

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT LEARNING SERIES

Family Engagement to Support Kindergarten Readiness and Early School Success

Welcome to the Family Engagement Learning Series briefs! These briefs summarize a six-part webinar series of conversations designed to Raise the Bar for family engagement practices between school and home. The 2023 series produced by the U.S. Department of Education in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York and Overdeck Family Foundation, provided an overview of evidence, highlighted bright spots in the field, and shared resources and evidence-based strategies to support student success with education leaders and practitioners.

Introduction

“[Raise the Bar: Lead the World](#)” is the U.S. Department of Education’s call to action to transform public education and unite around what truly works — based on decades of experience and research — to advance education equity and excellence. Achieving academic excellence for all students by supporting the conditions to [accelerate learning](#) and offering a [comprehensive and rigorous education](#), as well as boldly improving learning conditions are key focus areas under Raise the Bar, with a focus on assisting states and districts in achieving these goals for every student.

Achievement gaps start early and persist. During the review of evidence from the field, Stephanie Sharp noted that fewer than half of all kindergartners come to school kindergarten ready, with significant disparities in race and income. Unfortunately, these disparities have long-term impacts. Children who enter school with key readiness skills are more likely to master basic skills by age 11, less likely to drop out of high school, and more likely to reach middle class status by age 40.

Supporting early school success is an important part of the U.S. Department of Education’s Raise the Bar Lead the World initiative to accelerate learning and provide a rigorous, well-rounded education. That is why U.S. Secretary of Education [Miguel Cardona](#) is encouraging



more states to use Title I funds to support access to high-quality preschool and ensure kindergarten serves as a sturdy bridge between early years and the early grades. Building strong partnerships with parents and families is an essential strategy to align what happens in the classroom with what happens at home, making family engagement a critical driver in ensuring that all children enter kindergarten “ready to learn” and experience early school success. Thus, the U.S. Department of Education is committed to [Raising the Bar for Parent Partnership in Our Schools](#).



Evidence: Family Engagement to Support Kindergarten Readiness and Early School Success

The fifth webinar in the series, [Family Engagement to Support Kindergarten Readiness and Early School Success](#), was moderated by [Yolie Flores](#), president and CEO of [Families in Schools](#).



Scan to access the webinar

Yolie Flores noted that for many, family engagement emerged from the early learning space, primarily from the [Head Start](#) model of engaging parents in their children’s early learning experience. She shared the following:

- Flores grounded her review of evidence from the field in Connecticut’s definition of family engagement – “a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children’s learning from birth through college and career.”
- Families’ involvement in children’s learning and development impacts life-long health, developmental, and academic outcomes, including growth in literacy skills and narrowed school readiness gaps for children across all socioeconomic backgrounds.
- When families and those in early learning programs work together and support each other in their respective roles, children have a more positive attitude toward school, stay in school longer, have better attendance, and experience more school success.
- Parent involvement focused specifically on promoting reading skills, such as word recognition, is linked with increases in students’ literacy skills.
- Parents who are actively involved in their child’s early childhood education are more likely to stay involved when their child enters elementary school.



Learnings from Bright Spots

This webinar highlighted different models for family engagement in early childhood settings, paired with school districts who have implemented them. Panelists included:

- [Rebecca Crouse Kelley](#), Waterford.org;
- [Dr. Shawn Foster](#), Orangeburg County School District (South Carolina);
- [Kai-ama Hamer](#), ParentCorps;
- [David Cintron](#), District 14, New York City Department of Education (New York);
- [Dr. Deborah Leong](#), Tools of the Mind; and
- [Priscilla Hopkins](#), Denver Public Schools (Colorado).



When we talk about engaging families, we’re talking about helping schools create the conditions for families to feel seen, cared for, and valued when they walk into the school building – every time they walk into the school building – setting the stage for real partnership. I’m talking about more than pretty fliers and serving coffee. I’m talking about unearthing the values and beliefs that educators hold about families, that we all hold about families. ... There can be a lot of judgment and misunderstanding that blocks the ability to create the authentic relationships needed for school communities to thrive.

- KAI-AMA HAMER

Key Takeaways and Strategies

- **For parents, families, and caregivers:**
 - › Parents, families, and caregivers for early learners need access to the tools that will help them guide the learning of young people in their lives, including mentoring, parent coaches, practical guides, and understanding of student data.
 - › Provide parents the chance to get to know each other; parents want to connect to share their experiences and learn about practices they may choose to incorporate at home.
 - › Create programs that help build the skills and confidence for families to show up as effective partners in early learning, including parent academies and parenting programs.
 - › Make connections with families using word-of-mouth strategies, relationships, and video when not in person.
- **For educators and education leaders:**
 - › When communicating with families, consider strengthening the teacher-parent relationship by sharing expectations for children (hopes and dreams), sharing academic content, as well as content that builds parent confidence and skill around executive function and self-regulation.
 - › Engage parents as partners and build culturally responsive environments that support children's socioemotional well-being — to enhance pre-K quality and unlock the full promise of early childhood education.
 - › Provide professional development for pre-K educators to forge strong, culturally responsive relationships with families and promote children's socioemotional well-being.
 - › Start with the shared passion that educators and parents have for supporting the early learning of their children.
 - › Build excitement among educators to engage families by providing opportunities for educators



Make sure that family engagement remains joyful. ... And if it's joyful, they [families] are going to show up for it.

- KAI-AMA HAMER

to reflect on their interactions with families and build their capacity to conduct parent conversations.

- › Share evidence-based strategies with educators that are rooted in the science of early learning, which they can immediately apply in their classrooms and schools. Strategies can include: hosting parent workshops focused on supporting their children's learning, sending home activities for parents that are connected to classroom instruction that reinforce what students are learning, arts and crafts, and recreational components, and providing opportunities for families to connect, such as family dinners.
- › Track parent attendance at school-sponsored events and survey them to measure what efforts are most successful.
- › Prioritize personal, direct communication. Technology-enabled communication can be just as impactful as in-person communication if it's personal and convenient.
- › Involve the community in the selection of family engagement tools and programs. Consider community need, alignment with community values, and ability to scale across the geography of the community so all families have access.
- › Leverage all funding sources (i.e., city, state, and federal funding, as well as public and private grants) to build out a comprehensive early learning program.



Parents so want to be part of their children's education. We just need to open our hearts and open the doors.

- PRISCILLA HOPKINS



The [family engagement] program has to align with the values of the school district and our community and our parents in order for our parents to truly buy in and believe that the engagement program is there to help not just their child but the entire family system.

-DR. SHAWN FOSTER

RESOURCES

- Family Engagement Learning Series [summary and videos](#)
- U.S. Department of Education's [website](#)
 - › [Resources for parents and educators](#)
 - › [Raise the Bar priorities](#)
- [Overdeck Family Foundation](#)
 - › [2022 Grantmaking & Impact Report](#)
- [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#)
- The importance of kindergarten readiness:
 - › [Results for America](#)
 - › [Brookings](#)
- [Families In Schools](#)
- [Connecticut State Department of Education](#)
- 2016 policy statement on family engagement. "[From the Early Years to the Early Grades](#)," joint statement by the Department of Education and Department Health and Human Services
- [Texas Council on Family-School Engagement](#)
- [A New Wave of Evidence](#)
- [Waterford.org](#)
- [Orangeburg County video](#) on advancing early literacy
- [ParentCorps](#)
 - › [ParentCorps partnerships](#)
- Tools of the Mind [slides and other resources](#)



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