



# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

A Roadmap for  
Building Authentic  
School-Family  
Partnerships that  
Boost Student Learning

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 **CPRL** | Center for Public  
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# Introduction

**Scholars and practitioners have, for decades, suggested that purposeful partnerships between schools and families can help enhance student learning experiences and improve students' academic and socioemotional outcomes** (Mapp et al., 2022; Ishimaru, 2019a; Ishimaru, 2019b). When families and teachers work together, they can create more supportive, aligned, and consistent learning environments in school and at home. When leaders include families in school and district decision-making, they can support more culturally affirming education that meets students' needs.

**Too often, however, schools do not make these opportunities available for families, particularly in traditionally marginalized communities** where these opportunity gaps threaten to exacerbate educational inequities (Winthrop et al., 2021). Many schools and districts have not set up the structures to effectively bring families to the table, nor have they equipped educators with the tools, resources, time, space, and encouragement to meaningfully engage families. As a result, families are often spectators in the work of schools, their expertise and cultural capital overlooked or devalued (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Parent engagement activities that do happen are often one-off events driven by educators (e.g., classroom volunteering, chaperoning school events), rather than authentic ways to involve families as partners in supporting students' learning (Henderson et al., 2007). This is especially true in communities that are marginalized based on race, class, language, or immigration status (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). In these communities, school-family partnerships have been at best a "nice to have" and at worst nonexistent. As a result, families "feel uncertain and unwelcome in working with schools" (Winthrop et al., 2021).

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**WHEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS PRESENT, IT IS NOT AN ADD-ON BUT CORE TO THE WORK OF SUPPORTING STUDENT LEARNING AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING. ACTUAL AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS ENHANCE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES."**  
- CARNEGIE GRANTEE

**This report offers a theory of change and case studies aimed at transforming how organizations support schools in engaging families in their children's learning. It is informed by the work of 10 organizations serving communities throughout the United States** where families have not traditionally been invited into schools. As part of Carnegie Corporation of New York's Family Engagement to Advance Student Learning grant program, these organizations spent two years working alongside the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to build their leadership capacity and try out and assess new strategies for their school-family partnership initiatives.

**The theory of change, codeveloped with participating organizations,** first describes conditions such as organizational leadership, mission, and continuous improvement practices that



help enable and support school-family partnership work. It then provides an overview of promising programmatic activities resulting in successful school-family partnerships, such as equipping families and educators with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to work together. It capitalizes on the unique insights of participating organizations, shedding light on the complexities they experience in building school-family partnerships and the promise of these efforts in shifting students' learning experiences. The report then presents a set of recommendations for nonprofit organizations, schools, districts and funders that want to build similar partnerships, particularly in areas of the country that have traditionally not invested in these approaches and where partnerships can make a significant difference in student outcomes.

Organizations participating in the Carnegie grant found that school-family partnerships can lead to more **responsive learning environments** that provide safe, welcoming, culturally affirming learning spaces and opportunities for students within and outside school tailored to meet their developmental levels, needs, and interests. Ultimately, these environments can lead to greater academic success and stronger social and emotional well-being for students.

## The Theory Of Change At-A-Glance

### Enabling organizational conditions for strong school-family partnerships

- **Culturally competent leadership:** Organizational leaders with a deep understanding of families' lived experiences in the communities they serve, who build trust by listening to others' stories, sharing their own, and valuing and celebrating the assets that families bring to the table.
- **Power-shifting mission, vision, and values:** A codified organizational commitment to challenging traditional power dynamics within schools and leveraging families' expertise and cultural capital.
- **Relationships with partners:** Authentic and purposeful organizational connections with families, educators, and school and district leaders to build buy-in and create champions for the work.

- **Continuous improvement practices:** The use of reflective practices to rapidly and effectively adapt programmatic strategy based on evidence of success or failure.

### Programmatic activities that lead to successful school-family partnerships

- **Capacity building:** Equipping families, educators, and school and district leadership with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to work together to support student learning.
- **Listening and learning:** Providing the space for educators and school and district leaders to listen and learn from families about their experiences in schools and the dreams and needs of their students.
- **Coproduct:** Using skills gained from capacity building and knowledge gained from listening sessions to codevelop learning plans, resources, policies, and practices that are connected to student learning.

**This report lays out an inclusive school-family partnership model that focuses on building family and educator capacity and providing space for families and educators to listen, learn, and codevelop, all in service of building responsive learning environments for students.** This type of partnership does not require educators to step back from their role in schools, and families need not assume the role of teachers. Rather, it proposes that students benefit most from the collective strengths and understandings of both families and educators. When educators and families join forces, there is more knowledge about students and greater capacity to support them.

**Importantly, this report acknowledges that there are real challenges and barriers to school-family partnership work,** including the need to shift educator and family mindsets and to navigate persistent school challenges, such as educator turnover, finite time and resources, and meeting children's basic needs. This report posits that if organizations help create structures and systems for authentic and purposeful school-family partnerships, we will in turn address many of these barriers. With families and educators working together, there will be a greater ability to support students and their learning.



# Background

Our research is based on learnings from Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Family Engagement to Improve Student Learning grant program. The organizations funded through these grants advance change through a variety of school-family partnership programs in communities across the country that serve diverse populations, including indigenous families in rural South Dakota and Alaska, Latino immigrant families in urban California, and Black families in Philadelphia, PA, and Durham, NC. See Table 1 for a description of each organization, their core activities, and the populations they serve.

From March 2022 to March 2024, CPRL worked with these grantee organizations to build their capacity to design and measure their school-family partnership work at both the classroom and system levels. We learned alongside these organizations as they tested new strategies, assessed their success, and used learnings to inform program improvement. Throughout our work with the organizations, we leveraged the Dual Capacity-Building Framework as a foundation and guide (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The Framework, developed by Dr. Karen Mapp and colleagues, emphasizes the importance of breaking down traditional power imbalances between educators and families. It calls for the development of a “liberatory, solidarity-driven, equity-focused” family engagement built through intentional capacity building for educators and families. Each organization in the Carnegie cohort invested in this type of capacity building to support stronger, more equitable school-family partnerships.

At the end of the grant program, CPRL and the organizations codeveloped a theory of change that identifies the enabling conditions and promising strategies across organizations that most often lead to strong school-family partnerships that support more responsive learning environments. It builds off of extensive action research conducted with the cohort. Together, CPRL and participating organizations gathered, coded, and made meaning of structured conversations and program artifacts from the two year grant



program. **The findings reinforce the Dual Capacity-Building Framework and take it a step further by identifying practical ways nonprofit organizations can implement the theory.** Specifically, the report answers the following questions:

- What enabling conditions do organizations have in place to support strong school-family partnership programs?
- What promising programmatic strategies do organizations use to build strong school-family partnerships?
- What lessons can organizations, funders, schools, and districts learn from these organizations to create change?

TABLE 1

| Organization   | Whom They Engage  | Location                                | Grade Level                  | Type of Change   | Key Levers  |
|--|---|---|------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Connectedly</b>                                     | Grandparent caregivers  | Philadelphia, Pennsylvania              | Elementary                   | Stronger grandparent support for students, particularly around literacy  | Capacity building for families  |
| <b>Building Skills Partnership</b>                     | Property service workers and their families   | Los Angeles, California                 | All levels                   | Stronger family support for students, particularly around college and career and mental wellness                   | Capacity building for families  |
| <b>Latinos in Action</b>                               | Families at schools where Latinos in Action classes are offered to students               | Northern Utah                           | High school                  | Stronger family support for students, particularly around college and career                                       | Capacity building for families  |
| <b>Parent Institute for Quality Education</b>          | Families, educators, and leaders at schools   | Central Valley, California              | Middle school                | Stronger family support of students; improved school-level practices around student learning and family engagement | Family and educator capacity building; listening sessions; coproduction |
| <b>South Dakota Statewide Family Engagement Center</b> | Families and school teams   | On or near tribal lands in South Dakota | All levels                   | Improved school-level policy and practice around student learning and family engagement                            | School team capacity building; listening sessions; coproduction         |
| <b>Families and Schools Together</b>                   | Parent coordinators (PCs) and school teams, composed of PCs, teachers, and school leaders | Milwaukee, Wisconsin                    | Elementary and middle school | Improved school-level policy and practice around family engagement   | Parent coordinator capacity building; coproduction                      |
| <b>Federation for Children With Special Needs</b>      | Families, educators, school and community leaders across the district                     | Brockton, Massachusetts                 | All levels                   | Improved district-level policy and practice around student learning and family engagement                          | Educator and family capacity building; listening sessions; coproduction |

Continued »

| Organization                                 | Whom They Engage  | Location                    | Grade Level   | Type of Change  | Key Levers  |
|--|---|-----------------------------|---------------|---|---|
| <b>Association of Alaska School Boards</b>   | Families, educators, and leaders across the district        | Southern and western Alaska | All levels    | Development of culturally affirming resources; improved culturally affirming practice among families, educators, and leaders, grounded in these resources                 | Educator and family capacity building; listening sessions; coproduction |
| <b>Village of Wisdom</b>                     | Families, educators, and school leaders across the district | Durham, North Carolina      | All levels    | Development of culturally affirming resources; improved culturally affirming practice among families, educators, and leaders, grounded in these resources                 | Educator and family capacity building; listening sessions; coproduction |
| <b>National Center for Families Learning</b> | Families, including students, and educators at schools      | Jefferson County, Kentucky  | Middle school | Development of virtual reality science projects addressing a community need; stronger educator and family support of students, particularly around science and technology | Educator and family capacity building; coproduction                     |



# Theory of Change

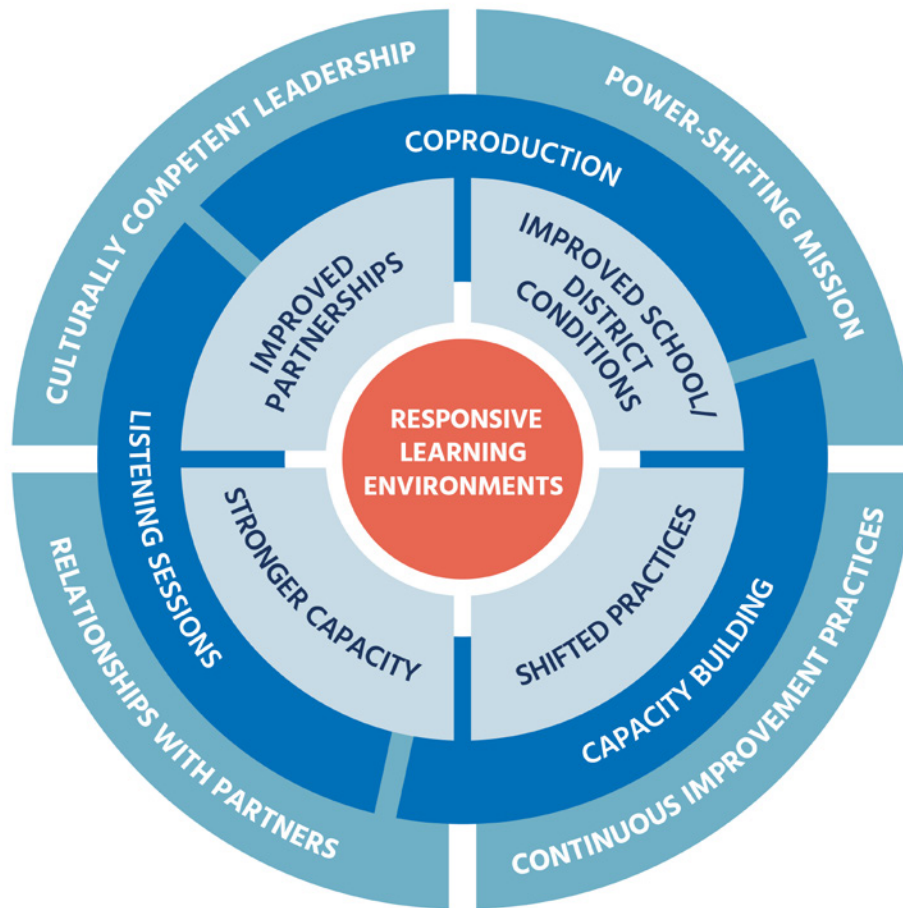
Based on our learnings from the cohort, we propose the following theory of change for how organizations can support schools in building strong, trusting school-family partnerships that lead to responsive environments for student learning (see Figure 1). The theory includes three components:

- **Enabling conditions:** The organizational inputs or foundational supports and systems that function as precursors and catalysts for implementing effective practices that directly affect school-family partnership outcomes.
- **Activities:** The specific programmatic practices, processes, or intentional steps that organizations put in place to achieve their desired outcomes.
- **Impact:** The outcomes of the organization's work, including changes in family and educator skills, mindsets, practices, and partnerships and school or district practices that ultimately lead to more responsive learning environments for students.

Each step in this theory is *logically connected* to the others. The enabling conditions (the outer circle) include the necessary resources for exercising the organizational activities; the organizational activities (middle circle) can reasonably be expected to produce the desired impact (inner circles). Because the level of performance at each of the preliminary steps serves as a leading indicator of performance at the next steps, the theory can be used to diagnose the root cause of weakness or failure in achieving the desired impact.



**Figure 1. Theory of Change for How Organizations Can Support School-Family Partnerships**



Effective organizations have these **enabling conditions** in place (outer circle):

- **Culturally competent organizational leaders** who can relate to the communities they serve and engage them in culturally affirming ways.
- **Power-shifting organizational mission, vision, and values** that ground the work and highlight their commitment to leveraging families' expertise and cultural capital.
- Ground-level **relationships with partners**, including families, educators, and school and district leaders, who can help codevelop school-family partnership strategies that meet communities' needs.
- **Continuous improvement practices** that allow them to consistently reflect on and improve their programs and strategy so that they more effectively achieve their goals.

Effective organizations engage in a series of programmatic **activities** (middle circle):

- **Capacity building** for families, educators, and school and district leaders, which lays the foundation for school-family partnership work by providing skills for partnering in culturally affirming ways.
- **Listening sessions**, or opportunities for educators to learn from families about their experiences with family engagement and their children's learning.
- **Coproduction**, an intentional and equitable process in which families and educators codevelop resources, practices, policies, or student learning plans that address gap or improvement areas, often identified in listening sessions.

When organizations effectively engage in these activities, they realize their **impact**.

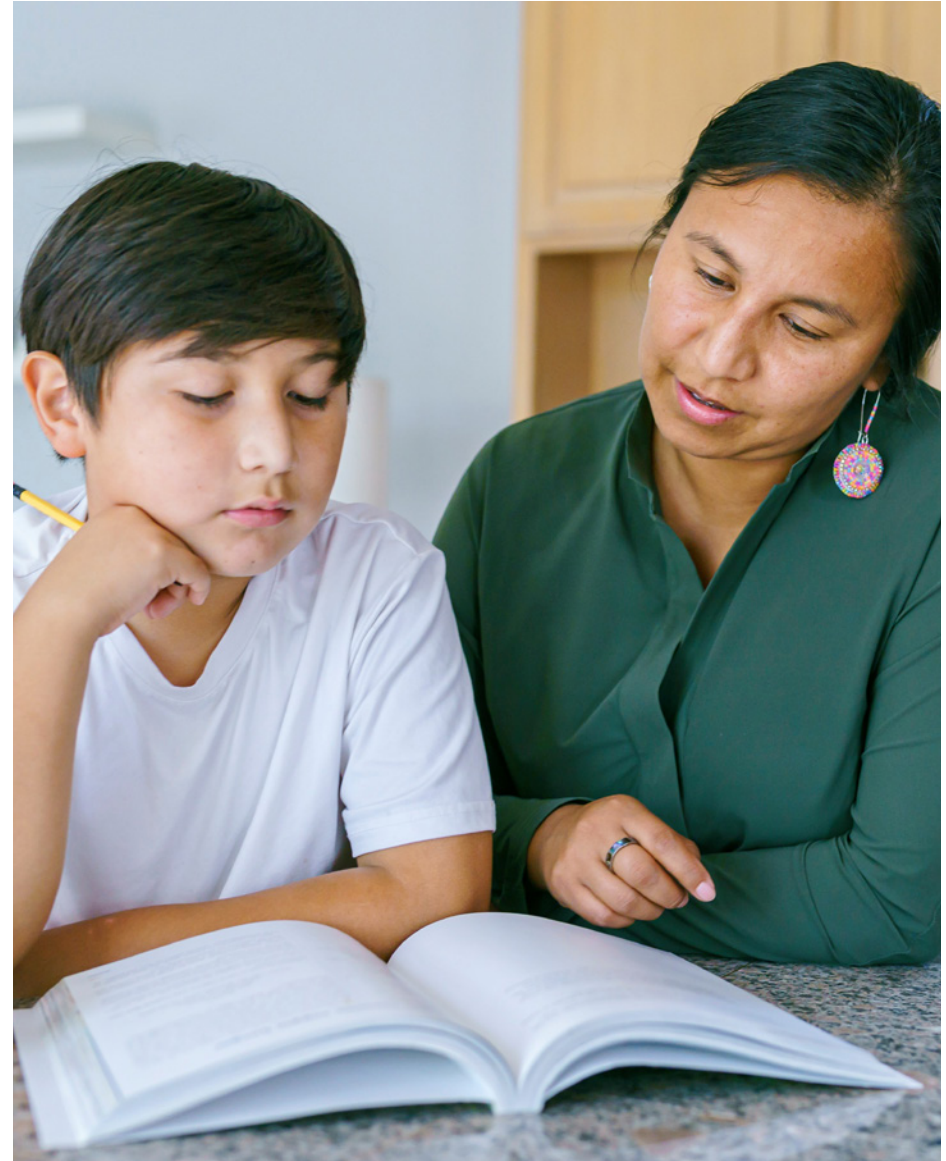
- They build **stronger capacity** among families and educators. Families gain the skills, knowledge, and confidence to support their children's learning and to communicate and engage with educators and schools. Educators build the skills and knowledge to partner with diverse families in asset-based, culturally affirming ways.



- With newfound capacity, families and educators **shift their practices**. Families more often work alongside educators to facilitate learning opportunities at home and in school and/or support educational decision-making. Educators more often integrate culturally affirming practices, including creating welcoming cultures for families and providing opportunities to work together to support students.
- As a result, families and educators have **improved partnerships**, grounded in *mutual trust* (families and educators respect one another, value one another's funds of knowledge, and view one another as honest and reliable partners) and *shared power* (families and educators both own educational actions and choices and see the impact of those actions).
- In addition to shifting individual families' and educators' capacity, practice, and relationships, organizations also **improve school and/or district conditions** and culture to support continued family-school partnerships through, for example, the creation of new family-informed resources, new structures for codesign, and shifted practice and policy around family engagement.

Ultimately, when families and educators have stronger connections and there are shifts in the ways that schools and districts operate around family engagement, there is the potential to create more **responsive learning environments** for students.

While this is an ideal model for organizations that want to build strong school-family partnerships, every organization engaging in school-family partnership work may not have the full suite of elements in place. Some organizations may assess community needs and feel that it is most urgent to focus their energy and resources on capacity building for families, for instance. Still others may want to invest in each element of the theory but require more time to build capacity and funding to scale toward the full model. **This model serves as a road map, not a prescription, and organizations can plug into it where it makes the most sense given their communities' needs and their organizational maturity.** In the next section, we describe each part of the theory of change and provide practical examples of how organizations can engage in this work.





# Enabling Conditions for School-Family Partnership Work

There are several core conditions or practices that must be in place at the outset for organizations to effectively engage in the work of building school-family partnerships. Each of these conditions is described below, along with examples of what these conditions look like in practice.

## Culturally competent organizational leadership

Organizations developing school-family partnership programs have leaders with a deep understanding of families' lived experiences in the communities they serve, including available resources and how power and privilege are determined and distributed in schools and communities.

Program leaders also have cultural humility, or an understanding that their cultural knowledge will never be complete, and a sincere desire and commitment to keep learning. Where possible, leadership comes from the communities they serve, so that communities can see themselves in their leaders and see a future for themselves as leaders in the work. Where needed, professional development and training centered on biased beliefs and mindset shifting can help create or deepen culturally competent understanding.



**The Federation for Children With Special Needs (FCSN)** engaged the head of family engagement at Brockton Public Schools as a coleader of its initiative to create district-level change through family-educator partnerships. This leader is an immigrant to the United States and shares the same cultural background as many of the families FCSN serves. She cultivated strong connections with families by listening to their stories, sharing her own, and finding areas of commonality. “Her leadership enabled the work to happen. Her own personal narrative and understanding of the immigrant experience ... and the fact that she speaks their language, causes them to have a level of trust with her,” an FCSN staff member said. She helped validate the initiative for families, who were less familiar with FCSN. Participants were also inspired to participate when they saw someone with a background similar to their own making real change in the school system.

**Latinos in Action (LIA)** prioritized building a staff and board that reflects its Latino community in Utah. Said the LIA program director, “Latino families face multiple barriers to supporting and advocating for their children within the dominant culture of the U.S. school system, and our majority-white teaching workforce is often underprepared to engage with Latino families in effective, culturally responsive ways.” Since the organization reflects the Latino communities it serves—its staff is 92% Latino and its board of directors is 100% Latino—participating Latino families felt a sense of safety to share their own experiences in their own language with LIA staff. “Being a Latino-led organization means that our Latino families can see themselves in our leadership and staff,” the program director said.

## Power-shifting organizational mission, vision, and values

Organizations developing school-family partnership programs demonstrate a strong commitment to empowering families to have a voice and influence in their children's learning alongside educators. This commitment is codified in a programmatic mission, vision, and values that are developed and shared by staff and participants and are “top of mind” when designing, executing, and evaluating the success of a program.

**Village of Wisdom's (VOW)** leadership, staff, and community members together codified a mission statement for their work in the predominantly Black community of Durham, North Carolina: “Close the academic opportunity gap by protecting the intellectual curiosity and positive racial self-concept of Black children through the love and wisdom of families and communities.” VOW uses this mission to inform its programmatic strategy: Black parents codesign culturally affirming and liberatory learning resources and environments inside and outside the classroom. They also serve as leaders, cofacilitating workshops for educators who are interested in improving their engagement with Black parents and instruction of Black students. To hold themselves accountable to their power-shifting mission, they regularly conduct a “Culture of Care” debrief with families and staff during their “Rest, Reflect, and Learn” quarterly sessions.

## Relationships with partners

Organizations building school-family partnership programs invest time at the outset to foster authentic relationships with families, students, and communities, as well as educators and leaders at the school and district levels. When developing relationships with families, staff listen to their experiences with schools and educators, their dreams and desires for their children, and their families' challenges. They share the program's power-shifting vision and mission and discuss how school-family

partnerships can enhance their children's learning and well-being. Organizations meet families where they are—at school events, at churches, on the phone after work, or at their workplace if appropriate. Said one organization leader, “When we focus on building relationships with current or prospective participants, they show up. Before people even walk in the room, we need to invest in those relationships.” Building strong relationships with families also involves engaging them as central partners in program design and improvement to ensure the relevance and practicality of workshops and activities.

**Building Skills Partnership (BSP)** leverages its partnership with the Service Employees International Union–United Service Workers West to build relationships with their program's target participants: janitorial and airport staff with school-age families. With the union's support, BSP staff set up information tables at job sites and plan family events—like college and community resource fairs—that showcase BSP programming and help staff make critical connections with families. BSP staff also schedule a call with every new program participant and engage in an informal needs assessment, often conducted in Spanish, to learn about their children's experiences at school, family resources provided by their schools, and their comfort accessing and communicating with educators. Staff also share their own experiences and challenges with families. “Our first conversations are open to make them feel comfortable voicing their own experiences. We show ourselves as human beings,” the BSP director said. “They are willing to participate because we've built that rapport with them.” These conversations also give BSP the feedback needed to create innovative programming to address family needs and goals. BSP also trains parent leaders who have participated in programming in the past to work alongside staff to engage new families. Said the BSP program director, “The fact that BSP has staff and parent leaders that connect with participants culturally is a strong contributor to our building a firm level of worker-community trust at the outset.”

**Latinos in Action (LIA)** also builds on existing partnerships to develop a strong rapport with families. LIA reaches out to teachers and students they work with at more than 30 schools across three districts to encourage their families to attend family nights. On these nights, they make presentations about LIA programs and get to know parents and students by inviting them to share their experiences in their own language. LIA staff members share their background and experiences, too. Thanks to this targeted school-level outreach, LIA shared, “We had unprecedented growth. We had four parents at the outset, and we shot up to approximately 60.”

Organizations building effective school-family partnership programs also **build strong relationships with educators and school and district leaders**, who can help inform strategy, champion the work, and create the time, space, and structures for the work to happen. When connecting with school and district leaders, initial meetings focus on helping them understand the power-shifting mission and vision of the program, aligning on shared goals and needs for the school and district, and building out the logistics for implementing the initiative at the ground level. Building relationships with education leaders requires a shared understanding that this work can benefit both families and educators because it is a strong lever for supporting improved student learning and well-being.

Organizations working at the school level spoke about the importance of building strong principal buy-in, so the principal can actively and enthusiastically message the initiative to staff and families, prioritize time to focus on family engagement, and help embed family engagement into the culture and fabric of the school. Similarly, organizations spoke about the importance of finding a district-level champion for the work—likely someone in the family engagement office—and working with other district offices to embed family-engagement work across initiatives and into the culture of the district.

**“If principals and district leaders do not buy in, the work will not be prioritized and therefore will not get done. There is a lot of lip service and a box-checking approach to family engagement. Principals and district leaders say that it is important, and even establish departments that are called “Family Engagement.” But if the deep lessons of family engagement and its value for improving student learning are not diffused throughout all departments—e.g., if the teaching and learning department does not embrace family engagement too, and it’s not built into the structure and culture of the school/district—it won’t really happen on a deeper level.”** —Carnegie grantee

The staff at **Parent Institute for Quality Engagement (PIQE)** started building a relationship with the school leader at their first program site over several conversations. They led an informal needs assessment to understand the state of school-family partnership work in the school and what support families and educators needed. Based on their learnings, the PIQE team shifted its plans to better address the needs of the school community. For example, instead of offering an action-oriented civic engagement program, the staff developed a new family workshop series to build family leadership skills before engaging in policy and practice change. The principal also connected PIQE with staff throughout the school to help forge more welcoming environments for families. Said the program director, “The principal was a key element [in building school-wide relationships]. He brought in the whole school, from the front desk to the janitors. There was a lot of time invested on his side. [That was] the gateway.”

**Families and Schools Together (FAST)** in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, invested in building a strong relationship with the leader of the district’s Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, who, in turn, helped them find school partners, connect with parent coordinators, understand the district landscape and its needs, and champion this work across the department. With the support of the FACE specialist, FAST staff had a summer training with the FACE team to get to know them and their roles, to provide data about the value of school-family partnerships, to share more about the program and its goals, and to offer tools and strategies for supporting parent coordinators. These connections have helped build a base of support for the work across Milwaukee Public Schools.



### Continuous improvement practices

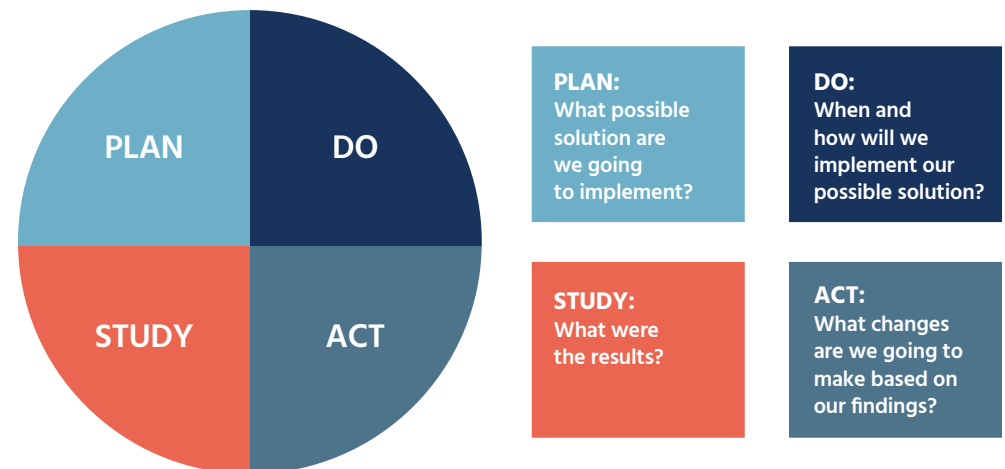
Organizations that develop strong school-family partnership programs regularly reflect on evidence of success or failure and use it to adapt strategy and programmatic implementation plans as a core condition for supporting their programmatic work. Organizations engage in reflective practice by (a) regularly collecting data aligned to their measurement framework and assessing the implications of that data for their program work and (b) testing small-scale solutions and measuring their success (see Figure 2). Continuous improvement work is often done in collaboration with key partners, including families and educators, who can provide critical insight for improvement. When done right, it leads to on-the-job learning for organizational staff and participants.

Organizations like **Connectedly** also engage in reflective practice by testing small-scale solutions to emerging problems and measuring their success, using a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. For example, Connectedly staff identified that health or transportation issues prevented some grandparents from attending capacity-building sessions in person. They tested a small-scale solution that they had hoped would increase attendance, offering the option to connect via Zoom. But they quickly learned that some grandparents struggled with digital literacy and internet connectivity issues. So Connectedly adapted their solution by offering Zoom sessions along with home visits to provide technical assistance. This improved workshop attendance.

The **Federation for Children With Special Needs (FCSN)** team regularly collects multiple sources of data aligned to their measurement framework that helps them understand and reflect on how their activities are challenging traditional power dynamics and engaging typically marginalized stakeholders. First, they measure the balance in the demographics and roles of participants in strategic planning meetings. They strive for a mix of family members, educators, leaders, and community members, and diversity by racial and cultural background, locale, and need areas (e.g., families of students with disabilities, non-English speakers, families experiencing homelessness). At each meeting, FCSN also measures balance in voice (or speaking turns) among participants with varying levels of power using an observation tool. In addition, they survey participants about whether they feel heard after a meeting. Then FCSN staff and participants convene to engage in data walks to review participation and voice. Based on data collected, they identify imbalances and find strategies to shift attendance and prioritize particular voices within meetings.

Figure 2.

Continuous improvement through a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle



# Effective Programmatic Activities Around School-Family Partnership

With these enabling conditions in place, organizations engage in a series of intentional, power-shifting programmatic activities that help them build impactful school-family partnerships. These activities are described here with examples of this work in practice.



## Capacity building

### **How to build family and educator capacity**

Strong school-family partnership programs invest time and resources in capacity building, a critical step for future activities. Capacity building equips families, educators, and school and district leaders with the knowledge, tools, and mindsets needed to effectively engage in strong partnerships, while valuing the skills and knowledge they already possess. Organizations often differentiate learning sessions for families, educators, and leaders to create safe spaces for these partners to reflect, learn, and ask questions and to limit influence or intimidation, even unintentional, before bringing them together.

Capacity building is most effective when there is a focus on building safe, supportive communities for learning and collaboration among participants across multiple, in-person sessions. Creating strong bonds among participants helps increase engagement and commitment to the work and builds social capital. Building safe and supportive communities—particularly for families—also means using inclusive practices for participation, including (a) communicating, sharing materials, and holding sessions in preferred languages, (b) providing opportunities to engage through multiple modalities (e.g., in person and virtual) and at convenient times, (c) meeting in a safe environment, (d) providing transportation or childcare, and (e) providing opportunities that are responsive to different learning or contribution styles.

The **Connectedly** staff worked hard to build connections and sustainable support networks among grandparents through community-building exercises and creating safe spaces for open, honest conversations about struggles and successes. “One of the most valuable parts of the workshop is for grandparents to connect with other people in the same boat,” Connectedly’s program director said. “Every week ... I don’t even ask, they just tell me how thankful they are for the group and for each other. One grandparent had back surgery, and the other grandparents offered to drop off and pick up her granddaughter from school.” LIA similarly encouraged community building by allowing intentional time for pre- and postworkshop conversations and connections. According to LIA, “We planned an hour to hour and a half, but these sessions ended up being two hours with parents lingering” to chat with one another and ask questions.

Organizations also found success when they embedded **opportunities for practice**, like role playing, into sessions. These opportunities allowed participants to try out new skills in a safe environment, particularly new skills around communicating effectively with educators, school and district leaders, and families.

**BSP** uses the “I and You Messages” capacity-building activity from the UnidosUS Padres Comprometidos secondary-level curriculum to help family members practice positive and productive communication with educators and to avoid conversation strategies that can turn into conflict. Participants learn that “you messages” more often than not label, judge, and blame another person and can result in a counterattack. “I messages,” on the other hand, describe your own personal experience and help improve understanding and problem-solving. Participating families have the opportunity to role-play with peers during these sessions around use of these statements. Said the BSP director, “This activity is especially helpful when working with family participants who can be very vocal when it comes to their rights and holding their employers accountable. This activity helps to build on their skills and identify the most effective messaging to advocate for their student’s success.”

Capacity building has also been effective when participants are provided **clear assignments** that they can implement right away to see positive change. By coupling professional learning opportunities with explicit activities to apply that learning, organizations can help families and educators make profound shifts in thinking and behavior.

Said the **LIA** program director, “We asked parents to do some homework and come back and share. Sometimes their homework would involve saying affirmative things to their children and observing their reaction. We also set some homework assignments where parents would go have a meeting with a school counselor and attend parent-teacher conferences. The purpose of these small homework assignments was to allow parents to feel confident about what resources were available to them and their children.” After an educators workshop, PIQE staff asked educators to think of an event that families could plan with them, rather than just sending invites to families. After a family workshop, they asked participants to present to school leaders their concerns about and solutions for improving student learning.



LIA staff lead parents in a capacity-building session.



In addition, capacity building works best when **facilitated or cofacilitated by peer parent leaders or educators**. Said the BSP program director, “Having parents as cofacilitators and allowing them to lead these conversations with others allows parents to understand they have the power to change their mindset, gain new skills, and be able to better support and advocate for their children. It creates a sense of relatability and possibility for parents in the sessions.” It is similarly effective when educators cofacilitate educator capacity-building sessions, since they can share what is possible in practice within the classroom and school setting. Importantly, when parent leaders or educators are prepared to work as cofacilitators, they can sustain capacity building beyond the time that an organization is working with a school or a district. When done right, capacity building is not a one-off occurrence but a sustained practice embedded into schools and districts, with capacity-building sessions continually offered to families and educators through professional learning sessions, grade and subject-team meetings, and onboarding opportunities for new staff and leadership.



BSP staff help parents build skills to support their children’s education.

### What to teach in family capacity-building sessions

The content of capacity building varies based on the needs of the community as identified during initial relationship building with partners, and it is often adapted regularly based on partner feedback. However, organizations have found that capacity building for families is most helpful when it focuses on

- (a) understanding how to navigate the education landscape, including the key players, the opportunities for participation, and the resources available;
- (b) affirming the value of their role as partners and advocates for their children;
- (c) building skills and confidence to engage with educators and act as partners and leaders in supporting learning;
- (d) developing digital literacy to communicate with educators, to view students’ progress, and to support students’ learning; and
- (e) growing skills to communicate and work with their children at home, particularly around core areas like literacy and math in the earlier grades, college and career at the upper grades, and mental health and wellness throughout.

Organizations emphasize to families that they are already leaders and have the human, cultural, and relational assets and skills needed to advocate for their child and collaborate with key players in the school system, even if they have not used those skills often in the education context. For example, at BSP, where the families engaged are airport workers or janitors, the participants were asked to consider how they can use their experience communicating with their union representatives to talk with their child’s teacher about their homework or Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

### What to teach in educator capacity-building sessions

For educator capacity building, organizations found it most helpful to build an understanding of

- (a) what strong school-family partnerships look like and their value for improving student learning, using data and real-world examples of success;
- (b) families’ cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, including the expertise that families have; and
- (c) how to engage in culturally affirming communication and practices with families, including how to partner to support student learning.

**FAST** provides capacity building to parent coordinators who play critical roles in MPS schools. Parent coordinators act as a bridge between parents and staff members and work to ensure a comprehensive family engagement strategy at their school. They are demographically representative of families in a way that teachers sometimes are not and bring critical lived experience and neighborhood context and expertise to their role. FAST engages parent coordinators in monthly professional development and a community of practice (CoP) that helps them identify and clarify their roles at their schools; strengthen and deepen their relationships with their principals and other school colleagues; and see the strengths that they bring to their positions and how they can use what they have learned and what they already know to make needed change at their schools.

FAST emphasizes the importance of safe, supportive communities for learning. The parent coordinator CoP provides an opportunity for participants to share promising practices and challenges they are facing and to receive relevant and tangible support. “The development of a CoP was even more important than we had thought. These are not people that meet regularly. Many of them didn’t know each other and they became a community. The growing trust between CoP members illustrates the power of social capital building: knowledge sharing becomes more likely,” the FAST program director said. FAST also emphasized practice and role-playing for parent coordinators, including gaining skills in asking their principals questions and explaining what they need to strengthen family engagement at their schools.



FAST paired capacity building for parent coordinators with monthly coaching sessions for school teams from an experienced FAST coach. These sessions helped schools identify challenges they might be facing in their family engagement work and develop an action plan to propel the work forward. To further support this work, parent coordinators and their school teams engage in the FAST readiness assessment, which measures their schools’ progress across six domains of family engagement and serves as a starting point to guide future action.

#### **Six Domains of Family Engagement**

- Family-friendly environment
- Partnerships between teachers and families
- Linking family engagement and student learning
- Communication

- Bridging racial, class, and cultural differences
- Family advocacy and empowerment

FAST is also facilitating professional development (PD) around family engagement for all school staff. The educator PD helps “provide strategies, information, and some concrete tools that teachers can use tomorrow in their classroom to begin to build a more positive, trusting relationship with families and to communicate more effectively,” the FAST director said. By supporting parent coordinators, school teams, and educators throughout the school, FAST can help embed family engagement linked to student learning into the school-wide culture.

## Listening and learning

Strong school-family partnership programs build the time and space for listening and learning sessions that allow families' voices to be heard. In these sessions, guided by a structured protocol and facilitated by trained leaders, families are encouraged to share their experiences with educators and leaders at their children's school or district, including their particular needs and interests when it comes to supporting their students' learning. These dialogues acknowledge and celebrate the assets, knowledge, and expertise that families bring to the table and help them feel empowered and heard. In addition, participating in these dialogues helps educators see the value in families' contributions and builds their understanding of what families see as areas of strength and areas for growth.

When conducting listening sessions, organizations pay careful attention to **identify facilitators who share the audience's culture, language, and experiences** to help build trust with the group. They are also mindful of power dynamics by asking people in power to listen, and they provide equitable time for different stakeholders to share their opinions and experiences. Importantly, organizations engaging in listening sessions **train educators and leaders to facilitate them on their own** so that schools and districts continue to listen and learn from families even when organizations are no longer working with them. The learnings from these sessions set the stage for future planning and coproduction to address gaps.

**South Dakota Statewide Family Engagement Center (SDSFEC)** conducts listening sessions with families at partner schools to understand their experiences at the school and their hopes for their children. Prior to these sessions, SDSFEC staff coach educators on how to step into a room with families in a way that will minimize a shift in power dynamics, through the appreciative inquiry approach. With this approach, the "school has to sit quietly ... and effectively listen ... instead of immediately responding or negating," the SDSFEC program director said. The idea is that educators come to the conversation hearing from families "not about what's wrong, but instead what is possible." Below are the four questions SDSFEC often asks family participants. Their goal is to limit the questions to just a few that can help surface wide-ranging thoughts. Following these conversations, SDSFEC develops an analysis of strengths and needs for each school that is shared with the family engagement leadership team and is used for action planning.

### SDSFEC sample questions from listening sessions.

What makes you feel welcome at this school?  
 What is the vision that you have for your child as an adult?  
 My child would be more successful if the school would \_\_\_?  
 How did it feel to be part of this focus group?

**Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB)** conducts family dialogues that prioritize cultural safety for participating Alaska Native families. The goal of these sessions is for families to give concrete ideas about how to deepen the partnerships and tools needed to support their children's social-emotional and academic learning. These ideas are then prioritized and used for district-wide tool and resource development. The AASB program director said that "it was critical to make that ... welcoming space [with listening sessions], especially with families we tend not to hear from. We can see incremental change. It takes a lot of work to undo systemic inequities." They particularly mentioned the value of listening to families to help make education resources more culturally appropriate (AASB, n.d.). "We need families to be the decision-makers of what is responsive." To sustain family dialogues, AASB is training district leadership to host them in communities and schools on their own.

### AASB sample questions from family dialogues.

- In one word, what does our community look like when we work together?
- What are you most proud of in your community or school?
- What can we do to support learning at home and at school?
- How can we incorporate community knowledge into our learning?





AASB staff hold a listening session with caregivers.

## Coproduction

Building on the skills learned through capacity building and the learnings from listening sessions, strong school-family partnership programs encourage families and educators to work together to develop a product or outcome that addresses a critical need. Coproduction often looks like families and educators working together at the school or district level to develop and implement resources, programs, practices, or policies that address system-level gaps. It goes beyond codesign by involving stakeholders in every step of the design and production process, not just in providing ideas and thoughts. It “is an approach to [creating] with, not for, people ... [and] elevating the voices and contributions of people with lived experience”

(McKercher, 2020). Said the National Center for Families Learning program director, “Traditionally, we have had people far from the problem, sitting in a room somewhere coming up with a solution and then going to the community and telling them what they need. Coproduction says the members of the community should be partners in identifying the problems and the solutions.” By engaging families as equal partners in decision-making, coproduction can lead to “more relevant and impactful outcomes ... and can foster a sense of ownership, buy-in, and empowerment among families,” the project director at FCSN said.

Coproduction works best when there is a **focus on the dynamic of the group or team** involved, such as when time is set aside for community building

among families and educators to create a sense of belonging, trust, and connection; when commitments, goals, and vision are codeveloped; and when there is an intentionality about sharing power, voice, and leadership in the room. Said McKercher (2020), “When differences in power are unacknowledged and unaddressed, the people with the most power have the most influence over decisions, regardless of the quality of their knowledge or ideas. To change that, we must share power in decision-making and design.”

Coproduction also works best when participants use an **accessible participant-driven problem-solving process** that involves understanding stakeholders’ needs and aspirations (often from listening sessions), defining these needs, creating responsive solutions, and continuously improving solutions through learning and iteration. During coproduction processes, participants are encouraged to **focus first on small wins** so that they can see the value of the work and be encouraged to continue. Then they move on to larger projects, which may take several years to implement. Importantly, organizations are intentional about setting up sustainable partnership structures to continue this work after they have left the school or the district, to realize the work’s full impact. The FCSN program director said that they are planning for “the educator-family group to operate without us being involved, that [the district] uses [FCSN] as a resource, and that they are able to meet their goals on their own.”

**FCSN** has a strong coproduction model. The organization created a district-level strategic planning team with a core group of families, educators, and community members to coproduce solutions for family engagement and student learning and well-being. FCSN focused on community building to help the group create a collective identity, feel comfortable sharing lived experiences with honesty and vulnerability, and offer one another a support system. FCSN used multiple methods to facilitate positive, equitable relationships among codesign groups:

**Progressive stacking** recognizes that there can be an imbalance of power among people in any group (Wright, 2018). One way to give all voices equal weight is to give people who are furthest from the circle of power and privilege the chance to speak first—families instead of school and FCSN staff. Progressive stacking is a key tool used to develop norms for the codesign group. All members of the team are invited to suggest a norm they believe should be adopted by the group, with those farthest away from power suggesting first.

**Leadership compass self-assessment** establishes a common language and framework for team collaboration before codesign (Be the Change Consulting, 2010). This activity aims to develop a deeper understanding of each team member’s strengths and how each person might work with and challenge other points of view. The goal is to reduce tension among team members by building awareness and facilitating effective teamwork through empathy, flexibility, and compromise.

FCSN also focused on creating a participant-driven process by developing a flexible agenda and letting team members take the lead on each step. “[The participants] are claiming this space for themselves. It’s one of the most participant-driven projects that we have been able to do. One person starts on an idea ... and it becomes a popcorn,” the FCSN program director said. The process included the following:

**Step 1. Vision statement:** What do we, as a district team, want to see in place in our community by 2025 as a result of our family engagement efforts?

**Step 2. Current realities:** What realities (strengths, needs, opportunities, threats) in our district does the team need to consider?

**Step 3. Prioritizing and following through:** What specific realistic actions will we take, as a team, over the next year to reach our vision?

FCSN shared how small wins—i.e., small shifts in practice at the school and district levels brought about by their group—have inspired further work and collaboration. For example, their group encouraged the district to train staff to use a translation system so that families can contact their schools. Said the program director at FCSN, “[There was] a shift in practice at the district level ... that responsiveness is a change for them.” Overall, FCSN shared that the benefits from facilitating coproduction in school districts is that “the district is hearing [families], rather than just giving them space to speak. Educators are hearing things that they usually don’t hear, things they usually don’t have access to.”





Families, educators, and community members following a codesign session with FCSN facilitators

**Village of Wisdom (VOW)** also engaged in a coproduction process to create culturally affirming tools that help parents, students, and teachers develop more responsive learning environments for children of color. The process started with several sessions and design work with Black parents over three months. They were asked to remember when they were affirmed and valued by others and to use those memories to define and design a holistic approach that affirms and protects Black students at home and in the classroom. Early during the prototype phase, the Black parent designers sat in spaces with educators, who were testing some of the strategies and offering feedback. That feedback contributed to the refinement of the strategies and organization of the toolkit. VOW saw the value of this coproduction process “in closing the problem-solution gap because those most impacted—parents and students—were centered in coming up with solutions” (Village of Wisdom, n.d.).

Each of the programmatic activities in the theory of change require time and dedication from educators and families, many of whom have a great deal of other responsibilities. Organizations that effectively engage in strong school-family partnerships find ways to respect boundaries by offering differing commitment levels and opportunities that align with participants’ needs. Said the SDSFEC program director, “Don’t make this complicated. What are simple things you could do to integrate this [partnership work] into what they’re already doing? If you’re asking them for more time, what are you taking off their plate?” At the same time, organizations have found that when educators and families engage in power-shifting partnership work, what initially starts as an additional task ends up providing critical leverage for transforming students’ learning environments and outcomes.



FCSN brainstorming sessions



# Recommendations

Our learnings suggest some action steps that nonprofit organizations, funders, schools, and districts can take to build strong school-family partnership programs that result in responsive learning environments.

## Nonprofit organizations

- **Hire locally.** Hire a leader from within the community who understands families' experiences and is strong at building relationships with families and educators.
- **Engage the community.** Listen and learn from the community about their hopes, dreams, desires, and needs, and use that knowledge to develop targeted programming and capacity building. Then show stakeholders how their recommendations were used to inform the work.
- **Focus on educator relationships.** Invest in shifting the mindsets and building the capacity of school and district leaders, so that they buy into the work. Make sure district staff in both the family and community engagement offices and in teaching and learning divisions believe in the work so that family-community partnership work is infused into the culture of the system.
- **Build structures and opportunities that elevate families' voices and build intentional bridges with educators.** For example, create spaces where educators can listen to families, learn alongside them, codevelop learning plans for students, or design new practices and policies at the school or district level.
- **Don't be afraid to take risks.** Try new strategies, measure whether they're working, and iterate based on results.
- **Develop a measurement plan that includes quantitative and qualitative measures.** One common pitfall of this work is focusing exclusively on easy-to-measure quantitative outcomes like participation and attendance. Consider pairing that with measures that are more qualitative,

such as participants' perspectives, which can elucidate the nuanced story of the work.

- **Offer accessible opportunities for families and educators to engage,** particularly families that have children in different schools, those in which both parents work outside the home, and multigenerational households.
- **Build leadership among families and educators to continue the work.** Consider supporting schools and districts with the work for at least two years, while building the capacity of families and educators to take over the work.
- **Partner with community organizations that can complement your organizational capacities.** Collaborate with others who can fill in gap areas for your organization—for example, organizations that have strong relationships with local education leaders or that have more experience with codesign.

## Funders

- **Invest in local organizations that focus on the hard work of building relationships and healing community divides.** Typically, organizations that reach large numbers of people are viewed as having a big impact. However, local organizations that build deep relationships with historically underserved communities are having an outsized impact based on the depth of their relationship building. Some communities require deeper engagement because of deeper fractures, deeper divides, and lack of trust between schools and families.
- **Consider funding organizations that are at different levels of implementation of the theory of change.** Some organizations are just beginning to build their capacity to do the types of work described in the theory of change. When considering which organizations to fund, place more emphasis on whether they are meeting the needs of their communities rather than whether they have implemented the full theory of change.

- **Support organizations with professional learning focused on building strong programmatic infrastructures.** Organizations that serve historically marginalized communities are often underfunded, operating with limited staff, and relying on passionate individuals who have deep community ties. Professional support and development is crucial for leaders with strong backgrounds in community building but without the experience to build strong programmatic infrastructure. Launching strong programs requires tools for developing a strong strategy and measuring its impact and support for troubleshooting challenges as they arise.
- **Encourage opportunities for problem-solving and continuous learning.** School-family partnership work is challenging and requires organizations to be nimble and pivot. Organizations should have the opportunity to provide data to funders showing why something didn't work, why they needed to pivot, and how that pivot has shown success, rather than being held strictly accountable to an initial set of grant metrics.
- **Allow local organizations to provide evidence of impact through storytelling and other qualitative methods, along with typical quantitative measures.** Measuring the impact of this work is highly qualitative. A singular data point, like the number of participants, does not capture the full story of the impact of the organization's work. Equipping organizations with the tools to build qualitative measures, focused on narrative and storytelling, will help them share the depth of their impact more effectively.
- **Acknowledge that this work takes time and patience.** It's hard to expect change in one year with school-family partnership programs, given the complexities of developing relationships and trust. Consider how to give grantees a longer runway for this work. At the same time, provide a sufficient on-ramp or planning time for this work. Start funding organizations in the spring to prepare for an early start to the school year.

## Schools and districts

- **Spend time building a culture and mindset among educators around the benefits of engaging families.** Set aside staff meeting time or professional development days at the beginning of the year to equip

educators and other school staff (including office staff) with the knowledge and tools to engage families in culturally competent and equitable ways. Emphasize that school-family partnerships, when implemented effectively, can help educators more effectively support student learning and social-emotional outcomes.

- **Try new and varied approaches that meet families where they are, particularly those that have not typically engaged in school-family partnership work.** Contact families by phone or use a survey to learn about their needs for engagement, including location (virtual or in person), transportation and childcare needs, language preferences, and availability. Engage the support of your school's parent coordinator, who has relationships and experiences within the community and who is someone they may trust.
- **Create and prioritize spaces and structures for educators to listen to families.** Set aside the time and space for families to come into the school or another safe location to share what they enjoy about the schooling experience and anything that they would change. Prepare educators to enter these spaces and to "step back" while families "step forward."
- **Create opportunities for families to engage in joint decision-making.** Include families on school-based teams tasked with making decisions that affect student learning and family engagement at the school and district levels.
- **Ask for help from community-based organizations.** The family and community engagement ecosystem includes other community-based organizations that can help bring additional resources. Partnering with an outside organization can bring in the expertise to help facilitate the work at the school and district levels, while reducing the burden on school and district leaders.
- **Set up a leadership succession plan within your school for this work,** and embed school-family partnership work into onboarding practices so that it is sustained over time, even with educator and parent coordinator turnover.

## Conclusion

Schools limit their capacity to create responsive learning environments when they fail to embrace the skills and expertise of families. School-to-family partnerships—like those described in the theory of change—that are grounded in shared leadership and are intentional and sustained can transform learning environments for students to thrive. As the program director from AASB said, “We hear a lot from teachers and principals: ‘I’m not sure I want to open this door.’ We’re saying that there is so much good that comes from that, and it has to be opened and remain open.” The FAST director added, “When family engagement is present, it is not an add-on but core to the work of supporting student learning and social-emotional well-being. Actual authentic partnerships with parents are going to make educators and school leaders’ lives easier and enhance students’ experiences.”





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