

Forward Together

Building a Field that Works for Families

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 **CPRL** | Center for Public
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About CPRL

The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University is a partnership of university-based professional schools that works to revitalize public education while reinventing professional education. Since its launch in 2011, CPRL has trained over 500 future leaders, all of whom have helped staff CPRL's research and consulting projects. CPRL's emphasis on broad community and family participation and collaborative problem-solving ensures that CPRL's recommendations, supports, and tools leverage diverse perspectives and strengths, are customizable to local communities, and promote equity and lasting change.

Acknowledgements

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“Parents will exercise their power with pitchforks, but they will put down pitchforks and pick up shovels and build with a system if systems are willing to respect them and acknowledge that they should have a say in what is getting built.”

—foundation leader

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic revealed the necessity, the complexity, and the tremendous value of building strong ties between schools and families. To ensure continuity of learning, schools were forced to rely heavily on families and caregivers to support learning in the home.

But the conversation around family engagement is not new. The value of family involvement in education has been clear for decades, with strong evidence establishing this engagement as a critical driver of student academic and socioemotional outcomes.¹

Building on this robust research base, the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) in 2016 began to explore a strategy of building the home-to-school connection. CCNY partnered with EY-Parthenon to study the role of philanthropy in bringing strong family engagement practices to schools and districts. EY-Parthenon found that funders actively supported family engagement, but the field lacked clear definitions of what constituted engagement and needed to create infrastructure to allow for shared learning and field building.²

In response to these findings, CCNY launched a Public Understanding strategy, focused on enhancing the school-to-home connection, building the leadership capacity of parents, and increasing the field's understanding of family engagement. CCNY's investments included direct services that improve the home-to-school connection, efforts to advance educational equity for low-income families, and the development of new products to increase family engagement.

To examine how its strategy and the EY-Parthenon analysis have influenced the family engagement field, CCNY enlisted the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University. This report presents the findings of the CPRL study, which uncovered evidence that the field is **more developed and robust in 2021 than it was in 2016**. In particular, CPRL observed that the family engagement field has:

1. a field-level agenda that recognizes effective family engagement as a core driver of student outcomes;
2. a strong extant knowledge base;
3. a growing and diversifying coalition of foundations and organizations, including a dynamic contingent of community-based organizations;
4. a movement toward funding structures that invite leadership from families and communities; and
5. a more established and inclusive field infrastructure that forms the connective tissue in the field, including national and regional intermediaries and learning collaboratives.

1 Epstein, "School/Family/Community Partnerships," 701; Garbacz et al., "Parent Educational Involvement, 629-660; Henderson and Berla, *New Generation of Evidence*, 14-16; Henderson and Mapp, *New Wave of Evidence*.

2 CCNY, "Family Engagement Landscape Analysis for Funders"



The first section of this report provides background on the study's analytic framework and outlines the study's methods. CPRL used Bridgespan's Field Building for Population Change to organize its analysis of data collected through a systematic literature review, qualitative data collected through expert interviews³, and data from IRS 990 forms to assess philanthropic giving.

The second section summarizes CPRL's assessment of the field's developmental stage against five core characteristics. The report concludes with recommendations for funders and a call to action:

To advance field development, funders must increase, coordinate, and sustain their support for community-driven parent and family engagement work.

³ Raw data and the names and organizational affiliations of sample participants from all CPRL projects remained confidential during these discussions.

Background and Methods

Research on family and community engagement predates the pandemic-related influx of attention to the field. Scholars and practitioners have, for decades, suggested that purposeful partnerships between schools, families, and communities can improve academic and socioemotional outcomes for children and benefit communities more broadly.⁴

Increasingly, researchers and practitioners have brought to the fore disparities in which families and schools engage, making the distinction between parent “engagement” and “involvement”⁵ and highlighting the development of culturally responsive strategies to better serve diverse populations of parents.⁶ In 2015, shifts in federal education policy via the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) spurred increased research on effective family engagement strategies,⁷ though the degree to which the research on family engagement affected practice in schools, organizations, and foundations varied greatly.

In 2016, as momentum around family engagement was growing, CCNY engaged EY-Parthenon to conduct a landscape analysis of philanthropic activity in the field. The study painted a picture of a burgeoning but somewhat scattered field. Funders invested \$230 million in organizations, programs, and research but lacked consensus on the core definitions and goals of family engagement efforts. At the time, foundations relied on traditional, top-down funding models, with foundation staff making decisions about grants in isolation rather than in collaboration with families and communities. This practice resulted in a limited understanding of what families

and communities truly needed. Additionally, philanthropic giving was focused on two areas: getting information to families about how to support their children academically and organizing families to advocate for system-level changes, like charter schools. Minimal funding supported the development of field-level infrastructure (e.g., intermediary organizations, convenings, common tools) so frontline actors could learn from one another.

In 2021, five years after the EY-Parthenon study concluded and five years into its updated Public Understanding strategy, CCNY enlisted CPRL to provide a new assessment of the field, building on CPRL’s experience supporting meaningful and authentic engagement efforts by school systems and school support organizations and CPRL’s own research on family engagement, including recent work on (a) the importance of families in supporting children in remote learning conditions, (b) the essential nature of democratic family and community engagement in building equitable public education systems, and (c) the role of high-quality curricular materials in building the school-to-family connection.

CPRL’s analysis of the family engagement field was guided by the following questions:

- To what extent have there been changes in family engagement funding since 2016?
- To what degree has consensus emerged about key issues, including the definition of family engagement and what success in this area looks like?
- What activities are funders supporting, and how should we make sense of the range of activities?

4 Epstein, “School/Family/Community Partnerships,” 701; Garbacz et al., “Parent Educational Involvement,” 629–660; Henderson and Mapp, *New Wave of Evidence*.

5 Baker et al., “Identifying Barriers,” 161–184; Ferlazzo, “Involvement or Engagement?,” 10–14; Ishimaru, “Family Engagement to Equitable Collaboration,” 350–385.

6 Grant and Ray, *Home, School, and Community*; Fenton, et al., “Power of Parent Engagement,” 214–225.

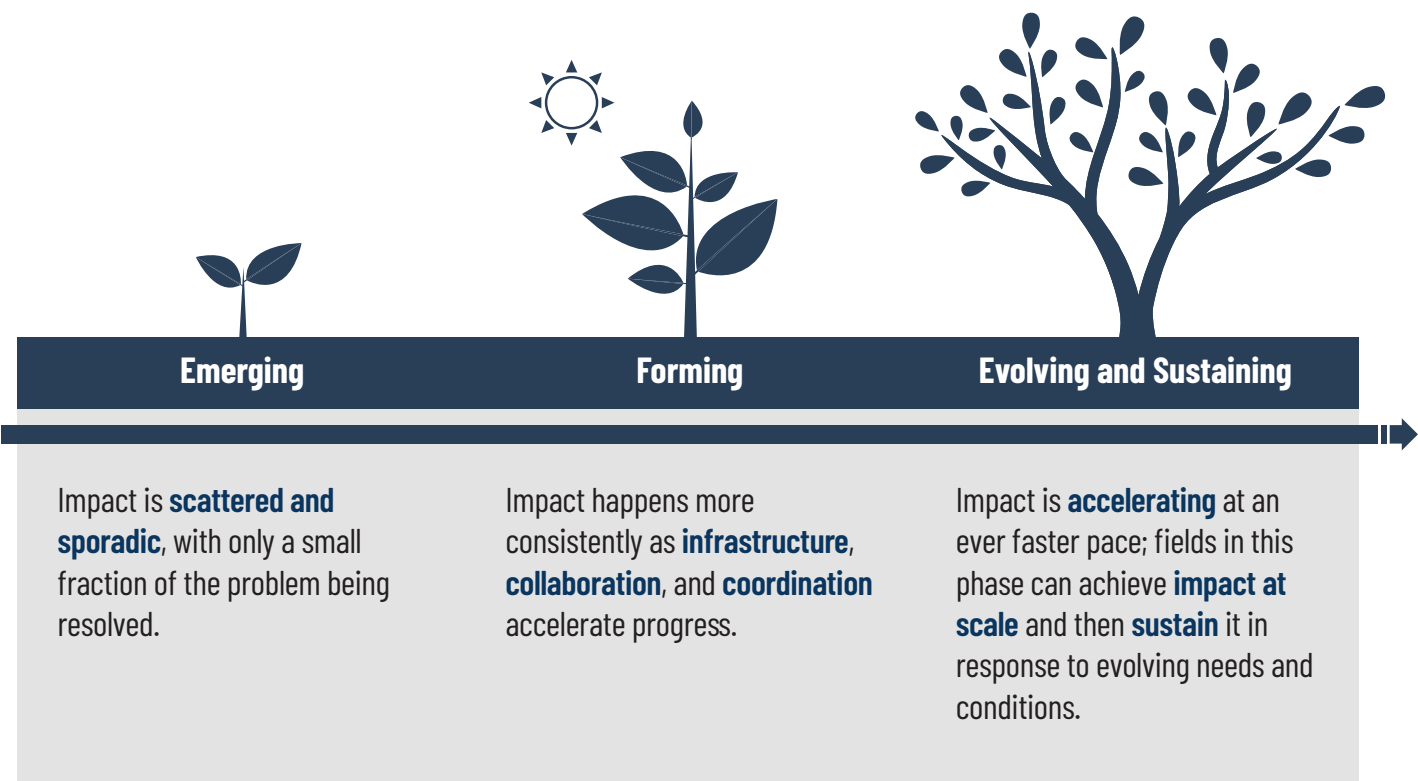
7 Fenton, et al., “Power of Parent Engagement,” 214–217.

Analytic Framework

To answer these questions and build a comprehensive picture of the state of the field, CPRL applied the Field Building for Population Change framework. This framework was developed by the Bridgespan Group based on an analysis of over 30 fields and grounded in equity principles. It codifies the typical progression of fields as they move toward motivating lasting societal improvement at scale, categorizing fields into emerging, forming, or evolving and sustaining phases (see Figure 1).

Identifying a field’s developmental stage requires assessing the field against five core characteristics: (1) a field-level agenda, (2) a knowledge base, (3) a core set of actors, (4) collaborative infrastructure, and (5) financial and nonfinancial resources. (See Table 1 for a summary of these characteristics.) Observable indicators of progress aligned to each characteristic enable the evaluation of progress and field development.

Figure 1. Phases of field development



Source: The Bridgespan Group

Table 1. Observable characteristics of fields

1 Field-Level Agenda	The strategic suite of approaches that aims to address shared barriers and unlock collective progress. It is created (and continually adapted) by the field's actors.
2 Knowledge Base	The body of academic and practical research that helps actors better understand the problem, identify and analyze shared barriers to solving it, and develop solutions.
3 Actors	The set of individuals and organizations that together bring a sense of shared identity and common vision to the field.
4 Infrastructure	The “connective tissue” that strengthens each of the other field characteristics. Infrastructure enhances the efforts of actors in the field by making them more coordinated, connected, and effective and includes such things as intermediary organizations, field convenings, and funding collaboratives.
5 Resources	Financial forms of capital as well as nonfinancial support.

Methods

To understand the state of the family engagement field, CPRL used a qualitative approach to answer three primary research questions:

- To what extent have there been changes in family engagement funding since 2016?
- To what degree has consensus emerged about key issues, including the definition of family engagement and what success in this area looks like?
- What activities are funders supporting, and how should we make sense of the range of activities as a whole?

To answer these questions, in Spring 2021 CPRL:

- conducted a systematic review of the literature on family and community engagement;
- interviewed staff from 27 foundations and funding groups and 17 family engagement-focused organizations; and
- reviewed publicly available information on 102 funder websites.

To analyze these data, CPRL generated a coding scheme based on Bridgespan's field-building framework using codes aligned to the five cross-cutting field characteristics (field-level agenda, knowledge base, actors, infrastructure, and resources). Throughout the analytic process, CPRL compared findings in this study with those from other CPRL family engagement projects to pressure test emerging insights and refine the coding scheme and analytic approach.

Additionally, CPRL partnered with Candid⁸ to analyze Form 990⁹ data that represent charitable giving for family engagement in 2018.¹⁰ CPRL reviewed over 1,500 grant entries from nearly 70 grant-making organizations representing national, regional, local, and family foundations. Grant entries typically included the total amount of the grant, the year the grant was issued, and a brief description of grant-funded activities. Based on the descriptions of each grant, CPRL determined if the grants fit the description of a family engagement activity (based on activities described by funders in the qualitative analysis) and reduced the eligible grant entries to 979 grants. The final analysis included patterns in the amount and percentage of total portfolios dedicated to family engagement and the types of grants funders were most likely to give.

Throughout this paper, findings and analysis from CPRL research beyond this study are cited. Finally, several funders contributed to this study with the expectation of confidentiality. We have therefore not included the identity of all individual contributions.

⁸ Candid (formerly the Foundation Center and Guidestar) collects and analyzes data on philanthropic giving.


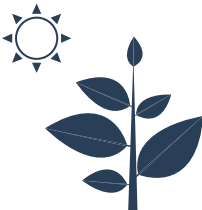

⁹ IRS 990 forms are collected from tax-exempt organizations, nonexempt charitable trusts, and some political organizations to report income and tax liability.

¹⁰ The most recent year for which IRS 990 data is available.

Key Findings

The family engagement field has matured over the past five years, fueled in part by responses to the pandemic, and is in transition from the emerging phase to the forming phase.¹¹ In four field characteristics—field-level agenda, knowledge base, actors, and infrastructure—the field is forming. The field is still emerging in a final, critical category: resources.

Table 2. Phases of family engagement field progression

	 Emerging	 Forming	 Evolving & Sustaining
1 Field-Level Agenda		X	
2 Knowledge Base		X	
3 Actors		X	
4 Infrastructure		X	
5 Resources	X		

¹¹ Terminology referring to family engagement is inconsistent across the field. In this study alone, CPRL encountered over 20 terms referring to this field. For the sake of consistency, we will use the term family engagement to capture the range of approaches observed in the field.

The following subsections summarize the key findings that shaped this assessment.

1. Field-Level Agenda

Bridgespan Definition:

The strategic suite of approaches that aim to address shared barriers and unlock collective progress. It is created (and continually adapted) by the field's actors.

CPRL's analysis suggests that a field-level agenda in the family engagement field is **forming**. The field is in the process of coalescing around a common narrative and set of approaches to engagement.

Coalescence around a common narrative

Both funders and field leaders report a significant shift in the narrative about parents and families. The discussion is asset based (having expertise in the needs and capacities of their children) instead of deficit based (burdensome, an obstacle to student achievement). Interview subjects universally recognized that parents and families have unique expertise and experiences and therefore have a strong value in education. There is considerable energy around the notion of parent power, a belief that those who have been most marginalized should have greater decision-making power in the system.¹² This concept comes from a long history of activism and organizing in marginalized communities and is being reflected in the grant-making activity of a notable portion of funders, with some going so far as to dedicate entire portfolios to this work.

Funders and field leaders also noted that the traditional notions of transactional relationships with families, such as periodic attendance at school events or one-directional communica-

tions from the school to home, are no longer understood to be authentic engagement. There is a new understanding of parent and family engagement—deeper, more sustained relationships and interactions between families and the school community.

“One of the biggest shifts...moving forward is that our sector has given lip service to what parent engagement has been like. It's been very surface level, and it's often been parents coming into the physical school building. Usually, it's high-level superficial doughnuts with dad, muffins with mom-type activities. Moving forward, we're going to see real opportunity with parents who want to facilitate student learning. They need better tools, they need better ways of engaging, and they need better data. We also need some connective tissue between educators and parents so they're speaking the same language and on the same page with setting goals for students.”

— foundation leader

Funders increasingly support activities that reflect this new definition of engagement. Funder strategies primarily fall along an engagement spectrum, from family consultation to leadership (Table 3).¹³ Notably, although transactional notions of engagement are seen as outdated, several funders said they are still investing in the one-directional dissemination of information to families, which falls outside the engagement spectrum entirely.

¹² Fabricant, Organizing for Educational Justice.

¹³ Given the range of portfolios, most funders still report investing in multiple approaches simultaneously.

Table 3: Family Engagement Spectrum

	Dissemination	Consultation	Partnership	Leadership
Schools	<p>The school or organization provides families with information about their child's education.</p> <p>Communication is one-directional and based on what institutions decide (usually unilaterally) families need to know.</p>	<p>The school or organization solicits feedback from families through surveys and interviews.</p> <p>Organizational leadership includes few or no parent leaders from the school community.</p>	<p>The school or organization seeks to collaborate with families. The institution invites families to help make decisions about the organizational agenda and strategy and may also ask them to help determine what success looks like. The school or organization may include some school community parents on staff.</p>	<p>The school or organization is led by families, with a majority of staff/leadership being parents from the school community, who make decisions about the agenda and strategy and determine what success looks like.</p>
Families	<p>There are no formal avenues for families to share feedback, beyond complaints.</p>	<p>Families participate in surveys, focus groups, and interviews. There are no clear expectations of how the organization, school, or district will use the feedback.</p>	<p>Families are active as members of school and district communities in roles that may include curriculum selection committees or school and district hiring committees. At the individual family level, partnerships may look like collaborations between teachers and families to determine instructional routines and support for students.</p>	<p>Parents organize to develop learning environments (e.g., pods) or start new schools (e.g., charter or private schools).</p>
Funders	<p>A small number of interviewed funders support some dissemination efforts.</p> <p>Nearly all funders, including those who fund this way, no longer regard this as true engagement.</p>	<p>All interviewed funders adopted, at baseline, a consultative approach to parent and family engagement, investing in activities that required grantees to meaningfully listen to parent and family feedback and input.</p>	<p>Nearly a third of interviewed funders reported investing in the partnership approach. These investments supported organizations to develop the necessary tools for families to collaborate effectively with system leaders. In many cases this led to families having formal leadership or decision-making authority.</p>	<p>Nearly a third of interviewed funders invested in the leadership approach, supporting organizations that are led by parents and solutions designed and developed by parents.</p>

Development of a common set of approaches

Funders and field leaders recognize that along the family engagement spectrum, strategies and approaches differ when helping individual families improve outcomes for their children (e.g., working closely with teachers and school leaders to improve individual outcomes) compared with improving community-level or systemic outcomes (e.g., advocating for change at the district or state level).

To align with individual and collective approaches to engagement, funders overwhelmingly support two types of activity: services and advocacy. Services typically include products, programs, and activities that assist individual parents by improving outcomes for their children. These efforts include Web and mobile apps that share students' academic progress and allow families to communicate directly with teachers, as well as training programs in literacy and math that allow parents to support learning in the home. Advocacy activities, alternatively, tend to focus on building the capacity of groups of parents to advocate for change at the school, district, and state levels.

In an analysis of IRS 990 forms from 2018, CPRL found that 70 percent of all foundation support went to services and 19 percent went to advocacy. Other activities, such as research (4 percent) and field-level infrastructure (6 percent), had relatively little support.

Districts and schools (9 percent) saw comparatively little direct support from foundations, even though most family engagement funding is focused on improving the home-to-school connection (70 percent). Instead, funders' investments went dominantly to third-party organizations that work directly with families. This gap highlights an opportunity for funders to

support both sides of the school-to-family relationship by investing in innovative school- and district-based family engagement models; building the capacity of districts and schools to effectively partner with families; developing and disseminating knowledge in school systems about the school-to-family connection; and influencing school, district, and state education leaders to meaningfully engage families.

Use of inconsistent language

Despite growing coherence around a field-level narrative and funding approaches to family engagement, one significant barrier to a coherent field-level agenda exists: inconsistency in the language used to describe the work. Funders use a variety of terms to describe their family engagement investments, and several note that language is constantly in flux, with terminology evolving rapidly as the field learns. The resulting variance can obscure the shared agenda and the size of the field.

Challenges with language extend to how words are codified within funder strategies. Almost half of the 102 funders identified for this study have a portfolio that explicitly references family engagement, but the terminology used to describe the work includes **public understanding**, **family engagement**, and **parent empowerment**. A further challenge is that some funders do not have dedicated portfolios for the work, and instead embed it as an expectation across all grants—meaning that funders expect grantees to include family engagement strategies, regardless of the portfolio's mission (e.g., early childhood, youth development, education). In this case, language about family engagement does not explicitly appear in grant descriptions or publicly available descriptions of the work. Both situations contribute to challenges in accurately quantifying the size of the field.

2. Knowledge Base

Bridgespan Definition:

The body of academic and practical research that helps actors better understand the problem, identify and analyze shared barriers to solving it, and develop solutions.

CPRL's analysis suggests that the family and parent engagement field's knowledge base is **forming**. There is considerable extant literature on family engagement, but this practice proliferated during the pandemic, making clear how much is unknown. Increased breadth, depth, and diversity of practices revealed a need for more rigorous and responsive methods of assessing what works and determining what should be codified as effective practice.

Proliferation of Knowledge-Generation Opportunities

"Forming" fields require an established knowledge base that actors can use to inform their practice.¹⁴ In the family engagement space, there is a long-established body of research spanning decades. Yet the breadth, depth, and diversity of family engagement approaches studied is dwarfed by the opportunity to learn during the pandemic, which transformed the field's shared knowledge base more quickly and dramatically than preceding events or policy changes. In Spring 2020, as schools abruptly pivoted to virtual and hybrid learning models, educators were forced to adopt novel, responsive approaches to partnering with families and communities. Unsurprisingly, the number and diversity of practitioners, organizations, researchers, and funders actively developing, implementing, studying, and financing family engagement activities ballooned over 2020–21, contributing to a rapid expansion of the volume of data and learning on the topic.

Funders are learning from the pandemic experience alongside their grantees and emerging with breakthrough ideas about how to support the more equitable engagement of a wider cross-section of families. As the field's collaborative infrastructure matures, field leaders hope to coordinate learning, so that the wealth of data emerging from this moment can enrich the collective understanding of what works and, as a result, contribute to improvement in practice at scale.

Measurement as an Area of Growth

In any forming field, the measurement and comparison of various strategies and models is an important input to the developing knowledge base. Across interviews, funders and field leaders identified measurement as an area of growth, with a third of interviewed funders reporting that they were actively rethinking their approach to measurement or refining their indicators of success.

Still, CPRL's analysis suggests progress on several fronts in the last five years. Several funders noted that the field has made advancements in identifying strong shared metrics for the success of family engagement efforts—for example, the EC Prism [Impact Measures Tool](#) for measurement in the early childhood space or the Funders Group on Parent Organizing, Family Engagement, and Leadership Development's Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership.¹⁵ A majority of interviewed funders now report using suites of indicators that gauge the quantity of touchpoints with families and the quality and outcomes of those engagement efforts. Finally, in a notable shift from historical top-down funding models, many funders emphasized that they work closely with grantees to develop customized success criteria for their grants and efforts, trusting that local actors have the necessary expertise to assess the impact of their work.

¹⁴ Farnham et al.,

¹⁵ Co-developed with UPLAN. The tool is being piloted and is not publicly available.

Looking ahead, several learning areas raised by interviewees were how to (a) measure and compare the efficacy of various family engagement strategies, (b) understand the contribution of family engagement investments and portfolios to progress on foundation-level theories of change, and (c) more potently incorporate qualitative data and—in another nod to the continuum presented in Table 3—family voices in the assessment and communication of program efficacy. Efforts to share resources, coordinate learning, and establish a shared field narrative around and definitions for family engagement will offer opportunities for collective advancement in these areas.



3. Actors

Bridgespan Definition:

The set of individuals and organizations that together bring a shared identity and common vision to the field.

CPRL's analysis suggests that the family and parent engagement field's actor category is **forming**. A small group of core funders serve as field-level champions who provide the majority of private philanthropic support, creating steadfast funding streams and influencing other private philanthropy. In addition to funder champions, the field is seeing an emergence of decentralized, community-based leadership.

Establishment of Funder Champions

A forming phase field is characterized by the emergence of a cohort of core funder champions, which the family engagement field has.¹⁶

CPRL's analysis of IRS 990 forms found that 21 funders provided 93 percent of private philanthropic support for parent and family engagement in 2018.

This small group of foundations supports field advancement via three sometimes overlapping approaches:

Influencer Champions

Influencer champions in the family engagement space are vocal advocates of the work and have the expertise and cachet to shape the field's agenda, bring visibility to grantees, and build connections between actors. Regardless of whether these funders make major financial investments, they have a great deal of influence on the field's direction. In 2017, for example, a group of 19 funders created the Funders Group on Parent Organizing, Family Engagement, and Leadership Development. In an attempt to encourage the philanthropic community to adopt more family engagement strategies, these funders partnered with UPLAN to develop an assessment tool and create a community of practice.

Financial Champions

The family engagement field's financial champions invest a significant amount of financial resources in increasing the size and scope of engagement work. Only a small number of funders fit this description—35 percent of funders each give more than \$1 million in 2018, but less than 1 percent of funders dedicate over 30 percent of their total grantmaking to family engagement strategies. Though few, these champions have resources and can commit funding toward seeding and testing novel approaches and innovative organizations that have the potential to move the field forward.

Steadfast Champions

Steadfast champions are long-term supporters with investments in family engagement that span decades and precede the development of a formal field. These foundations may not always drive major changes in the field, like influencer champions, or invest as heavily as financial champions, but they are critical actors in their early and sustained commitment to providing a reliable stream of financial support to the field over time.

Growth in Community Leadership

The field is moving away from top-down leadership models and toward field agenda direction from the communities, organizations, and historically marginalized actors closest to educational inequities. This decentralization is consistent with more developed fields because stakeholders who are proximate to the problem have a “unique vantage point” and, when included in the work, bring forward reliable and breakthrough insights that can accelerate progress.¹⁷ Almost all interviewed funders identified the importance of listening to and ceding decision-making power to local organizations, including those led by people of color and especially those driven by parents themselves.

This stated trust in organizations’ decision-making was further actualized during the pandemic as most foundations loosened grant requirements, typically in the form of less restricted funding and more general operating support to enable organizations to pivot to providing responsive services to their communities. Several foundations explicitly noted that changes to their funding models would continue after the pandemic. This predicted shift in funding will be critical for organizations serving families, as their needs—demonstrated so clearly through the pandemic—go beyond the programmatic interests of many foundations. Foundations will need to trust communities to lead in ways that meet the changing needs of families, including providing for basic needs like food and transportation.

“One thing is power—how we as funders consistently relinquish power and acknowledge power structures. We need to relinquish in ways that build trust and diffuse ownership. The hardest parts of this work have frankly been a real wake-up call to our staff. Power is not just about who has the money. It’s also about racial dynamics, income dynamics. The better we get at this work, the more we’re confronted with the realities of systemic racism and racial justice in the communities where we work.”

—foundation leader



4. Infrastructure

Bridgespan Definition:

The “connective tissue” that strengthens each of the other four field characteristics. Infrastructure exponentially enhances the efforts of actors in the field by making them more coordinated, connected, and effective.

CPRL’s analysis suggests that the family and parent engagement field’s infrastructure is **forming**. Several national intermediary organizations have emerged to connect key actors, develop and distribute knowledge, and coordinate a field-level agenda. There still remains a need to create convening spaces for actors at the local, regional, and national levels.

Growing number of intermediaries

A notable shift since 2016 is the emergence of field-level intermediary organizations in both the philanthropic community and among national and local organizations. In the past five years, a number of formal funder working groups have emerged that focus on or include family engagement, including the Funders Group on Parent Organizing, Family Engagement, and Leadership Development (The Funders Group); the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative’s parent engagement affinity group; and the Community Engagement Funder Collaborative.

At the organizational level, the emergence of the **United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN)**, the **National Parents Union**, the **Family Leadership Design Collaborative**, and the growing number of local parent and family engagement chapters of the PIE Network are important signals that the field is beginning to establish the necessary infrastructure to support the scaling of effective practices, accelerate learning among key actors, distribute financial and other resources, and solidify a field-level agenda.

“For us to do this work well together...we’re going to have to slow down and take the time to build trust with one another to build some common language with one another. And that tends to go against the way a lot of our society works—results fast. The challenge is to resist that and to do the partnership work in the authentic ways we know we need to.”

—foundation leader

Inadequate networking convenings

Consistent field-level convenings play an important role in advancing fields. This element of the field’s infrastructure is not as developed as others, but both funders and field organizations have pointed to the spaces that do exist as valuable for networking and leadership development (e.g., National Parent Union Parent Power convening, UPLAN national gathering). Funders have a critical role to play in organizing and funding regular regional and national convenings that allow families, field leaders, and funders to learn from and connect with one another.

5. Resources

Bridgespan Definition:

Both financial forms of capital as well as nonfinancial support.

CPRL's analysis suggests that the family and parent engagement field's resources are **emerging**. The level of philanthropic support for family engagement remains relatively low compared to other sectors and has not grown to reflect the demand in the field.

Relatively small current levels of investment

A foundational criterion for categorization as a “forming” field is sufficient dedicated funding—a present gap in the family engagement space. CPRL's analysis of IRS 990 forms suggests that funders invested just under \$162 million in family engagement-related activities in 2018, compared to EY-Parthenon's report of over \$230 million in 2016. In comparison, in 2018 funders invested over \$1 billion in the field of [early childhood care and education](#). Funders and organizations alike report that need is much greater than available resources. Growth from the emerging to forming phase will depend on the degree to which funders contribute sufficient financial support for family engagement efforts.¹⁸

“There is not enough funding going to any of these parent-led organizations. Even from us.”

—foundation leader

Lack of long-term commitment of resources

A hallmark feature of a forming field is the presence of significant, sustained funding streams, which are not present at this point. Both funders and grantees noted increased interest in family engagement over the last year, but many were concerned that attention from funders would be fleeting. Some funders speculated that interest would wane once most schools return to in-person instruction, while others worried that the long-term investment needed to see significant returns on investment could discourage funders looking for short-term measurable outcomes. It is difficult to predict whether recent funding initiatives will become lasting sources of support, but some funder champions are developing promising long-term strategies to provide sustained funding for family engagement efforts, including integrating family engagement expectations (e.g., requiring all grantees to consult with families) across all education-related grant making and shifting to participatory grantmaking models to ensure long-term family involvement in decision-making.

Movement toward funding community-based organizations

A particularly salient concern in the transition from an emerging to a forming field is ensuring that resources—capital or otherwise—are funneled to the actors who are most proximate to the problem.¹⁹ Our Form 990 analysis suggests that in 2018, just over 80 percent of grants were going to community-based organizations, rather than large national groups. Interviewed funders consistently expressed an intention to further increase movement in this direction, noting the importance of finding and funding local organizations with ties to the community, rather than parachuting in large national groups. Funders suggested that place-based funding produces stronger results because community-driven organizations are often better positioned to identify community needs and develop authen-

¹⁸ Farnham et al, 2020

¹⁹ Farnham et al, 2020

tic engagement strategies. Still, some interviewees noted the difficulty of identifying local groups, especially in under-resourced rural areas where—unlike large urban centers—national funders often do not have strong community ties. This presents an opportunity for national funders to partner more closely with community foundations and other place-based funders who have close connections to the organizations in their communities.

Grant spending autonomy

As funders increasingly embrace the notion of Parent Power, a key step toward actualizing more decision-making among parents and families is allowing parent-led organizations more discretion over how to spend funds. Based on our Form 990 analysis, just over 20 percent of family engagement grants in 2018 went to general operations. In contrast, in 2021, nearly all interviewed funders mentioned that they had relaxed grant restrictions in response to the pandemic, allowing grantees to use the newly unrestricted funds for more immediate needs and general operations. A number of funders explicitly mentioned that they were considering permanently shifting their grant-making practice to more general operations funding, a move that would, if adopted by a broader group of funders, support field movement toward an equity-driven forming phase.

“The work in this area is funding people who have the trust of the communities where work is taking place, allowing them to take it wherever they want, and being OK with the risk—because there will be risk associated with it.”

—foundation leader



Discussion

The family engagement field has moved from the emerging to the forming phase of field development in four of Bridgespan's five core characteristics.

- Both funders and field leaders have aligned around a **field-level agenda** and narrative that positions parent power and two-way communication between schools and families as necessary drivers of student success.
- Experimentation and research from a variety of funders and organizations over the last year have contributed to an already strong **knowledge base**, allowing it to evolve and meet the needs of schools, families, and students in a moment of national crisis.
- A diverse group of institutions and **actors**—including families and community organizations—are grappling with how to effectively engage a wide range of families in ways that best meet their needs.
- A significant expansion of field **infrastructure** has carved out a space for collaboration and collective learning.

The sole area in which the field remains in the emerging phase is in the commitment of sufficient financial **resources**, but CPRL's analysis suggests that there is momentum that can be captured to spur increased and sustained funding for this critical work.

This is an exciting moment for the field, one in which the value of effective family engagement is widely recognized and demand for strong support and guidance from leaders is high. To ensure continued field development and progress toward population-level change—where the benefits of effective family engagement can benefit children at scale—funders must make a commitment to sustaining significant funding, resources, and attention to family engagement efforts.



Field leaders have a unique opportunity to motivate continued field development and growth and lay the groundwork for progress toward the final evolving and sustaining phase, during which population-level change can occur. To realize this agenda funders should:

Increase funding

The greatest concern voiced by both funders and organizations is a deficit of dedicated funding for family engagement efforts. Funders should, first, commit to increased and sustained funding, while also leveraging existing investments in this work to push for increased federal, state, and local funding. Funders can act immediately by providing guidance to states and local educational agencies about using funding from the federal [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#) to meaningfully engage parents and families in COVID-19 recovery efforts.

Align funding strategies with community priorities

COVID-19 and the racial reckoning of 2020 presented in stark relief the degree to which broad systemic inequities are implicated in race- and class-based educational achievement gaps. Over the last year, foundations have loosened funding restrictions, allowing grantees to nimbly respond to the most pressing needs in their communities, even when those issues fall outside the funder's specified education strategy. Looking ahead, if foundations are interested in engaging communities meaningfully, they must continue to provide grantees discretion in the use of funds or, if that is not viable, commit to the continued support of community priorities by building strategies that are inclusive of and responsive to those stated needs.

Commit to long-term, cross-cutting efforts

A theme in interviews with both foundations and grantees was skepticism that foundation commitment to family engagement will persist when, historically, the collective attention of funders has shifted quickly from one reform strategy to the next. There is a great deal of evidence that a lasting field is forming, but it is important that funders develop strategies that conceptualize family engagement as not just a siloed workstream or portfolio but also a necessary pillar of any education-focused work. Such a shift will require a long-term commitment of resources to direct family engagement strategies as well as a recognition that family engagement strategies enhance other bodies of work (e.g., teacher preparation, high-quality instructional materials, school redesign, leadership development). This broader approach, along with increased flexibility in grant-reporting requirements, will ensure that the field is resourced to grow over time.

Build the capacity of school and district systems

Funders invest heavily in family advocacy, but they do not sufficiently support learning about how school and district systems can engage more meaningfully with parents and families. Funders should invest in models that allow schools and school systems to test various ways to learn from, partner with, and enable leadership from parents and families.

Foster cross-field collaboration and improvement

As the field develops and approaches to family engagement become more diverse, an important next step will be using this variance to test which engagement models are particularly effective, for whom, and under what conditions. This type of learning will require (1) increased and ongoing collaboration among field actors, (2) alignment around core measures that can supplement, not replace, localized metrics of success, and (3) transparency about outcomes. Refocusing extant infrastructure (e.g., funder working groups) around this goal will help propel productive cross-field collaboration and growth.

Support strong intermediaries

Family engagement, at its most effective, is a hyperlocal activity. Place-based and local funders have an advantage in learning with and responding to the needs of families in their communities. National funders can also play an important role by supporting and developing intermediary organizations led by and responsive to the needs of their communities. These organizations further develop the field's infrastructure while allowing funders to channel resources to communities most in need.

Expand the table

Taking time to identify which communities and individuals are still not consistently included in direct investments, field convenings, and other influential spaces and integrating them into field activity is critical to broader field efficacy. Funder champions should commit to seeking out and including foundations, organizations, communities, and families that have been left out of agenda-setting conversations or opportunities to spotlight innovative and effective work. Building networks that are inclusive of regional and local funders and organizations with strong ties to marginalized communities will be critical.

**“We’re not going to achieve the goals we have
around educational equity if we’re not ensuring
that parents are at decision-making tables.”**

— foundation leader

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