, but the FACE team was able to identify issues and concerns voiced by parents. Parent feedback was very positive as shown in the exit ticket responses.

**Jefferson Middle School** is a highly-diverse middle school that was also the first to establish a FACE Action Team to guide their family engagement strategy. The team that participated in the Seminar identified the FACE rubric and checklist as extremely valuable tools to guide their reflection and planning process. Here is how one of the team members described it.

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**“It was interesting to see how differently we scored our school depending on our respective roles and experiences. We would meet as a group outside of the seminar meetings, and we would go through the checklist and talk about why we were seeing things differently. It helped to have that time to reflect, and not to become defensive of what we were seeing, but to be able to hear what other people were saying, and appreciate the variety of perspectives. As a result we were able to come up with a project to work with the school as a whole, and really look at what we can do to improve family community relationships as a whole, rather than each from our own little, isolated parts.”**

The Jefferson FACE team project focused on planning and conducting a series of workshops for parents to learn how to use ParentVue, an online tool designed to help parents monitor their child’s education. Workshops were conducted in the main languages represented in the school and co-led by parent leaders from those language groups whom they engaged as partners to offer the trainings.

effective engagement strategies. Participants identified the following strengths:

- The team approach allows for multiple perspectives and opportunities for peer learning while fostering shared leadership and roles in planning and implementation. The opportunity to reflect on learning and engage in meaningful dialogue during and in-between sessions was listed as one of the most valuable components of the design.
- The FACE High-Impact Checklist and Partnership Rubric provides guidance for reflection, dialogue, and planning.
- The high-impact engagement project provides an opportunity for the team to apply learning by assessing school needs to repurpose an existing activity or create a new high-impact strategy and receive seed money for project implementation.
- Cohort Dialogues provide an opportunity to share and receive feedback on strategies from other FACE Seminar teams and previous cohorts.

Teams felt the process helped them “move out of their comfort zones” to implement strategies differently. It also generated creative ideas for connecting with and engaging parents. The development of a team project supported by FACE funding provided an opportunity for participants to apply their learning in the context of their school culture.

### Lessons Learned:

Dr. Briceno stresses that “this is really more than a professional development strand. It is an intentionally designed experience that bundles learning sessions, guided team reflection, and application of high-impact strategies to promote the shift in mindset and practice that

is called for to be effective.” Her advice to others seeking to implement a similar strategy is to:

- *Leverage the Dual Capacity-Building Framework:* The Framework grounds the development of content and the professional development process.
- *Engage school teams in learning about family and community engagement to maximize impact:* School-based teams that include an administrator provide access to decision-making and scheduling, while facilitating school-wide efforts and conveying to all that family engagement matters.
- *Create opportunities for staff to gain new knowledge about high-impact family engagement AND a safe space to examine their assumptions and beliefs about engaging marginalized families:* This work calls for changing both hearts and minds.

## The Challenges to Systemic Engagement

The exemplars demonstrate the benefits of systemic approaches to implementing family and community engagement. Alignment allows for more intentionality and efficiency of efforts, which has a strong impact on district and school goals and student outcomes. The Key Elements of Systemic Engagement outlined in this publication provide a comprehensive approach to implementation.

Systemic engagement requires district leadership to deeply understand the intersection between engagement, equity, and instruction and commit to a coherent approach that acknowledges the potential impact on student achievement and school improvement. Without a commitment to embedding and integrating engagement

values, expectations, and supports, efforts will continue to be disjointed and produce varying results largely dependent on the level of experience and commitment of school leaders. Listed below are some of the major challenges to implementing systemic engagement.

- **Leadership mindset and capacity:** The greatest threat to engagement efforts is the mindset and capacity of superintendents, senior leadership, principals, and family engagement staff leading the work. Superintendents tend to jettison program components that they feel aren't of high instructional impact. Usually, in the absence of prior success, evidence, or applicable examples, family and community engagement is on that list. When superintendents truly believe that their work is in service of the families and students in their care AND understand the impact of effective engagement practices, they are more apt to highly value engagement. This is especially true when there is a shift in leadership.
- **Leadership Shifts:** The rate of leadership shifts at the superintendent, central office, and school level have upended engagement efforts and, in some cases, totally dismantled effective efforts towards establishing systemic practices.
- **Accountability:** There is an ongoing challenge regarding how schools and districts hold staff and themselves accountable for effective engagement. Even when there are clear accountability measures, such as at the state level with California's Family Engagement Framework and Local Control and Accountability Plan process, and the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation system, which has clearly defined engagement indicators as part of

## School Boards Take Heed — A Cautionary Tale

*A new Superintendent with no family engagement experience can undo years of progress in the blink of an eye.*

The Hittsville Public School District had developed a national reputation for great family engagement practices, an integrated approach to providing student supports, and a collaborative culture where department heads worked together more often than not. Joint planning by leaders of key initiatives, including social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and school discipline reform, led to dramatic shifts in mindset and practices which set the stage for deeper collaboration around new priorities like chronic absenteeism. District-family engagement teams from around the country visited Hittsville to learn more. Hittsville leaders were invited to tell their story at national conferences. An infographic Hittsville leaders created described how various departments and strategies were aligned to support students and families and was circulated widely as an example for others to consider and pursue. Hittsville wasn't a perfect district, but things were moving in a good direction. And then their Superintendent decided to retire. The school board conducted a national search, and selected an exciting young Assistant Superintendent from a district with no meaningful history of strategic alignment or family engagement. The school board didn't ask those questions during the interview process. With full authority, the new Superintendent arrived with a large team of colleagues from his previous district, tearing the senior cabinet apart. New structures were created and old strategies pushed to the side. Hittsville's highly regarded family engagement team was marginalized and reassigned. One by one they left the district. The Hittsville infographic no longer applied. And that bright new Superintendent? A newly constructed school board fired him. Hittsville is in the midst of another national search. The cycle continues.

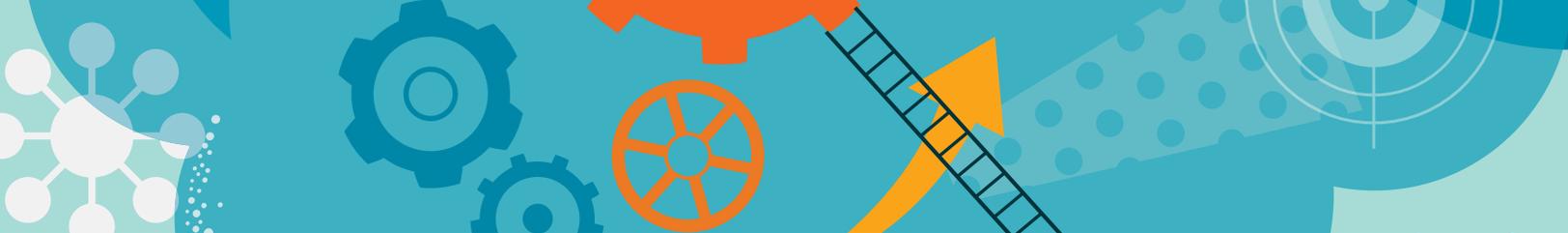


principal and teacher evaluation, there is a tendency to devalue accountability for engagement.

- *Capacity:* Staff and data collection capacity are also major impediments to implementation. Building capacity of district engagement staff as well as school leadership, staff, and families is critical to successful implementation. Data systems are essential to shaping the engagement narrative, learning in real time, and monitoring progress. Often the data collected doesn't provide insights into the impact of the work because the focus is on quantitative data.

- *Relevance:* Family and community engagement is often marginalized and still commonly viewed as “nice to do, but not necessary” by leaders at both the district and school level. Breaking down the silos within a district to embed engagement practices requires constantly making the case for engagement and coherently aligning engagement to district work on equity and instruction to provide an anchor for engagement efforts.

These challenges demonstrate the critical need to build the capacity of superintendents and other district-level “gatekeepers,” as well as individuals in districts tasked with engagement implementation.



# Building Capacity for Systemic Engagement

The challenges to systemic engagement indicate a need for building the capacity of leaders responsible for championing and implementing effective practice, including superintendents, their senior cabinet, and the district lead responsible for system-wide engagement efforts. Largely the result of disparate pathways to the superintendency, coupled with uneven knowledge of the potential impact of effective engagement efforts on the part of school boards and superintendents, capacity for engagement is very much dependent on how individuals value the contributions of families and understand the significant impact that engagement has on student outcomes and school improvement. This is an area that remains untapped in superintendent preparation programs. While most superintendents broadly acknowledge the importance of families by including engagement in strategic plans and goals, engagement work is often marginalized within or disconnected from district structures, key strategies, and initiatives.

An ever-increasing number of districts have established dedicated positions and/or departments to oversee and implement strategies for engagement. With this increase in family and community engagement staff, there is a corresponding need for building the capacity of those responsible for promoting, implementing, and monitoring family

and community engagement strategies and outcomes.

While many basic project management skills are transferable to this role, the unique position that this role and family and community engagement efforts fulfill requires an expanded skill set. Leading family and community engagement in a district requires the individual and/or team to possess a systems-level view, coupled with a unique mix of skills and a cross-functional understanding of education and how to establish the structures and systems that promote and sustain effective implementation. District engagement leads are primarily responsible for building awareness and districtwide capacity for effective engagement practice, which requires the integration of engagement principles, policy, and practice across the district, not to mention designing, implementing, and informing capacity-building activities for principals, teachers, and other district staff.

There are few regular professional development opportunities specifically for districtwide engagement practitioners and many existing capacity-building vehicles often provide outdated approaches to engagement. In addition, the individuals in this position often express a sense of isolation as their work in the district is often marginalized or misunderstood.<sup>xii</sup> Building the capacity of



engagement leaders and staff is critical to the successful implementation of systemic engagement.

## **Promising District Capacity-Building Models**

Professional learning communities and networks have been shown to build teacher capacity and efficacy by creating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and expanding networks of support.<sup>xiiiiv</sup> Leveraging this practice to build the capacity of district engagement leads is an emerging strategy that has gained traction and led to more effective implementation of engagement strategies and more systemic approaches within districts. One such example of this approach is the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement.

The District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement (DLN) is a coalition of individuals whose primary responsibility is the oversight and implementation of family engagement practice in their respective districts. The group was originally convened by the Institute for Educational Leadership in the fall of 2009, with leaders from six districts that had established cabinet level engagement positions (Boston, Philadelphia, New York City, Alexandria, VA, Hartford, CT, and Springfield, MA). The leaders at that session overwhelmingly agreed that the unique qualities of their position created the need for a “network” of supports that would build their capacity and provide peer-learning opportunities to implement and scale effective engagement practice from the district level to the classroom.

In the 10 years since that initial convening, the network has grown significantly, with over 200 active districts representing over 9,000 schools and 5 million students in 44 states and

the District of Columbia. The District Leaders Network is the result of an organic process driven by members and supported by IEL to establish a support system for those in the unique position of leading implementation of family and community engagement in a school district. The DLN is unique in purpose, function, and design and is grounded in the belief that members can increase their collective capacity to implement a systemic approach to family and community engagement, resulting in more consistent practice across districts, greater sustainability, and measurable impact on student outcomes and school improvement.

In the 2017 DLN biennial survey, members described key practices, challenges, and insights on how the work in districts is structured. Overwhelmingly, district leaders identified systemic approaches to engagement, leveraging family engagement for equity, and addressing bias and racism as key areas for their own capacity building.

The DLN connects district leaders for peer-to-peer learning and offers professional development annually based on needs identified by members through a pre-conference session at the IEL National Family and Community Engagement Conference and a District Leaders Network Learning Lab held each fall and hosted by a member district.

## **Regional Capacity-Building Approaches**

An emerging trend in support of systemic family and community engagement is a regional approach to building capacity and peer learning. These regional learning communities are organically forming in some cases and in others, are convened by a specific entity whose focus is building regional capacity for school improvement. These

regional spaces provide an environment which supports district FCE leaders as they implement engagement strategies and initiatives in their local districts.

The following exemplars detail this emerging practice by examining the structures, practices, and impact of each groups' collective work to glean a set of guiding principles and effective practices that can inform future regional capacity-building efforts for family and community engagement leaders. The regional exemplars include:

- Alameda County Professional Learning Network, a consortium of the eighteen districts in Alameda County, California;
- The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, which convenes engagement leads from seven districts in the greater Hartford area that are designated as Alliance Districts by the state of Connecticut; and
- The Roadmap Project in the greater Seattle region, which convenes engagement leads from seven South King County, Washington districts in a professional learning community.

## ALAMEDA COUNTY FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

The Alameda County Office of Education (ACOE) first convened the Family Engagement Network (FEN) in the spring of 2015, in response to an emerging need to provide support for district engagement leaders. The FEN is one of seven such county-wide family engagement networks in the state of California. The Alameda County FEN is a community of practice that includes all 18 school districts in the county, located in the Bay Area in northern California. Facilitated by Jason Arenas, Program Director for Accountability Partnerships in the

county's Research, Assessment, Accountability and Partnership Department, the network brings together district representatives and community partners to develop co-learning spaces with a shared mission, vision, and values for their regional work. The FEN also gives districts the opportunity to provide feedback to the county regarding the supports and resources necessary to meet expectations.

In 2015, California passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) which requires districts to submit a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) based on state priorities for improving student outcomes. Each county has the autonomy as a Local Education Agency to set expectations, outcomes, and supports for school districts in their jurisdiction to assure compliance with LCFF and LCAP requirements. Priority 3 in the LCAP is Parental Involvement, which is defined by the district's efforts to engage parents in decision-making at both the district and school level and to promote parental involvement specifically for parents/guardians of low-income, English language learners and foster youth. The state of California has very explicit expectations for family and community engagement, which are detailed in the California Department of Education's (CDE) Family Engagement Framework. This framework provides guidance for implementing effective engagement practices as expected by CDE across state- and federally-funded programs.

In Alameda County there are number of affinity networks, such as the Family Engagement Network, Lead Learners Network, and Superintendents Network, which collectively address issues across districts, engage in learning, and provide feedback on policies and protocols at the county level. While the county oversees how districts meet state requirements, much of its work is informed

by the thinking and feedback generated from the various affinity networks. The learning that emerges from these networks provide a rich source of ideas and opportunities for improving county and district practice.

The Alameda County FEN is one of seven county-wide family engagement networks in the state of California. FEN members represent senior staff with oversight for family engagement in positions either at or reporting directly to the superintendent's cabinet, which uniquely positions FEN members to influence policy and practice in ways that have an impact at both the district and county levels. In addition to district leaders there is also representation from statewide partner WestEd, whose collaboration with CDE helped produce the California Family Engagement Framework.

### **Collective Practice:**

Through monthly meetings, FEN provides districts the opportunity to discuss their progress toward goals and challenges, as well as collectively develop solutions to address issues identified by district representatives and provide feedback to the county regarding specific supports and resources necessary to meet expectations. As a result of these meetings, FEN has developed a theory of action which focuses their collective efforts.

A countywide logic model details how they will accomplish their collective work in the short and long term including both district and county inputs, activities, and outcomes. According to ACOE, the network "serves as a model for how the collective ownership of participants can transform educational systems from unilateral transactional spaces into collaborative spaces of partnership." The networks are a strategy for change that has facilitated trusting relationships over time and a common understanding across districts

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**"If the Alameda County Office of Education meaningfully collaborates with school districts to create authentic family, school, and community partnerships using the research-based family engagement framework, grounded in racial equity and social justice, linked to academic and social-emotional outcomes through differentiated technical assistance, coaching, and professional development, then this will lead to closing the achievement and opportunity gap."**

regarding the intent and requirements of the LCAP and LCFF. The collaboration among FEN districts has anchored their work in a social justice and racial equity framework.

The focus on facilitating common understanding and expectations for family engagement and the collective has led to the development of tools to measure family engagement. The first collectively developed tool, the Continuum of Success Rubric, is the result of a deep dive into four of the districts' processes for measuring outcomes and assessing progress. The tool assesses district practice in the following areas: relationship building, capacity building, and policy.

### **Impact:**

The impact of FEN extends from the individual members to their districts to the county and beyond to the state Department of Education. Individual members of the network report feeling a sense of connection to a larger movement that focuses on leveraging family and community engagement practice for reaching goals on student achievement, school improvement, and equity. Sara Nuno-Villa, District School Governance Specialist of Oakland Unified School District shares that the FEN "helps develop new ideas to improve the



work. I appreciate that the FEN is anchored by a racial equity lens — every meeting includes a conversation about how racism, institutional racism affects students and what we need to do to disrupt that system so we can see the outcomes we want for our kids. I have infused the lessons learned from FEN directly into my work.” Other members agree that the peer learning and collective problem solving of the FEN network directly informs their work.

FEN utilizes an adaptive approach to addressing challenges grounded in identifying problems of practice, which keeps the work focused yet flexible. Districts using the Continuum of Success Rubric as an assessment are asking themselves: What qualitative and quantitative data do we have? What’s missing? How are we collecting and analyzing data? and; Are there gaps? They are also spending time identifying problems of practice in their districts and engaging in collective problem solving through a systems change approach.

FEN’s work continues to have an impact at the county-level because of cross-pollination across other county networks. Jason Arenas, Program Director for Accountability Partnerships periodically presents to cabinet-level administrators on emerging themes, connecting them to areas of intersection via Curriculum & Instruction, Students Services and LCAP Directors, Associate Superintendents and Superintendents. He is in a unique position in that he is part of the county LCAP review team for 18 Alameda county districts and participates in the approval process. Learning from his peers in the field allows him to push districts to be more specific in their actions and services and to align resources to reach their unique goals.

In addition, Arenas works with CDE and FEN members to serve as part of CDE committees

where the work of the networks has influenced the indicators on the California School Dashboard. The Dashboard measures 10 state priorities that must be addressed in the LCAP connected to California’s System of Support, one of the central components of California’s accountability and continuous improvement system. Due in part to Arenas’ influence, new accountability standards and indicators for family engagement and school climate are being implemented on the Dashboard for the 2018-2019 school year, affecting California’s 58 county education offices.

The Alameda County FEN has provided a vehicle for strengthening implementation of effective engagement practices and strategies in the region. District representatives report that the connection with FEN has reduced feelings of isolation and has been central to building both individual and district-family engagement capacity. County-level affinity networks provide opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and strategies as well as influencing which strategies and protocols districts will be held accountable for implementing. The regional approach in Alameda county has provided consistency of practice and supports for districts and the staff responsible for family engagement.

### HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING — DISTRICT LEADER THINK TANK

In 2013 the state of Connecticut passed a statute establishing the Alliance District Program, as “a unique and targeted investment in Connecticut’s 33 lowest-performing districts.” Eligible districts received special funds through the program “to support district strategies to dramatically increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps by pursuing bold and innovative reform strategies.” Annual



plans submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) by districts are organized around the state's four pillars of school improvement.

- *Talent:* Systems and strategies to recruit, hire, develop, evaluate, and retain excellent school leaders, teachers, and support staff.
- *Academics:* Rigorous, aligned, and engaging academic program that allows all students to achieve at high levels, including aligned curricula, instruction, and assessment.
- *Culture and Climate:* Positive learning environment that supports high-quality teaching and learning, and engages families and the community as partners in the educational process.
- *Operations:* Systems and processes that promote organizational efficiency and effectiveness through the use of time and financial resources.

In 2014 the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving designated funding to complement state allocations. The seven Alliance districts in the Hartford region were invited to apply for a planning grant focused on establishing and strengthening district policies and practices in building family, school, and community partnerships (FSCP). The Hartford Foundation would provide five-years of funding to establish a district position to oversee the implementation of strong family, school, and community partnership practices and policies in each district. Once FSCP leads were hired in the seven Alliance districts receiving complementary funding, the Foundation began convening the District Leaders Think Tank on a monthly basis as a community of practice focused on family, school, and community partnerships.

In addition to convening the District Leader Think Tank, the Foundation holds a quarterly colloquium for superintendents and their district teams (including the FSCP lead) to support capacity building for family, school, and community partnerships. The colloquium provides an opportunity for the seven districts to learn and build capacity together.

### **Collective Practice:**

Early on, the District Leader Think Tank identified two major obstacles to implementing effective partnerships between families, schools, and the community: staff mindset and welcoming environments. The district FSCP leads conducted Welcoming Walk-Throughs at schools and realized that there was a lack of buy-in from front office and other key staff which the district leads call "Directors of First Impressions." As a result, FSCP leads decided to hold professional learning sessions for frontline staff including secretaries, deans of discipline, and school safety officers in the fall of 2017. The group co-designed the session with Michele Brooks, former Assistant Superintendent in Boston Public Schools. The session was well received by participants and led to the development of a Welcoming University specifically designed for the Directors of First Impressions. The opening plenary for Welcoming University brings parents in to share their stories, followed by breakout sessions on a variety of engagement and mindset topics. At the most recent Welcoming University, the group was expanded to add family engagement liaisons, and two-thirds of the participants were returnees.

The quarterly superintendents colloquium was designed to be a professional learning opportunity for district teams where participants engage with national speakers



and experts on specific topics. The ongoing theme for the colloquium has been equity and mindset. As a result, the Hartford Foundation established an opportunity to delve more deeply into these areas with two experts in the field: Dr. Sebastian Cherng from NYU who shared his research on how teacher mindsets impact relationships with minority and immigrant families and student outcomes; and, Dr. Daren Graves from Simmons College, a critical race theorist who works with districts on equity.

Over the last year “equity teams” from all seven districts have come together in multiple sessions with Dr. Graves to unpack current practices and to implement strategies that address identified inequities in their districts. The work of the Think Tank has been the driving force behind these efforts, from identifying experts to lead these sessions and participating on their district teams, to becoming the champion for the work in the district.

### **Impact:**

The work of the Think Tank has shaped how district FSCP leads are connected and supported in a region where districts serve similar student demographics and face similar challenges to building effective family, school, and community partnerships. The Think Tank reduces the sense of isolation often felt by individuals in this role, and district leads share a strong sense of team. Their monthly meetings provide a safe space for discussing challenges and peer learning with the team, serving as both a resource and as thought partners.

The District Leaders Think Tank has provided opportunities for individuals leading the work to build their skills and engage in collective problem solving that has impact at the district level. For example, as the FCE offices began

to take on central registration as part of their work, members generated ideas for technical improvements to the registration process across districts and visited each other’s physical spaces to envision how to make the most of the central registration experience for families. The supports and professional development for Directors of First Impressions provided an opportunity for staff across districts to come together to learn from each other and expand their skills in the area of family, school, and community partnerships. Many of these Directors of First Impressions had never attended any type of district professional development.

At the district level, equity teams working with Dr. Graves are implementing strategies that increase opportunities and access for families and students. In the East Hartford District, all professional development is vetted through the FCE department to ensure that engagement is embedded. In all seven districts, family engagement has been embedded in both the district- and school-level improvement plans.

As the districts begin to receive their final grant allocations, the challenge becomes sustainability of both the family engagement work that is happening in the district and the continuation of the Think Tank. The professional learning community that has grown into the Think Tank provides participants with the space to share accomplishments and challenges, to collectively problem solve, and to build capacity for effective engagement practice in the region. The Hartford Foundation, the superintendents, and the Think Tank members are currently engaged in planning for the long-term sustainability of the Think Tank and the colloquium.

## ROAD MAP PROJECT DISTRICT LEADERS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

The Road Map Project is a collective impact initiative aimed at improving education to drive dramatic improvement in student achievement. The project builds off of the belief that collective effort is necessary to make large-scale change and has created a common goal and shared vision in order to facilitate coordinated action, both inside and outside schools.

Led by the Seattle-based Community Center for Educational Results (CCER), the goal of the Road Map Project is to “increase equitable policies and practices so that 70% of South Seattle and South King County students earn a college degree or career credential by 2030.” Seattle Public Schools is the largest of the seven districts involved in this enterprise, and has identified improving family and community engagement capacity across the region as a major strategy for achieving the overall goals of the project.

IEL worked closely with CCER staff, regional stakeholders, and family engagement leads from each district over an 18-month period to create and implement a regional family engagement capacity-building strategy. Regional field-building activities were designed to take advantage of local talent, unique opportunities, and lessons learned from previous strategic investments, with an emphasis on districtwide strategies that support school/community-level impact while targeting high-need schools.

IEL supported the Road Map Project in three ways: facilitating brainstorming activities to inform a regional strategic planning process; launching a professional learning community among FCE leaders from each district; and

conducting family engagement audits in six of the seven Road Map Districts.

### Regional Strategic Planning

Through backward mapping and other design-thinking processes, stakeholders uncovered regional priorities and desired outcomes while illuminating a proposed FCE Summer Institute as a key touchstone for strengthening the capacity of the local field across the cradle to career spectrum. Participants highlighted a lack of opportunities for parents, families, and school and program staff to build capacity for the kinds of partnerships that support improved student outcomes. While a number of cross-sector leaders in the region had been introduced to key frameworks, other resources, and evidence-based programs, there was still a need for guidance and technical assistance to make meaning of this information in ways that facilitate meaningful and lasting change. IEL worked closely with CCER staff, district FCE leads, and a variety of regional stakeholders to plan and implement a successful summer FCE institute in August of 2016. A second successful summer institute was held in August of 2018 with minimal IEL involvement in planning or execution, an important indicator of local ownership and sustainability.

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**“In a district where principals have a lot of autonomy, a direct result of the summer family engagement institute was that 98% of our principals showed up for capacity-building training — that’s huge!”**

### Family Engagement Audits

Facilitating systemic engagement practice was viewed as a key step in achieving broader field-building goals across the Road Map Project Region. The purpose of the family

engagement audit is to provide districts with the opportunity to reflect, highlight current work, and grapple with existing challenges in a supportive, non-judgmental environment. Collected data assessed demonstrated levels of implementation and examined perceptions of current practice and engagement conditions. The analyses sought to establish a high-level view of each district's structures, systems, and practices and to provide recommendations for solidifying sustainable practice. Recommendations were specifically designed to scaffold and provide guidance to build district capacity, ensuring more coherent and systemic implementation of engagement strategies and practices based on their current context.

The audit process includes several steps:

- An onsite planning meeting with district team members and constituents to identify key elements of the engagement strategy and provide an orientation on the process;
- A review of key documents and artifacts to ascertain how the district publicly articulates the value and expectations for family and community engagement and the structures and systems that support the ongoing work of engagement both at the school and district levels;
- Implementation of a perception survey based on IEL's Systemic Engagement Rubric, which is grounded in research/evidence-based practice and aligned to the Dual Capacity-Building Framework; and
- A final report with recommendations and a debriefing for the superintendent, their senior staff and other key stakeholders.

Identifying district strengths and opportunities, the audit included recommendations in

three categories: systemic, districtwide considerations; capacity-building considerations; and targeted supports for specific "high-need" schools.

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**"The Family Engagement Audit was the catalyst for movement in our district. Bringing together a cross-departmental team to discuss districtwide family engagement showed the importance of the work and took family engagement from the back burner to the forefront."**

### **District FCE Leaders Professional Learning Community**

Launching a professional learning community (PLC) in the midst of implementing a major regional field-building strategy was seen as a way to cement the shift toward systemic engagement practice while creating a local self-directed and self-sustaining vehicle for capacity building, collective learning, and problem solving. IEL facilitated monthly PLC sessions that included skill building (informal/formal power analysis; root cause analysis; progress monitoring and outcome/impact measurement; and analyzing and adapting engagement tools/models) and the use of consultancy models and protocols to provide peer input and feedback.

A number of regional priorities were incorporated into PLC sessions in order to ensure relevance and efficiency, including: Climate Surveys; School Improvement Plans; Educator Evaluation; Common Engagement Language; Budgeting; and Professional Development. In districts with recommendations from an engagement audit, the PLC process provided a specific touch point for action planning around audit recommendations.

## Impact:

Regional stakeholders took field-building opportunities very seriously. For CCER staff, outside expertise provided clarity on what a supportive role looks like for regional district leaders. The PLC process provided structure and credibility while creating space for learning in public and sharing expertise and knowledge. The engagement audit process provided a framework and context for understanding current efforts and a basis for deciding which activities were worth keeping because they are consistent with evidence-based practice, which activities could be tweaked or strengthened, and which engagement activities were no longer useful. The similarities in challenges and demographics across the region added to the ease of identifying solutions that work region-wide, providing a basis for regional strategies, common language and joint problem solving. One Road Map superintendent shared that “having common ground is one of the strengths of the regional network.”

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**“As a superintendent, one of the biggest and ongoing challenges we all face is around engaging families.... There’s always more opportunity and more learning to come together on as a region.”**

## Regional Collaboratives: Lessons Learned

Regional professional learning communities are highly effective vehicles for reducing the isolation of district FCE leaders and building both individual and district capacity to support the implementation of effective engagement. By providing support and connections for building capacity, regional efforts can be a critical strategy for peer learning, expanding

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**“By engaging leaders from all seven Road Map Project districts and building their capacity to support schools, we are working toward better advocacy, leadership, and accountability across the education continuum.”**

authentic engagement practice, and influencing policies and practices at both district and state levels. Analysis of these regional efforts has identified common themes that can guide the approach and strengthen the impact. Effective regional collaboratives focus on the following:

- Promote common language and a shared definition of family and community engagement that can be leveraged across districts to drive the work.
- Acknowledge that while every district is different in their approach, there are foundational elements that must exist for authentic engagement to thrive and be sustained in a district.
- Identify common expectations for engagement that are grounded in the belief that youth, family, and community engagement are levers to achieve equity.
- Create spaces for collective problem solving and innovation that potentially influence and/or inform policy and practices at the district and state levels.
- Provide ongoing opportunities to build the capacity of engagement leaders to collectively identify and address problems of practice and build their leadership skills through peer learning and professional development opportunities.

## ANOTHER CATALYTIC EXAMPLE: THE FLAMBOYAN FOUNDATION

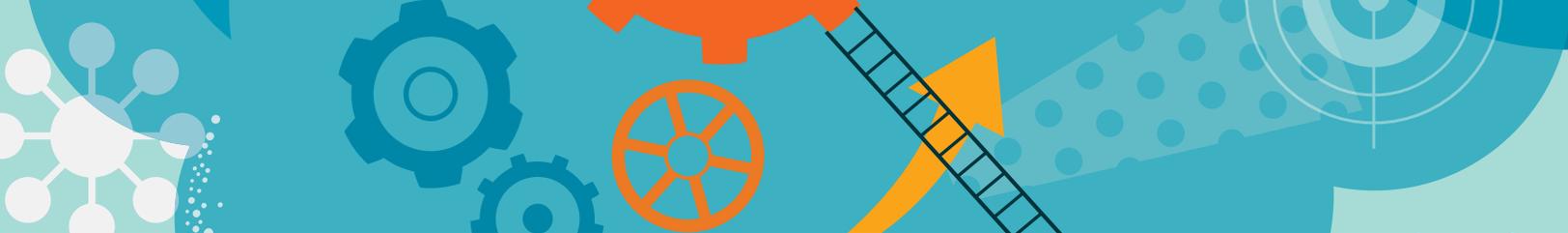
While there are a number of national and local foundations supporting and catalyzing important family and community engagement work across the country, the work of the Flamboyant Foundation stands out. The Foundation focuses on implementing sustainable solutions in Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. Through its Family Engagement Partnership with D.C. Public Schools Office of Family and Public Engagement and a national fellowship program, Flamboyant provides two noteworthy examples of foundation support that catalyzes systemic engagement.

The [Family Engagement Partnership](#) is “a multi-year partnership with public schools across D.C. to support building a culture of effective family engagement within the school.” To support these efforts, Flamboyant provided funding, training, coaching, and tools, while schools created a family engagement leadership team to support effective family engagement practice. Flamboyant’s initial investment focused on capacity building around two high-impact strategies in a limited number of schools: relationship-building home visits (using the [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#) model); and [Academic Parent Teacher Teams](#), a model which offers parents and families practical skills and insights into how to support their child’s academic progress at home through regular

teacher-family meetings facilitated by the classroom teacher. As a result of Flamboyant’s initial investment, D.C. Public Schools has sustained and grown the work across many more schools and incorporated the lessons learned into a broader set of strategies the undergird a truly systemic approach to family engagement.

Flamboyant’s [National Family Engagement Fellowship](#) is a second example of catalyzing systemic engagement. The 20-month fellowship brings together teams of family engagement leaders and advocates, exposing them to researchers and expert practitioners, while building their knowledge of effective family engagement approaches and involving them in strategic planning and “equity-focused program design” for implementation in their local community.

Flamboyant’s first cohort included teams from Nashville, Massachusetts, Kansas City, Baltimore, and Colorado. Aside from participation in a professional learning community with fellows in other sites, each team spent almost 18 months “planning, implementing, and sharing lessons learned about their family engagement work.” As they implement their action plans and pilot projects locally, Flamboyant provides ongoing coaching and support to each cohort. A second cohort was launched in early 2018 with teams from Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis, Utah, and Milwaukee.



# Recommendations to the Field

**S**ystemic, integrated approaches to the implementation of engagement practices have great potential for positive impact on student outcomes and school improvement. Activating these recommendations will help facilitate coherence and alignment of several district priorities and strategies in ways that improve efficiency, staff efficacy, and other outcomes.

## For Districts:

- *Embed family and community engagement into the fabric of the district.* Additionally, engagement should be integrated into district and school leader job descriptions, and engagement skill sets should be explored as part of the hiring process.
- *Ensure that district policies and practices align with district values regarding family engagement as a lever for improvement.* As a core value, family engagement should be reflected in a district's mission, vision, goals, and strategic direction. Districts should conduct a policy review and assess alignment of practices and protocols to ensure effective and equitable implementation.
- *Establish and strengthen districtwide expectations, supports, and accountability for engagement.* Clearly define district-level baseline expectations for engagement that are aligned to core values and goals. If family engagement is an indicator on

educator evaluations, make sure that it is assessed authentically and provide a districtwide menu of supports and tools to ensure schools, educators, and other staff meet expectations. Develop data systems to measure effective practices and monitor progress.

- *Build the capacity of district leaders responsible for engagement oversight.* Provide access to capacity-building opportunities for engagement leaders to ensure their efforts are systemic and collaborative in nature. Ensure that engagement efforts are adequately resourced.
- *Support and promote high-impact engagement strategies.* Districts should leverage data to drive the development and adoption of high-impact strategies that affect student outcomes as well as school and district improvement. Develop data systems to monitor progress and the impact of strategies as well as to drive a continuous improvement process.
- *Educate and engage your school board and other influential stakeholders.* Most school boards value families and conceptually agree they should be engaged, but lack clarity on the extent to which effective engagement is a capacity that must be cultivated and sustained. With high superintendent turnover in many districts, more often than not boards select a new

district leader with no track record of leading effective engagement practice who then unravels years of hard work.

### **For District Engagement Leaders:**

- *Collaborate across departments.* Collaboration not only strengthens engagement efforts, it also distributes responsibility and accountability for outcomes. Aligning engagement efforts to district goals and strategic direction provides the opportunity for building a coherent cross-departmental approach.
- *Build a constituency for engagement internally and externally.* Establishing a shared understanding regarding the benefits and impacts of effective engagement practices with both internal and external stakeholders is critical. Stakeholders provide advocacy and support for sustainability and growth of engagement practice.
- *Shape the engagement narrative.* Assume ownership of the engagement narrative in your district and shape the way engagement is viewed. Leverage data and anecdotes to develop a narrative that tells

the story and promotes engagement in a way that is clear and concise.

### **For State Education Agencies/Higher Education/Leadership Programs:**

- *Include family and community engagement as a core requirement in educator preparation programs, especially for district and school leaders.* Leadership is the driver for effective engagement, as it is with all aspects of district and school improvement. Preparation programs for superintendents and school leaders rarely include intensive coursework on family and community engagement despite decades of research on and evidence of the benefits of effective engagement practices across a range of indicators.
- *Include more robust coursework on engagement in both teacher and administrative prep programs.*
- *The environment is ripe for additional research in the area of family and community engagement.* Encourage and support further study on the impact of engagement on educator practice and student outcomes.



# Conclusion

In *Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next-Generation Family Engagement*<sup>xv</sup>, the Global Family Research Project examines over 50 years of family engagement-related research and policy, confirming yet again the unquestionable benefits that result from engaged parents and strong family-school partnerships. *Joining Together* recommends five “high-leverage” areas as “core building blocks for next generation family engagement strategies”: attendance, data sharing, academic and social development, digital media, and transitions. These areas represent touch points for the involvement of a range of stakeholders, including parents and families, community-based organizations, school and district leaders, as well as teachers, other staff, and partners across the range of settings where children learn and develop. While schools and districts aren’t the only variables in this complex equation, they can and should play a key role in moving the needle in each of these areas.

***Successfully engaging families and strengthening family-school partnerships is a capacity that must be cultivated and sustained.*** Making meaning of the research and applying evidence-based practices to local contexts requires a clear understanding of current engagement conditions and practice. Moving the needle, maximizing impact, and sustaining positive results require strategic alignment, coherence, and intentionality, particularly at the district level.

As districts and schools work to improve the engagement of their parents and families, they are also tackling tough issues such as diversity, equity and inclusion, and reducing the effects of racial bias and low expectations. While the research suggests a number of overlapping or integrated approaches between improving engagement, whole child strategies, and creating more equitable and bias-free environments, districts struggle to align their strategies and often have different personnel leading redundant and/or contradictory efforts.

The move toward better aligned districtwide strategies and systemic engagement requires a comprehensive approach to the myriad challenges districts face — from inconsistency in school-based practices to mistrust between families and staff to the persistence of random activities and events that don’t yield progress on student outcomes. When districts clearly articulate the value of engagement and establish expectations, supports, and levels of accountability, engagement becomes tangible and operational.

Leadership matters both at the district and school levels; it is the driving force for school improvement<sup>xvi</sup> and engagement. Leadership that empowers and engages the adults responsible for the academic and healthy development of children and youth has a significant impact on student outcomes and school improvement. District leadership must hold the engagement of families as a core



value with clear expectations, supports, and accountability.

Integrated engagement structures and systems provide guidance, accountability, and a level of sustainability for authentic engagement. As districts explore this next level of engagement practice, aligning their efforts to the Key Elements of Systemic Engagement is important.

Districts must view family and community engagement as a collective endeavor, distributed across departments with indicators and regular data collection to monitor implementation and provide for continuous improvement. When embedded in a district's core practice, systemic engagement approaches become non-negotiable and can withstand the instability that shifts in leadership often bring — they become a constant.

# Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group was comprised of a group of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers convened in 2009 to share information and shape policy with the White House, the Department of Education, and leaders on Capitol Hill.

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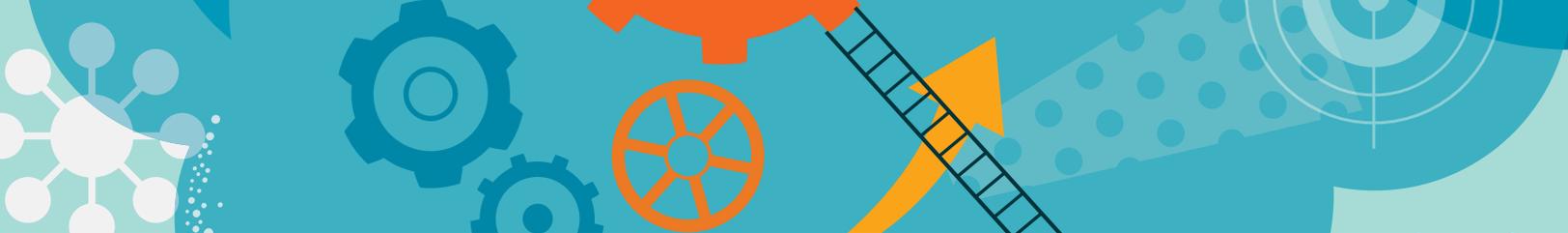
<sup>xii</sup> 2017 Biennial Survey results from the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement.

<sup>xiii</sup> Barton, R., Stepanek, J. (2012) The Impact of Professional Learning Communities. *Principal's Research Review*. Issn 1558-5948 Vol. 7, Issue 4 July 2012

<sup>xiv</sup> J de Jong, Kees & Moolenaar, Nienke & Osagie, Eghe & Phielix, C. (2016). Valuable connections: A social capital perspective on teachers' social networks, commitment, and self-efficacy. *Pedagogía Social Revista Interuniversitaria*. 28. 71-83.

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# About IEL

Since 1964, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) has equipped leaders to work together across boundaries to build effective systems that foster successful transitions from cradle to career, preparing children and youth for postsecondary education, careers, and citizenship. We envision a society that uses all of its resources effectively to provide an equal opportunity for all children and youth to learn, develop, and become contributing citizens of our democracy. As a community-driven, equity-focused organization dedicated to catalyzing and building capacity at the intersection of leadership, education, and workforce development, IEL partners with under-resourced communities through initiatives strategically situated at grassroots, regional, and national levels. IEL uses several strategies to eliminate systemic barriers and [Rise Up for Equity](#).

## **Prepare and support youth, parent, family, and community leaders**

IEL equips community leaders to engage policymakers and fight for change in their communities. We prepare and support leaders of all ages, stages, and contexts who can work effectively across sectors. IEL also collaborates with leaders and policymakers to ensure that transition-age youth have access to high-quality services in education, employment, and independent living.

## **Mobilize to disrupt systematic inequity and discrimination**

IEL joins forces with over 250 partners nationwide to improve opportunities and outcomes in education and workforce development. We mobilize leaders to address inequity and injustice within the community, and we work to advance policy at the national and state levels in support of leaders and their communities.

## **Innovate policy and program strategies in education, workforce development, and civic engagement**

IEL synthesizes research and practice to create innovative solutions that address employment and career readiness of young people and adults. We equip leaders with tools to eliminate systemic barriers in accessibility for people with disabilities and at-risk youth. We model and simulate policy and program ideas that promise to increase access and outcomes in education, youth development, and workforce development before implementing and scaling them.

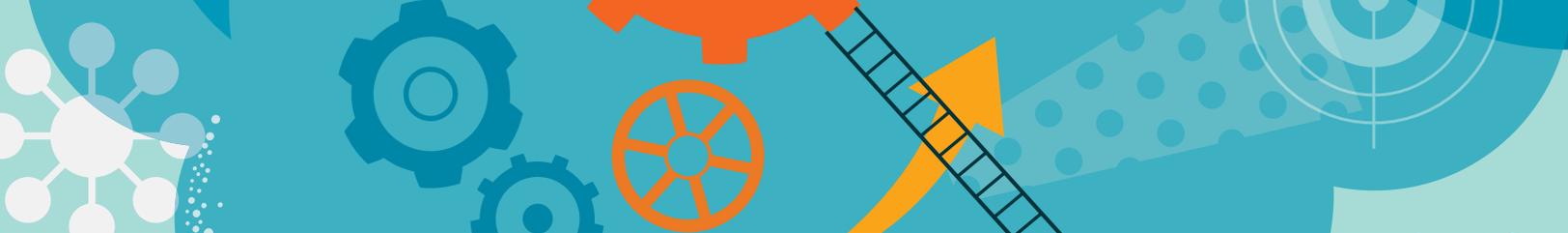
## **Family and Community Engagement at IEL**

IEL's family and community engagement (FCE) work is focused on assisting states, districts, and schools to improve their engagement of parents, families, and community partners



and is built around two broad goals: (1) Improve state and district FCE capacity, and (2) Improve federal, state, and local FCE policy. Aside from support for the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement, one of IEL's primary vehicles for facilitating networking, partnership, learning, and knowledge transfer is the annual FCE national conference. Each year the FCE conference highlights evidence-based practices and leadership at all levels, offering ample opportunities to examine how schools, districts, and communities around the country are realizing mutual goals and aspirations through productive partnerships.

IEL provides a range of supports to school districts including: assessment of current practice; coaching district engagement staff; technical assistance in implementing assessment recommendations and action plans; and designing summer institutes and other professional development and peer learning activities where necessary. Avoiding cookie-cutter approaches, IEL tailors supports and capacity-building activities to the needs and opportunities in each district and community, working with districts on customized action plans informed by assessments of current family engagement policies and practices.



# Authors

**Michele P. Brooks** is a parent activist, educational advocate and educator. She served as the Assistant Superintendent for the Office of Engagement for the Boston Public Schools for eight years before her retirement in June 2015. Her work as Assistant Superintendent in Boston was influential in the development of the U.S. Department of Education's Dual Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnerships. Ms. Brooks is currently the Principal Consultant for Transformative Solutions in Education, a consulting firm which focuses on organizational development, program/evaluation development and leveraging engagement as a strategy for improving outcomes for schools and school districts. She was the founding director of the Boston Parent Organizing Network, serving from 1999 until 2004. She has also served as a member of the Boston School Committee from 2004–2008. A founding member of the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement, Michele is a national expert on systemic family and community engagement. In 2013 she was recognized as *Education Week's* first Leader to Learn From in the area of family engagement. Ms. Brooks is also a board member of National Parent Teacher Home Visits, holds a Bachelor's Degree in Educational Psychology from Cambridge College and a Master's Degree in Education Policy and Management from Harvard University.

**S. Kwesi Rollins** is a member of IEL's Senior Leadership Team, guiding IEL's portfolio of programs designed to develop and support leaders with a particular emphasis on family and community engagement, early childhood education and community-based leadership development. Kwesi directs the District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement and Leaders for Today and Tomorrow, an initiative that designs and delivers professional learning and support opportunities for school and district leaders. Kwesi has years of experience working with local communities and state agencies to improve cross-sector collaboration and service delivery systems supporting children, youth and families. He has provided technical assistance and training to a range of state and county agencies, school districts, local schools, and community-based organizations in projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Kwesi is a board member of National Parent Teacher Home Visits, Parents as Teachers, Attendance Works, the Institute for Democratic Education in America, and the National Association on Family, School and Community Engagement. He holds an MSW degree from the University of Maryland School of Social Work where he was a Maternal and Child Health Leadership Training Fellow.



**Natalie Mayanja and Joline Collins** are key members of IEL's family and community engagement team, helping to design, plan and execute national and regional conferences and learning labs as well as supporting the growth and development of the District Leaders Network. Previously, Ms. Mayanja worked at Envision EMI, where she served in a number of roles, including speaker and congressional affairs coordinator, faculty advisor, and program coordinator for the National Youth Leadership Forum. She earned her MPA in public administration from the University

of Alabama and her BA in international relations from Oral Roberts University. Prior to joining IEL, Ms. Collins worked as a training coordinator for Spitfire Strategies; a national communications firm that works with nonprofits and foundations to provide strategic communication counsel, develop winning campaigns, and increase the capacity of staff through training and technical assistance. Ms. Collins graduated from Roosevelt University with a BA in international studies and a minor in political science.

