

Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement

“A student-led conference lets us [students] know that we have to tell the truth for our teachers to help us and at the same time our parents, to see if they can find a way to help us with the teacher together.”

—Student at Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School¹³⁰

What Students Need

While educator quality is critical to student success, educators cannot do it alone, and their most important partners, aside from students themselves, are students’ families and caregivers. Family engagement is a priority in many elementary schools, but it is difficult to sustain in most traditional secondary schools when there are few opportunities for teachers and families to meet or talk on a regular basis. Middle schools and high schools are typically designed to focus on teaching content rather than taking into account the whole child, including the family. Yet adolescence is a critical time in brain development and social-emotional growth—a time when it is more important than ever for educators and caregivers to be on the same page. Research shows that authentic family engagement can improve attendance rates, create a more positive school climate, and increase academic achievement.¹³¹

Differences between the norms and expectations of home and school can lead to serious disjunctures that cause students to fail in school. If educators do not have the advantage of parents’ knowledge about their children, they may miss important elements that could inform teaching. If parents do not know what the school expects and needs from their children and from them, it is difficult for them to respond in supportive ways. Just as strong teacher–student relationships can provide students with invaluable support, so too are solid partnerships between teachers and families a key component of student success.

Part of the difficulty in creating strong family–school connections is that parents often do not feel welcome at school, especially in secondary schools. Many have vivid memories of their own negative experiences in school. Usually, the school contacts them only to tell them that their child is in trouble: Teachers who call home with positive news are the exception, not surprisingly, given their typical pupil loads and lack of planning time. And when parents do make an effort to reach the school, they must negotiate the difficulties of contacting multiple teachers, counselors, deans, and assistant principals, quite often without reaching anyone who knows very much about their child.

Key Practices

Communication With Families

Schools that have been redesigned to build connections between educators, students, and families enable educators to better support young people and tailor their teaching to individual needs. This process begins with prioritizing **regular, positive communication** with families—a simple step that goes a long way to building trust and making families feel welcome.

This kind of personal communication is a challenge if schools have not redesigned their **structures for personalization**, as described in [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#). A teacher with a pupil load of 150 cannot realistically call most parents on a regular basis. It becomes more feasible for a teacher in a small learning community with block scheduling who carries a smaller pupil load, and even more so for a teacher-advisor in an advisory system who is the primary point of parent contact for 15–20 students. Looping also allows teachers to get to know parents over time and build the trust required for meaningful partnership. Therese Arsenault, founding middle school math and science teacher at Gateway Public Schools, explained the expectations she can fulfill to a small group of students:

There’s a real intention [at our school] of getting to know families: seeing the family as a partner, reaching out at the beginning of the year with, “Hi, my name is ...,” and really talking about what [you have] noticed has gone well with this student so you establish that we’re all advocates. We’re on the same page. There [are] also a lot of phone calls and emails that go back and forth between us and our students. Then, ... [during] the first [student-led] conference of the year, ... you’re really trying to establish the relationship with the parent and the child at that same time.¹³²

Then parents are encouraged to be in touch when they have questions, information, or needs. A parent at City Arts and Technology High School in San Francisco—a school with a well-developed system of advisories and teaching teams—explained how this kind of communication makes them feel:

You call, email, text, whatever method they give you to get in contact with them, and the teachers use it. They check it. They answer it. That’s my personal experience. I have not contacted any of my son’s teachers or principal without an immediate answer, and that’s pretty sweet.¹³³

Parents or caregivers fluent in languages other than English often report that they want to support their students’ learning but cannot communicate with teachers who do not speak their language. At the secondary level, schools often rely on students themselves to interpret; however, while this is often useful, it can sometimes create a challenging dynamic for parents and their children. Effective schools serving students who speak a home language other than English build language capacity by prioritizing hiring **staff who speak parents’ native languages**, so parents feel respected and welcomed in the community. In California, state law requires schools where more than 15% of families speak a particular language to provide all written notices to parents and guardians in that language as well as English. Family-connected schools also provide oral interpretation at schoolwide events and meetings. For languages with smaller populations, schools often set aside funding to pay for

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phone-based interpretation services that teachers can access when needed. No matter the language, all important documents, such as Individualized Education Plans, are translated in advance so that parents can participate as full partners in their child's education.

Flexibility is essential in connecting with all caregivers, especially those with fewer economic means, who care deeply about their children's academic success but often face significant barriers to providing the levels of support that middle-class families can provide. Parents often work multiple jobs, and their work hours can be irregular and lack flexibility, requiring them to show up with little notice or risk losing employment. When work is not available, accessing government aid requires long hours of navigating complex bureaucracies. In many places, public transit is unreliable. If educators interpret these barriers as indicating that families do not care about their children, they are playing into harmful stereotypes.

Effective schools serving students from low-income families respond with flexibility, offering meetings at flexible times and in varying ways. When they host meetings at school, schools welcome parents with food and child care—and if the school is not near where families live or work, educators offer to come to locations that are convenient for parents, such as places of worship or community centers. They use multiple means of communication as well: telephone, email, web postings and chats, and text messages.

One California superintendent noted that, when school sites were closed during the pandemic, he began to offer online informational meetings to families. Whereas usually only a couple of dozen families were able to show up to traditional back-to-school nights, he had more than 2,000 parents and other family members attending these online sessions, which he decided then to continue when schools were physically back in session.

Home Visits

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators took it upon themselves to visit student homes to deliver laptops and hotspots so their students could access virtual learning. But home visits need not only be a response to a crisis: Planned home visits are a research-based approach to building positive teacher–parent relationships at the secondary level. Not only do home visits build trust and engage families, but they also help teachers learn about parents' goals for their children and provide an important learning experience for teachers who do not come from the same communities as their students. When families are uncomfortable having a visit in their home, the visit can be arranged in another community-based location, such as a library, recreation center, or coffee shop.

Some schools make it a practice to organize home or school visits and positive calls home from advisors early in the school year to establish a productive relationship in which both partners are sharing and learning with each other; educators can learn about their students' histories, interests, and needs, and families can learn about the school's approach and how they can support their child. The schools create explicit room in the schedule and/or set aside funds to pay for extra hours for advisors to conduct home visits or school-based meetings with caregivers early in the school year so that the relationships can get off to a trusting start.

As with many family engagement strategies, home visits become feasible with redesigned school structures such as advisories. East Palo Alto Academy High School, for example, organizes family–teacher meetings conducted by advisors with the families of their 15–20 advisees within the first 2 months of each school

year. These may be in homes or other settings in the community, or if the families prefer, they can be held at school. Teacher time is planned and compensated. Advisors share information about their advisees with other teachers and become a key coordinator of information and supports for these students.¹³⁴

Educators at Oakland International High School participate in Parent–Teacher Home Visits,¹³⁵ an approach to home visits supported by a national nonprofit that has been shown to be effective for engaging families, informing teachers, and mitigating bias across cultural, racial, and linguistic lines.¹³⁶ Under this model, home visits are voluntary for educators. In addition, all students in a class are eligible for a home visit—there is no targeting of specific students or families—and teachers are trained and compensated for their time. Educators visit families in pairs and start each visit with a focus on hopes, dreams, and goals to establish a positive relationship grounded in shared values. They frame the visit as the beginning of a relationship rather than a one-time engagement.

Family Involvement

Authentic partnerships with parents and guardians, in which their expertise is tapped, can lead to mutually supportive practices at home and school. Parents can offer observations about students’ strategies, pace, and style of learning; their different strengths and experiences; the ways they express what they know; and the kinds of teaching strategies that are effective for them. When teachers’ insights are supported by parents’ insights, teachers can more easily connect students’ experiences to curriculum goals. In addition to engaging parents around their own children’s learning, teachers in successful schools invite parents to visit classrooms and provide feedback on how the school can create the most effective learning environment possible for all students.

Conferences With Caregivers and Students. Student-led parent–teacher conferences have become an increasingly common practice in elementary schools, and they are effective at the secondary level as well. (See the [Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School profile](#) at the end of this chapter.) In middle and high schools, these conferences are usually managed by the students’ advisors and are often integrated into performance assessment systems. Students select work from their portfolios or examples of their exhibitions and explain to their parents what they have learned, why it matters, and how it connects to their postsecondary goals. These conversations not only allow parents to see students’ academic work and help them understand what is happening in school, but they also provide students with the opportunity to take ownership of their learning and share pride in their accomplishments. As needed for caregivers who speak a language other than English, these conferences are conducted with translation services for the teacher and/or caregiver.

During students’ final year of high school, conferences provide a space where students and parents can discuss concrete **postsecondary plans**. In situations in which a student would be the first member of their family to attend college, educators can work with parents to support the university application and financial aid processes, which are difficult to navigate even when one has been through them before. No matter what a student plans to do after graduation, leaving high school can be a stressful transition, and conferences during senior year allow the student and their family to slow down and have a focused and intentional conversation about the future, including potential challenges and opportunities for support.

Some schools go a step beyond conferences and develop **Academic Parent–Teacher Teams**, a practice in which each teacher hosts three meetings a year with the families of all the teacher’s students together. At the secondary level, these meetings could occur in an advisory or within a small learning community.

Unlike a traditional back-to-school night, where teachers just present information, Academic Parent-Teacher Team meetings are collaborative sessions where teachers and parents together look at trends in student performance and examples of student work, so parents are better prepared to support their children's learning.

Family Services. Another strategy for welcoming families into the school community is running family literacy or continuing education programs (or partnering with community agencies that run such programs at the school) to provide useful services to families. Families who attend such activities at the school during school hours get to know teachers and other school staff and feel more comfortable talking with teachers about their children's education.¹³⁷ (See [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports.](#))

One example of this kind of partnership is the Multigenerational Afterschool Arts Program at the UCLA Community School, where every Wednesday afternoon family members, students, and a local teaching artist coconstruct a curriculum that “engages 30–40 students of all ages in making art that honors their home culture and lived experience as immigrants.” For example, as fears of deportation intensified after the 2016 election, the group created a quilt representing what sanctuary meant to them; the quilt now hangs in the school's Immigrant Family Legal Clinic.¹³⁸

Another example is the Parent Center at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles, where parents and community members can take and teach classes on their interests, sign up to volunteer at the school, and connect with members of the school and broader community. As a school study noted:

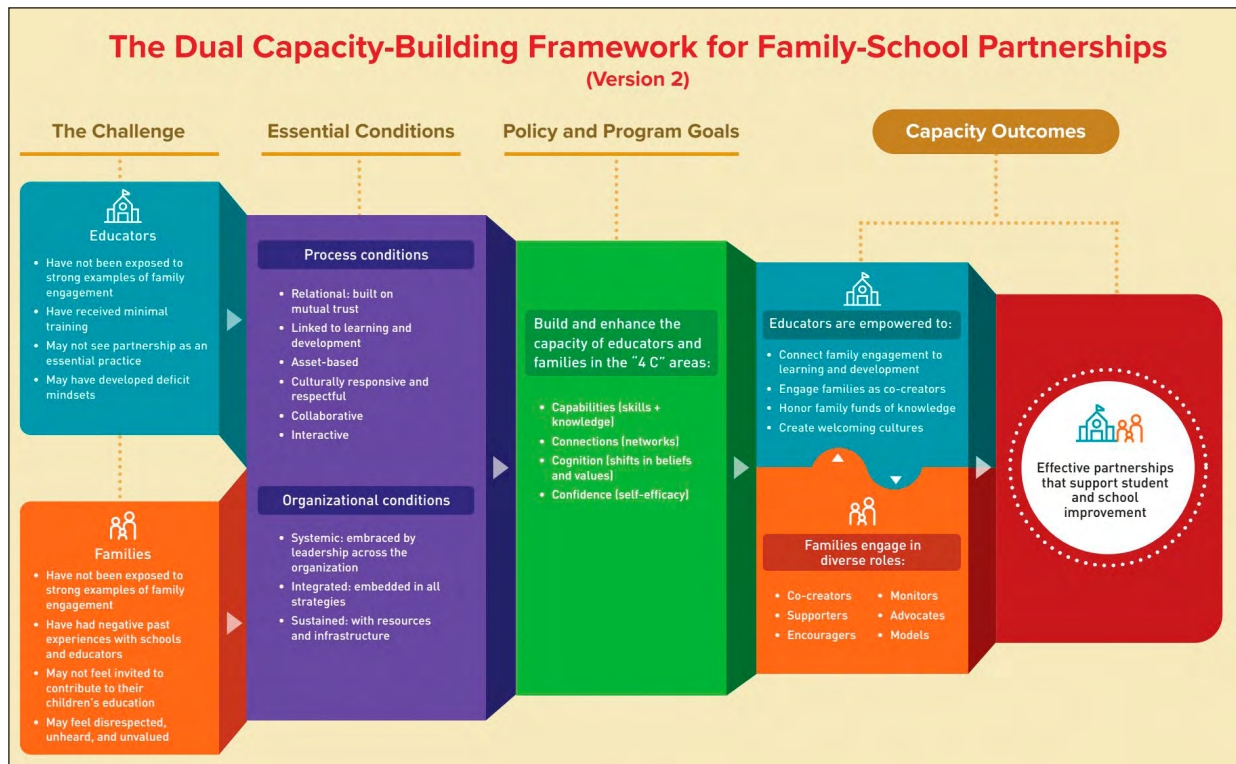
Mendez's robust parent programming provides ample opportunities for families to engage with the school. To foster a love of literacy among parents, which was identified as a goal during a recent needs assessment, the director of the Parent Center—herself a parent—leads a book club. The school also hosts regular Zumba classes, trains parents as *promotoras* (health advocates), and provides opportunities for parents to teach and learn *manualidades* (crafts). These options open the campus up to parents in a variety of capacities, from volunteering in classrooms to full leadership positions, which helps Mendez deliver on its original goal of being a community hub.¹³⁹

Once communication and relationships are built between educators and families, they can begin to partner to create the best possible learning conditions not just for individual young people but also for the school as a whole. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships is a useful resource for developing meaningful partnerships on a schoolwide level. (See [Figure 10.](#)) The framework recognizes that both families and educators bring skills, knowledge, and social capital to the table and that everyone involved must feel confident in taking on leadership and be committed to authentic partnership across roles.

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In a broader sense, family–school connections are essential because they place education where it belongs—at the heart of the community. Unlike the traditional factory-model school representing a faceless system, the redesigned school has the potential to be an integral part of the neighborhoods it serves—and even to help build community in those neighborhoods around the critical goal of education.

Figure 10. Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships



Source: Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2019). Dual capacity-building framework for family–school partnerships (Version 2).

School Profile: Family Participation at Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School



Photo provided by NYC Outward Bound Schools.

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS), a public PreK–12 school within the New York City Department of Education, grounds its mission in its work with families. Located in Washington Heights, the school serves approximately 950 students, of whom 93% identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, 88% are from low-income families, 24% are identified for special education, and 14% are English learners. Its mission statement reads:

Our mission is to work with families to prepare each student academically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially to succeed in the college of their choice and beyond. We provide a small, nurturing environment where high expectations, excellent instruction, and dedicated faculty work relentlessly to meet the needs of all students. Consider our school if you strive to become a skilled problem-solver, effective communicator, adventurous risk-taker, and an active contributor to the school and local community. Our high expectations coupled with our commitment to creating a sense of membership and belonging for all students is why so many of our students are fulfilling our mission, graduating from college and pursuing meaningful careers.

And indeed, 92% of WHEELS students graduate from high school within 4 years, and 76% go on to college or career pathways. WHEELS is part of the NYC Outward Bound Schools network that uses a model created by EL Education that focuses on character and high-quality work along with mastery of knowledge and skills. The school's mission is based on four principles:

1. Instruction and assessment that challenge, engage, and empower learners
2. Access to standards-based, content-rich, culturally affirming curriculum
3. School culture that fosters positive identity, belonging, agency, and purpose
4. Explicit anti-racist discussion, practice, and action

Support for rigorous project-based learning and for connections with families both start with “**Crew**”—the advisory structure in which 15 students and a Crew leader (teacher or other member of professional staff) meet 4 days per week. Crew includes academic advising, individual goal setting, character development, and explicit teaching of study skills. In Crew, students learn to take responsibility for their learning and develop mentoring relationships with adults and peers. Crew leaders are responsible for tracking and supporting the behavioral and academic success of students and maintaining strong communication with families, serving as the primary point of contact for a student’s family regarding all school-related matters. Crew leaders develop strong relationships with families and contact them regarding students’ attendance, academics, and social-emotional and physical well-being through calls, emails, and meetings throughout the year.

Part of that communication includes **student-led conferences** three times each year, at which students present to their families and Crew leader selected work products and reflect on their growth and next steps. In student-led conferences, all students also reflect on WHEELS Habits of Work and Learning (responsibility, craftsmanship, perseverance, and curiosity) and Community Values (integrity, collaboration, respect, and compassion).

At his first student-led conference in 10th grade, Rafael discussed his progress with his Crew leader and his mother, who this year was happy to have all three of her children at WHEELS. He began by introducing himself to his mother, which occasioned laughter all around. He had chosen two pieces of work to present and reflect on. The first was a global history thematic essay for which he had to use a set of documents to investigate and write an essay on a theme dealing with “economic systems.” In reflecting on the process of producing the essay, he noted that, at one point, “I kind of lost track of how to do it, but then we had a lesson on that, and I got it down.”

The second was a piece of work from his AP Spanish Literature course, in which Rafael confessed he was struggling. Fluent in Spanish, he noted that “it was surprising, because I thought it would be like last year’s [Spanish] class.” His Crew leader, who was his Spanish teacher the year before, noted that this class was different because “it’s very literature-based.” Rafael agreed that “the text is difficult,” but he continued, “It’s hard but I know I can do it because I’m that kind of student who doesn’t give up so easily,” voicing perseverance, one of WHEELS Habits of Work. He and his mother discussed how important it is to ask for support when needed, and his Crew leader volunteered to take a look at the texts with him.

As they were setting goals, Rafael noted, “I don’t like to make mistakes. Last year, me and my mom had a goal for me so that I would stop having a fear of being wrong in front of the whole class.” His mother added, “Just take the risk and raise your hand and be wrong once in a while. That’s a strategy to learn.” Rafael agreed. Later, in reflecting on the value of the student-led conference, Rafael noted that it allowed both his teachers and his mother to support him in his work: “A student-led conference,” he noted, “lets us [students] know that we have to tell the truth for our teachers to help us and at the same time our parents, to see if they can find a way to help us with the teacher together.” The partnership between families and educators at the school is a key ingredient in the ultimate success of the students. As Rafael’s mother said with emotion after the conference, “I see that they’re going to pull these kids to be a complete success, and as a parent I have no words to thank them.”

Sources: EL Education. (2012). *High school student-led conference* [Video]; [Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School](#).

Additional Resources

Communicating With Families

- [3 Ways for Schools to Engage Families of Older Students](#), Edutopia: This web page provides links to videos and resources that can help practitioners develop strategies that better engage families of older students.
- [4 Ways to Improve Communications With Families](#), Edutopia: This article describes tips and resources that can support educators in building strong communication with students' families.
- [The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#), Karen L. Mapp and Eyal Bergman: This framework was designed to help districts and schools chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts.
- [Making Families Feel Welcome](#), Greater Good in Education: This brief reflection activity for school staff lists methods for making students' families feel valued and respected.
- [SEL With Families & Caregivers](#), Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): This web page explores partnership opportunities and two-way communication that invites families to participate in planning processes and support social and emotional learning.

Home Visits

- [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#): This web page compiles resources for educators, families, and communities to help implement home visit programs, including tools for getting started, training, and outreach.
- [Virtual Home Visits: Building Essential Relationships](#), Stand for Children: This web page includes a guide and an app designed to make virtual home visits easier.