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Family Engagement Practices in California Schools



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SUMMARY

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A technical appendix to this report is available on the PPIC website.

The California education landscape has shifted dramatically toward local control. With the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), school districts now have freedom to design educational approaches tailored to their student populations. But they also have responsibility for articulating how these plans address student needs. LCAPs require school districts to put plans in place for eight priority areas, among which is family engagement in support of student learning. The literature on family engagement suggests that it is an important part of a comprehensive strategy for improving educational outcomes, particularly for low-income, non-English-speaking, and other at-risk groups.

This focus on family engagement is unprecedented in an education accountability system, both in California and nationally. Therefore it warrants attention—to understand the various family engagement strategies employed and how they align with the literature on effective practices. Although the California Department of Education has offered districts guidance about family-engagement strategies, rubrics for evaluating the content of LCAPs have not yet been put into place.

This study relies on reviews of a select sample of 15 district LCAPs chosen intentionally to represent high-need districts with a known focus on family engagement, so as to elicit promising and transferrable practices. As a framework for reviewing the LCAPs, it uses four key family-engagement strategies the literature identifies.

The first strategy is resources—in the form of family resource centers or family liaisons—and opportunities for engagement in a variety of ways, including volunteering and capacity-building to support learning at home. This category also includes training for school staff on best practices for family engagement, including how to engage families with cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own. Second is effective communication, which includes communicating through multiple modes, in appropriate languages, and providing opportunities for two-way sharing of information. Third is shared responsibility and leadership, which refers to opportunities at the district and school levels for family members to be involved in decision-making roles and supported in their leadership development. The fourth strategy involves creating a welcoming environment, which includes providing staff who are culturally competent to make all families feel comfortable, and ensuring family members and students feel safe at school.

The 15 district LCAPs in this study approach these strategies in different ways. Highlights include:

- Offering capacity-building opportunities so families can both support student learning at home and navigate the school environment more effectively.
- Reformatting school events to make them more focused on engaged family learning, for instance by changing “open house” to “family literacy night” or “family math night.”
- Communicating in multiple languages and through multiple avenues to reach as many families as possible—such as emails, texts, phone calls, websites, mailings and newsletters, and media.
- Engaging in two-way communication through family surveys, home visits, parent-teacher academic teams, and opportunities for parent feedback on available services.
- Establishing formalized leadership training programs for family members, including a certification process and a “train the trainer” model.
- Creating a welcoming environment by offering a safe and clean school campus, inviting families to participate in classroom activities, and providing cultural diversity training for staff who interact with families.

Districts report using multiple approaches to engage families, although no one approach or combination of approaches emerges as a model. Instead, it appears districts are tailoring their practices to the needs and strengths of their own communities, or selecting one or two main approaches to family engagement on which to focus. It is important that districts select approaches to engagement that are integrated with student learning and culturally appropriate for their students’ families.

Districts are required to describe the metrics they will employ to track family engagement outcomes. The most common two metrics are counts of family participation at events and response rates to family surveys. Both are limited in that they focus only on family participation and not on opportunities for engagement offered by districts and schools. An appropriate set of metrics would include measures of opportunities for family engagement at the district and school in addition to family members’ participation in these opportunities. Data-tracking systems, annual self-assessments, and family surveys together are the best data collection tools for gathering the information needed to assess family engagement in schools and districts.

Introduction

Involving parents and other family members in students’ schooling experiences has been associated with improved academic outcomes. This is especially the case for low-income or otherwise disadvantaged children and youth.¹ This correlation increases when family-engagement strategies are implemented alongside other school reforms. The relationship between engaging parents and engaging students in school is so robust—and makes such intuitive sense—that California included *parent involvement and participation* as one of eight priority areas in its newly established Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). Including family engagement in an accountability system is unprecedented, both in California and nationally, and warrants research to understand how districts operationalize it and their plans for assessing their approaches. This report provides specific examples of how different school districts approach and measure family engagement to aid all California districts as well as state policymakers in understanding the variety of approaches that exist across the state.

The LCAP—implemented in tandem with the Local Control Funding Formula—requires school districts to submit a plan every three years for addressing each of eight priority areas grouped into three main categories, as shown in Figure 1. The California State Board of Education has presented these priority areas as equally weighted. However, the board has not yet finalized an accountability system to measure districts’ and schools’ progress in students’ learning and achievement or a rubric for evaluating the district LCAPs. When released, these new systems could further illuminate prioritization.

FIGURE 1
LCAP categories and priority areas

Conditions of learning	Pupil outcomes	Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to core services—credentialed teachers, materials, quality facilities.• Implementation of state standards.• Access to broad course of study and programs for high-need students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student achievement, using multiple measures.• Other student outcomes, such as in physical education and the arts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student engagement—graduation and dropout rates, chronic absenteeism and attendance.• Parent involvement and participation, engagement in decision making and educational programs.• School climate—suspension and expulsion rates, as well as other measures.

SOURCE: California Department of Education. www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/statepriorityresources.asp.

Parent involvement and participation (referred to as “family engagement” in this report) is shown in bold type in the “engagement” column. It comprises two separate components. The first is stakeholder engagement, which includes involving family members in designing and vetting the LCAP. When considering family engagement in the LCAP, researchers have primarily focused on this aspect (Humphrey and Koppich 2014; Humphrey, Koppich and Marsh 2015; Warren and Carrillo 2015). A recent poll of California residents indicates that 51 percent of public school parents report having received information from their school about the LCAP. This proportion is

¹ For two recent reviews of the parent involvement literature, see California Department of Education (2014) and EdSource (2014).

slightly higher among Latinos (58%) and those with incomes at or higher than \$40,000 (55%) (Baldassare, Bonner, Kordus, and Lopes 2016). In the same survey, 16 percent of public school parents reported being very or somewhat involved in LCAP development, with higher participation among women (23%) and those with incomes lower than \$40,000 (20%).

The second—and far less prescribed—component is family engagement in support of student learning. This could involve a variety of activities by parents and other family members, such as participation or leadership in school or district committees, volunteering, and participating in parent learning. Schools and districts could provide parent resource centers or liaisons and work to improve communication. A 2016 report produced by Families in Schools focuses on this aspect of family engagement. It describes the on-the-ground challenges California districts face implementing their plans (Families in Schools 2016).

This study also focuses on family engagement in support of student learning but from a different perspective. I document the various ways that California school districts envision engaging parents and families toward improving student academic success. I focus on districts with a known emphasis on family engagement so as to be able to report on promising practices.² I examine 15 LCAPs to illustrate the range of practices planned to address this priority area, and include interviews with four district representatives. I highlight both what they report about how they intend to promote family engagement, and how they intend to measure various related outcomes. I also examine data collection and measurement issues that will allow districts to track their progress in family engagement, particularly in light of its inclusion in the state’s accountability framework.

In the report, I first describe four family-engagement strategies established in the literature, to provide an underlying framework for the study’s findings. Next, I present the study methods and report on findings in each of the four strategy areas. Finally, I discuss measurement issues, including data collection and reporting. Textboxes throughout highlight innovative practices districts are using to engage families in new ways.

² This may limit the generalizability of the findings across the state.

Family-Engagement Strategies

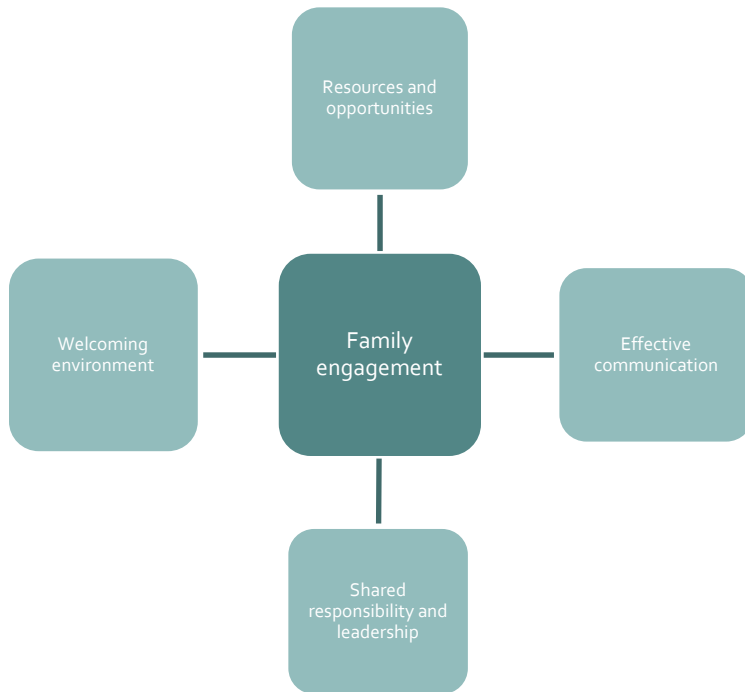
There are multiple frameworks for best practice in parent and family engagement. Some focus on engaging families in both school and community, and others focus specifically on engaging them in schools. Researchers and practitioners have developed these strategies based on a literature that demonstrates family engagement's effectiveness in promoting enhanced student academic outcomes. Family-engagement strategies are typically implemented alongside other reforms, and have not been studied much using experimental methods. Therefore links to enhanced outcomes should be considered associations rather than causal factors.

In 2014, both EdSource and the California Department of Education with WestEd conducted comprehensive reviews of the family engagement literature. They find that, in general, studies examine the effects of different types of engagement—or multiple types at once—on students' academic and behavioral outcomes, including grades, test scores, attendance, and social skills. Family engagement tends to have a positive effect across many types of studies and measurement strategies. For instance, a variety of types of engagement—ranging from parental expectations to their actual involvement in school and at home—all linked to positive student educational outcomes for both elementary and secondary students (Fan and Chen 2001, Jeynes 2003, Jeynes 2005). Although students of all ages benefit from family engagement, strategies may differ for elementary and secondary students. For instance, elementary schools may be more likely to have parents volunteer in classrooms. Secondary schools may be more likely to engage parents outside the classroom. Parental expectations for educational success are among the strongest predictors of student outcomes, although participation in school and home activities are also significant (Chen 2001, Jeynes 2005, Jeynes 2007, Yan and Lin 2005). This relationship between family engagement and student outcomes has been demonstrated both in comparisons across schools with varying rates of family engagement and in studies at the individual level that examine a child's own parents' degrees of involvement and his or her outcomes. Findings are especially strong for students who are low-income, African American, and Latino and whose parents have lower educational levels (Jeynes 2003, Lee and Bowen 2006). Importantly, research also shows that parental involvement in schools may have an even stronger effect on students' behavioral outcomes than their academic ones (Domina 2005).

In 2014, the California Department of Education collaborated with WestEd to release a framework for family engagement in California based on its review of the literature. This framework is now a main source of information many districts use. For this report, I cull a set of four strategies from this and five other prominent frameworks found in the literature. Shown in Figure 2, they are resources and opportunities, effective communication, shared responsibility and leadership, and welcoming environment. I describe each in more detail below.

These four strategies encourage schools and family members to mutually engage, sharing the responsibility to create and sustain school-home partnerships. This joint responsibility is the key component of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp and Kuttner 2013). It notes that although families, principals, teachers, and other staff may want to engage with each other, these stakeholders may not already possess the skills needed to build effective partnerships. They may need capacity-building to achieve their goals.

FIGURE 2
Family-engagement strategies



SOURCES: Author’s compilation based on: California Department of Education (2014); California State PTA (Undated); Epstein (2011); Families in Schools (2013); Harvard Family Research Project (Undated); Mapp and Kuttner (2013).

Resources and opportunities

Schools and districts have a responsibility to provide both the resources necessary to appropriately engage families and the opportunities for them to be engaged (California Department of Education 2014; California State PTA; Epstein 2011; Families in Schools 2013; Mapp and Kuttner 2013). Resources can include funds to support family resource centers or liaisons at schools, but also refers to having appropriately qualified staff, trained to use effective practices for family engagement.

The category “opportunities” includes a host of activities ranging from organized opportunities for volunteering at schools to attending parent-teacher conferences to participating in capacity-building training or workshops offered by schools and districts. Capacity-building could be aimed at improving skills and knowledge (e.g., English courses). It could be providing workshops aimed at assisting family members to gain the information needed to advocate for themselves and their children at school and in the community. Districts or schools may collaborate with community organizations to help families obtain the services they need to support their child’s learning, both at school and at home. As reflected in the Dual Capacity–Building Framework (Mapp and Kuttner 2013), training for school and even district staff in how to create strong partnerships with parents is also a critical piece of this strategy area. These aspects of engagement are strongly associated with enhanced student achievement (California Department of Education 2014, EdSource 2014).

Effective communication

Effective communication between districts, schools, and families is a critical piece of family engagement (California Department of Education 2014; California State PTA; Epstein 2011; Families in Schools 2013). Communication that takes place in families’ home languages and through multiple avenues is considered

important for reaching families and engaging them in their child’s educational experience. Home visits may be used in some cases, when warranted and circumstances permit.

Two-way communication—which allows families to share their views about the school environment—is considered critical. The primary mechanism for this family-to-school interchange is through family surveys. Other strategies to solicit input from or engage in conversation with family members may also be appropriate—such as informal gatherings between families and school staff or more formalized meetings aimed at gathering family feedback.

Bi-directional communication is not necessarily a current practice in K–12 education. Therefore it is one area where staff training may be important, especially if substantial cultural and linguistic differences exist between school staff and students’ families. Without this training, staff may be unable to accurately identify and leverage the important ways that family members are already contributing to their children’s education (Zarate 2007, Ramos 2014).

Strong home-school communication holds a lot of promise. Simple one-way communication—such as sending home math progress reports—and face-to-face parent-teacher meetings improve student outcomes. A focus on two-way communications improves transitions between middle and high school and is linked to stronger engagement among non-English speakers (California Department of Education 2014, EdSource 2014).

Shared responsibility and leadership

A central tenet of family engagement is shared responsibility and leadership (California Department of Education 2014; California State PTA; Epstein 2011; Harvard Family Research Project). It means involving families, school staff, district staff, and other community organizations in joint decision making around a host of school- or district-related matters. Shared responsibility indicates the duality of the school-home partnership, acknowledging that families and schools play complementary roles in a child’s educational success. It implies that families actively establish relationships with schools, and that schools also take responsibility for creating partnerships with families, all on behalf of a child’s learning and development (Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg 2010).

At the school level, examples of formalized shared responsibility and leadership opportunities include parent-teacher organizations, site councils, English Learner advisory committees (ELAC), and committees that make decisions about special programs or school athletics. At the district level, they include advisory committees, wellness committees, English Learner advisory committees, and other types of oversight committees such as those that monitor parcel taxes. Districts might also provide formal or informal training to parents and other family members to support their ongoing leadership.

The literature has not focused heavily on this aspect of family engagement. However, one study examined leadership participation in a California school district and found that parents of English Learner students who were more involved in leadership opportunities saw greater rates of English proficiency gain among their children, as measured by the California English Language Development Test (Castrechini and London 2012).

Welcoming environment

A final strategy is creating a welcoming environment for families at the school site (California Department of Education 2014; Families in Schools 2013; Mapp and Kuttner 2013). Because of the potential for school staff and students’ families to have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, families could feel alienated or unwelcome on campus. Alternatively, they could know that there is a role for them at school regardless of background. Families’ comfort with being on the school campus can be enhanced through different types of activities, including community events held at the school that they are invited to and attend. Families could be

invited into classrooms to observe or participate in teaching and learning. In addition, both students and their families should experience a feeling of school safety. This overlaps considerably with the “school climate” priority area, also listed under engagement in the LCAP categories. Feelings of both physical and emotional safety at school are key to a positive school climate.

No literature focuses specifically on the effects on family engagement of providing a welcoming environment. However, there is strong evidence that a supportive school climate—which includes feelings of safety at school—has a positive association with students’ educational outcomes and their social and emotional development, and a negative one with student social and health-related risk behaviors (Thapa et al. 2013).

For analytic purposes, I present the four family-engagement strategies as distinct. But they are deeply intertwined in many ways. For instance, training for school front-line staff on appropriate ways to greet parents is an example of resources being used, an attempt to improve communication, and an attempt to provide a more welcoming environment for families. There may also be causal implications between strategies. For example, attention to effective communication could improve family members’ attendance at events or leadership opportunities. This highlights the importance not only of tracking what districts’ LCAPs intend, but also what they do to implement these plans and the resulting effects on the school environment.

Research Approach

In this study, I review 15 district LCAPs.^{3,4} Because previous research has shown that LCAP implementation has been uneven, with some districts much further along than others in their formulating plans as well as implementing them (Hahnel 2014; Humphrey and Koppich 2014; Humphrey, Koppich and Marsh 2015; Warren and Carrillo 2015), the 15 districts were selected because of their known focus on one or more aspects of family engagement. In addition, they represent different types of districts (e.g., urban/rural, smaller/larger, elementary/K–12) all of which serve a socioeconomically disadvantaged or otherwise high-need student population. Consequently, the analysis presented here does not represent districts across the state. Rather, it focuses on high-need districts that are among the furthest along in their planning for family engagement, so as to illuminate their innovative practices. To elaborate on specific programs referenced in LCAPs, I supplement the reviews with phone interviews with district personnel in four of these districts, and with web searches. Table 1 below illustrates district variations, and the [Technical Appendix](#) provides more information on the districts and their characteristics.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of study districts, 2014–15

Characteristic	Number of districts (of 15)	Characteristic	Number of districts (of 15)
Grade span		Percent English Learners (state average = 22.3%)	
K–8	4	<20%	2
K–12	11	21–30%	7
Number of students		31–50%	6
<10,000	4	Geographic Location	
10,000–40,000	5	Central Coast	1
>40,000	6	Northern California	1
Percent free/reduced-price meals (state average = 58.6%)		Sacramento area	1
<50%	3	San Diego area	1
50–70%	5	San Francisco Bay area	5
>70%	7	San Joaquin Valley	3
		Southern California	3

SOURCE: California Department of Education Dataquest.

Note that this report covers only plans for family engagement and does not assess the extent to which districts follow through on these plans, or whether their strategies result in improved outcomes at the student level. These are important questions that should be answered over time as districts continue to progress in California’s new education accountability regime. A key limitation of any LCAP analysis is that districts may not include every detail of their plans and practices. Therefore, this review is not meant to provide tallies of which districts are engaging family members in which ways, but rather to show the range of practices in place and highlight those that seem effective and transferrable to other districts.

³ These are: Bakersfield City School District (Kern County), Hayward Unified School District (Alameda County), Live Oak School District (Santa Cruz County), Lynwood Unified School District (Los Angeles County), Milpitas Unified School District (Santa Clara County), Oakland Unified School District (Alameda County), Redwood City School District (San Mateo County), Riverside Unified School District (Riverside County), Sacramento City Unified School District (Sacramento County), San Diego Unified School District (San Diego County), San Francisco Unified School District (San Francisco County), Sanger Unified School District (Fresno County), Santa Ana Unified School District (Orange County), Sylvan Union School District (Stanislaus County), and Willows Unified School District (Glenn County).

⁴ All LCAPs were downloaded from the EdTrust West website: <http://lcapwatch.org/>.

Findings on Districts' Plans for Family Engagement

Each of the 15 LCAPs demonstrates a tailored approach to family engagement. In this section, I align the approaches to the four strategies discussed previously and provide specific examples from the LCAP, interviews, and website reviews to demonstrate the various ways that districts are approaching family engagement. Although districts often incorporate multiple strategies, no one approach or combination of approaches emerges as a potential template for other districts. Because of the variety of frameworks and strategies available, it is incumbent upon each individual district to identify its own needs for family engagement. In the state's future LCAP guidance, it will be important to help set some priorities so that districts are better able to align their needs with specific practices.

Resources and opportunities

This strategy is the most pervasive of the four family-engagement strategies discussed in this report. Every LCAP reviewed has at least one approach to providing resources and opportunities for engaging family members, and many use multiple approaches. There are seven main categories of engagement:

- Dedicated staff or resource centers for family engagement
- School events
- Capacity-building opportunities for parents and family members
- Capacity-building opportunities for school staff
- Formal agreements with community organizations
- Organized volunteer opportunities
- Student learning at home

Family engagement staff and centers

Ten of the fifteen LCAPs state that districts hired or planned to hire staff positions to support family engagement either in standalone positions or through family resource centers. For example, school districts such as Milpitas Unified, Lynwood Unified, and Sylvan Union, among others, have put funds toward standalone staff positions: school community liaison, family liaison, and parent liaison. Hayward Unified School District takes this a step further. In addition to putting these positions into place, it plans for monthly collaborative meetings with parent outreach workers and community partners engaged in parent involvement work.

Several districts have centers devoted to family engagement, staffed by family engagement specialists. These types of centers can be found nationally. They are generally places where dedicated staff help parents navigate school, district, and community resources; provide leadership training or capacity-building; and aid parents to become more effective advocates for their children. For instance, Bakersfield City School District has opened 10 regional parent centers and aims to expand to 15 placed strategically across its 43 schools. Sacramento City Unified already has parent resource centers at 54 schools and plans to open these centers in all of its 62 schools. Oakland Unified plans to fund family resource centers at 31 school sites.

These staff members or centers can be hubs for providing culturally appropriate outreach and services to families—a key component of family engagement. For instance, Oakland Unified's LCAP mentions hiring a bilingual family liaison for each of its centers. The district has also hired a parent coordinator to increase participation of African American families and to facilitate Believe the College Dream Curriculum for parents of students in grades 6–12. It has also hired a refugee program specialist to facilitate interpretation and translation

services for refugee families in support of parent-teacher communication, family orientation to the district, and workshops to engage refugee families in school activities.

School events and interactions

School events—and interactions with school personnel during them—serve a dual role. They provide opportunities for family members to learn firsthand about their child’s learning environment and academic progress. They also create a sense of community at school so family members feel welcome on the campus. Whether specifically mentioned in the LCAP or not, it is safe to assume that all districts offer some events on campus to which family members are invited—at a minimum open houses and teacher conferences, but possibly also student performances, award nights, and graduation or promotion ceremonies. These special events are opportunities for schools to engage more deeply with families to build community both between families and schools and amongst students and families.

For instance, Santa Ana Unified School District reports using events such as back to school night and open house as an opportunity for family learning. Sylvan Union’s LCAP specifies it will offer two family learning nights at each school site each year, one in math and one in literacy. Live Oak School District is changing its family learning format to encourage more family interaction with students in the learning process, described in the text box below.

Opportunities for Joint Student-Family Learning in Live Oak School District (LOSD)

Involving family members and students in the learning process is a key goal of family engagement at LOSD. To offer a more interactive family learning environment, the small district of one middle and three elementary schools has piloted two new approaches this school year.

- LOSD is forgoing its typical spring open houses and instead is offering family learning nights. Teams of parents, teachers, and school administrators are tasked with planning these events, which are tailored specifically to each school and follow a specific theme (e.g., literacy or math). At the first family learning night offered at the middle school, more than 200 attendees spent two hours engaging in 30 different STEAM-related (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) activities that were spread throughout the school’s classrooms and hallways.
- LOSD is also using elementary student-led spring parent-teacher conferences to help children establish ownership in their learning process. In small groups and with support from their teacher, students walk their parents or family members through their classroom learning, reflecting on their work, setting goals, and focusing on positive learning outcomes. Any behavioral or other concerns are addressed at a separate meeting. After a highly successful pilot effort in 2014–15, this approach to spring conferences is expanding in the current school year.

Capacity-building opportunities for parents

Capacity-building for parents aims to better prepare them to be engaged in their children’s schools, to understand the local educational policies and practices that might affect their children, and to support their children in meeting their educational goals at home. According to the Dual Capacity–Building Framework (Mapp and Kuttner 2013), this is a critical step for any family involvement plan. Fourteen of fifteen LCAPs report providing capacity-building opportunities for parents. These can range from periodic workshops to formalized approaches to family learning.

San Francisco Unified School District has plans for each of its schools to offer three family-centered workshops per year, with additional outreach to ensure families have the information they need to participate in the district’s school choice program. Lynwood Unified School District plans to offer parent centered training on academic support, navigating the school system, and student advocacy. Santa Ana Unified and others offer English classes to parents and families. Sanger Unified allocates resources to develop a Parent University. This is a series of workshops and seminars to help parents better work with their children, the content of which is driven by the needs of local area parents (Bafile 2006). Sanger’s Parent University focuses on increasing family engagement by offering courses to boost family members’ skills to support their children’s health, safety, and academic success.

San Diego Unified School District already has a formalized Parent University in place, which according to its website prepares families to motivate, nurture, and referee their children’s scholastic life more effectively.⁵ It has been in existence for more than 15 years and offers free classes to family members and guardians, even providing them on site at neighborhood schools that meet federal Title 1 status. Courses include academic support classes, as well as those focused on how to help with homework, using positive effective discipline, and improving parent-child communication, among others.

Riverside and Willows Unified School Districts are both implementing parent capacity-building offered by the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), a nonprofit organization headquartered in San Diego that serves school districts across California and the nation. PIQE offers a nine week course to educate, empower, and inspire parents of K–12 children to take an active role in encouraging and enabling their children to: stay in school; improve their academic performance; develop healthy and constructive relationships with their parents, teachers, and counselors; and prepare themselves for a post-secondary education.⁶ It also offers supplemental courses on topics such as family leadership development.

Riverside Unified and Redwood City School Districts both report working with families of preschool students in an effort to prepare them for entering elementary school. This approach is in line with research that shows that although families of very young children are invested in supporting their children’s healthy development, they do not always know the best ways to do this and can therefore benefit from early family engagement (Fehrer 2014). Oakland Unified is focused on the transition from middle to high school and has produced materials to educate and inform families and students about college and career pathway options while students are still in middle school.

All of these parent capacity-building activities are key points during which district attention to cultural differences between staff and family members could surface. Several LCAPs report ways of addressing this through interactions with both staff and family members. For instance, San Diego Unified states that its engagement opportunities are attentive to and supportive of neighborhood culture, circumstance, and need. Sacramento City Unified’s LCAP mentions an intentional cohort-building approach to capacity-building, by linking low-income and English Learner families to each other through its Parent Leadership Pathway program.

⁵ For more information on San Diego’s Parent University see www.sandiegounified.org/san-diego-parent-university.

⁶ For more information on PIQE see <http://piqe.org/>.

This approach could help family members support their children in completing homework, positive communication, good attendance, and building resilience. Riverside Unified also supports a cohort, with capacity-building opportunities for certain subgroups of family members, including a Dad’s University, a Grandparents’ Group, and a Latino Family Literacy Project. These cohort approaches have the advantage of linking family members to others in the school community who may share a cultural heritage or similar experiences.

Capacity-building opportunities for school staff

Throughout the LCAP documents, many districts identify their plans for staff professional development, particularly in the realm of building capacity to implement the Common Core State Standards. Capacity-building for school or district staff is not a key strategy for family engagement in any district LCAP reviewed in this study, but it is mentioned as part of the approach in several districts, and is an important aspect of the Dual Capacity–Building Framework (Mapp and Kuttner 2013). In particular, where it occurs, the goal of staff training to support family engagement is to provide a culturally appropriate experience for family members when they interact with school staff who may be from different backgrounds.

For instance, the Sylvan Union School District LCAP states that the district provides training to parent liaisons (who are district staff members) to increase their knowledge on barriers that immigrant pupils experience. Oakland Unified’s LCAP also mentions staff training, focusing on professional development for translators who translate district materials and interpret during meetings or conferences. In addition, it calls for two schools to provide actions and services to support family engagement professional learning for administrators, teachers, and staff—although the specific goals of this training are not listed. Bakersfield City School District’s LCAP provides funds to support professional learning in cultural proficiency for bus drivers and clerical staff to promote the value of diversity and create a more welcoming environment. It also funds training regional Parent Resource Center staff on strategies to address challenging youth. In addition, Bakersfield plans to train its Administrator Leadership Team and support staff in effective parent engagement practices. Lynwood, San Francisco, and Riverside Unified School Districts mention offering training or technical assistance for district staff, including but not limited to family engagement staff. In Redwood City School District, the staff training focuses on using a web-based tool that allows teachers and administrators to connect easily with parents in two-way communication.

Oakland Unified and Sacramento City Unified are training teachers to conduct home visits as part of the parent-teacher home visit model and the academic parent-teacher team model. The parent-teacher home visit project offers professional development to teachers in listening and responsibility, academics and capacity-building, and building cultural competency. This would provide them with tools to use home visits as a way to improve the academic outcomes of students.

Formal agreements with community organizations

Eleven of fifteen LCAPs include creating formal agreements with community organizations to provide a variety of services to students and families. Santa Ana Unified School District is partnering with nonprofit organizations to provide Internet access at low cost to families and Internet-enabled devices for students to check out, as well as linking families to community social service resources, offering health fairs, and supporting events with transportation and child care. Sylvan Union is establishing a partnership with foster care agencies. San Diego Unified is partnering with community organizations to support student and family engagement and learning, and to gather input from the community to assist in the identification of needed learning and social services at its schools.

Several school districts have implemented a formalized process for engaging with outside community organizations through the provision of full-service community schools. School districts in Hayward, Oakland, Redwood City, and San Francisco are all implementing community schools, which include a focus on family engagement as well as support services for students and families provided at school sites. As part of the Hayward Promise Neighborhood Initiative,⁷ Hayward Unified School District is implementing community schools in its selected Promise Neighborhood schools, with plans for expansion to other schools in the district. With funding from the US Department of Education, Hayward partners with multiple city and county agencies, institutions of higher education, and community service providers to serve students and families in six public schools and their surrounding neighborhood. The initiative's vision is that all children growing up in the Hayward Promise Neighborhood will have access to effective schools and strong systems of family and community support, and that schools will provide education, health information, and parent support in locations accessible to all HPN residents.⁸ San Francisco Unified is similarly engaged with the Mission Promise Neighborhood, which includes four schools in the city's Mission District.⁹

Redwood City School District was an early adopter of the full service community schools model and has been studied extensively both for its model and its data collection system, highlighted later in this report (Castrechini and London 2012). Redwood City's approach includes family engagement, extended day learning, family support services, and coordination of services, all provided at strategically located school sites in the district.¹⁰ Oakland Unified is implementing community schools broadly across the district. This includes partnerships with community agencies and organizations to offer afterschool programs, behavioral health and health services, family engagement, social emotional learning, and summer learning.¹¹ One specific example of a partnership reported in the LCAP is an agreement with the East Bay Agency for Children to increase the number of students with uninterrupted health care coverage.

Organized volunteer opportunities

Only two of the fifteen LCAPs specifically report a process for organizing volunteer activities. Oakland Unified School District has allocated funds to provide a program assistant to support parent volunteer structure and clearance for all schools, fingerprint vouchers for parent volunteers, software licensing and technical assistance for an online volunteer management system, and an annual parent-community volunteer recognition ceremony. Sacramento City Unified notes that it will provide personnel and services to support families in volunteering at the school, especially families of low-income students, English Learners, and students with disabilities. Other districts mention that increasing the number of volunteers is a goal, but do not lay out specific activities for achieving it.

Student learning at home

Aiding students' learning at home is one of the main goals of family engagement and the focus of a majority of parent capacity-building efforts. This is particularly salient, as family members who work multiple jobs or at odd hours are typically not available to connect with schools during regular business hours. Supporting student learning at home is a key way that these parents can remain involved, even if the school is unable to track and count this as part of its engagement efforts.

⁷ Promise Neighborhoods are funded by the US Department of Education and modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone's "cradle to career" approach to serving children, youth, and families within a community. The program's vision is that all children and youth growing up in Promise Neighborhoods have access to high quality schools and strong systems of family and community support to prepare them for college and a career.

⁸ For more information on HPN see www.haywardpromise.org/.

⁹ For more information on MPN see <http://missionpromise.org/>.

¹⁰ For more information on Redwood City community schools see www.rcsd.k12.ca.us/Page/131.

¹¹ For more information on Oakland community schools see www.ousd.org/Domain/97.

Five of the fifteen LCAPs offer ways they support families to engage with student learning at home. Redwood City School District’s goal is to increase the number of parents helping their children at home. In an interview, a district leader further explained that the district and its schools have developed action plans with specific goals and are using family engagement practices tailored to support those goals. Many district schools focus on reading and literacy and have developed different approaches to engaging families in support of this goal. Several schools send short videos to family members by text message, containing strategies for reading with their children and reinforcing comprehension. Another redesigned its back to school night to focus on helping parents understand their child’s reading scores and provide strategies family members could use at home to improve these scores. Schools are also hosting family literacy nights and providing materials that family members can bring home to use with their children.

In addition, through the parent-teacher home visit project (discussed in more detail in the next section), Sacramento City Unified and Oakland Unified are focusing on improved student learning at home. San Diego Unified also mentions providing opportunities and resources for family members to support their children’s education at home. Sylvan Union has initiated a flashcard program for parents to use with their children before school.

Effective communication

Fourteen of fifteen reviewed LCAPs focus on effective communication strategies as an aspect of family engagement, including in multiple languages and modes, through home visits, and using two-way interaction such as family surveys. Thirteen LCAPs mention communicating with parents in their home language, including translating materials that are sent home and having interpreters available for schoolwide events and parent-teacher conferences. Ten LCAPs discuss using multiple mechanisms for communication. For example, one of Sacramento City Unified School District’s goals is that schools communicate regularly with families through websites, phone outreach, mailings, and meetings. Willows Unified lists communicating effectively with stakeholders through phone messaging, text messaging, email, mailings, and local media. Bakersfield reports using similar methods and also publishing Spanish articles in the local newspaper throughout the academic year to target Spanish-speaking parents and encourage their engagement.

A key mechanism through which districts report supporting family-to-school communication is through parent surveys, which all 15 districts employ. The process of filling out family surveys is itself a form of family engagement. Surveys are also a mechanism for districts to learn families’ views about their efforts to engage family members—as well as their success—on all of the LCAP priority areas. How districts use these surveys, however, is the key to their effectiveness. Family surveys are discussed in more detail in the section on measurement.

Several districts emphasize other ways to engage in two-way communication. For example, San Diego Unified School District’s LCAP mentions expanding and simplifying access to a Quality Assurance Office for parents and community members to express concerns and receive a timely response. San Francisco Unified has prioritized two-way communication through principal “chats” and engaging community organizations.

Supporting Enhanced Parent Communication in San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)

SFUSD has an equity focus and a strong commitment to ensuring that communication reaches all parents and that all are invited to interact. The district is actively pursuing strategies to build its communications systems to better connect families to school and allow school and district administrators to listen to parents and family members. To these ends, SFUSD is engaged in multiple activities.

- SFUSD is examining its communications systems with an eye toward improving two-way communication. For instance, it is expanding systems for two-way texting and email between schools and families and updating parent surveys to better elicit family members' feedback.
- As part of its full-service community schools approach, SFUSD has formal agreements with many community-based organizations to provide direct services to students and families at school sites. These organizations play a key role in helping family members learn about and feel welcome at school, as well as connecting them with needed services for themselves and their children.
- With so many outside organizations providing services at school sites, SFUSD is building better systems to track and map the services provided and establish manageable and useful tools for school sites and families to weigh in on the quality of programming offered by outside organizations.

Two school districts are working with outside organizations or programs to pilot new approaches to effective communication. LCAPs in both Oakland and Sacramento City Unified School Districts report piloting the parent-teacher home visit project. The parent-teacher home visit project offers teachers professional development in listening and responsibility, academics and capacity-building, and building cultural competency. This should provide them with tools to use home visits as a way to improve students' academic outcomes.¹² A third district, Live Oak, is also piloting home visits but with an unspecified model.

Oakland Unified and Sacramento City Unified School Districts are also piloting academic parent-teacher teams—a WestEd initiative—with goals that include helping teachers to use family engagement as an instructional strategy, developing teachers' skills for parent meetings, sharing data with families to establish academic goals, and enlisting parents as classroom leaders.¹³ The academic parent-teacher team model supports more than effective communication and demonstrates well the ways that the four strategies discussed in this report overlap and enhance one another.

Shared responsibility and leadership

Twelve of fifteen LCAPs reference aspects of shared responsibility and leadership, including involving families in decision making, providing opportunities for family leadership, and providing leadership development opportunities. In general, districts that include shared responsibility and leadership cite all three aspects of this strategy, with a bit more emphasis on leadership opportunities than on involving families in decision making and leadership development.

¹² For more information on the parent-teacher home visit project see www.pthvp.org/.

¹³ For more information on this initiative see www.wested.org/service/academic-parent-teacher-teams-aptt-family-engagement-in-education/.

Some districts, such as San Diego Unified, plan to generally expand their opportunities for meaningful leadership and to provide training to parents who volunteer to be on leadership committees. Willows Unified reports examining existing committees and developing a plan to include parents from various unrepresented groups in their decision-making processes. In an effort to improve school site-based decision making, Oakland Unified reports providing stipends for parent leader fellowships and creating a district-wide school site council summit to bring together school-based leadership teams. Sacramento City Unified has a Parent Leadership Pathway program, which includes a series of workshops aimed at helping family members support their child’s education and at the same time practice leadership skills.

Riverside Unified School District is working with the Riverside County Office of Education and a county-wide PTA to implement the Parent Engagement Leadership Institute (PELI), which was designed by and is being implemented within the county. PELI is a 10-module training based on the work of family engagement scholar Joyce Epstein.¹⁴ PELI consultants train teams of parents, administrators, teachers, and community members at district sites with the understanding that those who have completed the training will take the material back to their individual school sites and train their parent groups. Most other school districts do not report undertaking similarly intensive parent leadership training efforts. One exception is Bakersfield, which has its own parent leadership training program described below.

Building Leadership Capacity in Bakersfield City School District (BCSD)

The BCSD family engagement goal is to ensure that all parents and community members are welcome in the learning process. To that end, BCSD has funded 15 parent resource centers located strategically throughout the district. It offers a series of five learning modules to help parents prepare students for academic success:

1. How to support and monitor student academic success.
2. Promoting positive behaviors at home and in school.
3. Using technology to support student learning.
4. Becoming an active volunteer and parent leader.
5. School district and community resources.

Family members who complete all five modules receive a certificate of completion and can become designated as Parents as Leaders (PALs) in the district. They are then eligible to attend quarterly meetings at the district that provide professional development and an opportunity to engage with Community Relations Liaisons for their schools. They also have the opportunity to become part of a “train the trainer” model where they work to inform other family members at their school site on how to be an active volunteer and parent leader.

Some districts utilize parent leadership as a mechanism for infusing the cultural background of students and families into family engagement efforts. For instance, in Hayward Unified School District, the LCAP allocates funds to the African American Student Achievement Initiative parent leadership team to improve school site parent involvement. Oakland Unified provides a family engagement specialist to recruit and support African

¹⁴ For more information about PELI, see www.rcoe.us/parent-engagement/parent-engagement-leadership-initiative-pei/.

American Male Achievement Parent Leaders. Sacramento City Unified has a goal of maintaining participation of low-income and English Learner parents (currently 80% of family members have English Learner students) in its Parent Leadership Pathway program.

Most districts take a school-based approach to parent leadership, with opportunities at the school taking precedence over those at the district. One exception is that all LCAPs focus on district parent leadership in the context of stakeholder engagement in the LCAP process. None of the reviewed LCAPs mentions parent leadership on district-wide wellness committees, although many California districts have such committees. For the most part, LCAPs also do not highlight in detail the actions of already established school leadership groups such as PTAs, site councils, and ELACs. Some districts, such as Redwood City and Sacramento City, mention improving the number of these committees and family member representation on them. Others focus on how to support family-school committees. For instance, Oakland Unified mentions hiring a school governance specialist to support family and community engagement with school site councils and LCAP site-based planning, and also to organize district-wide school site council summits.

Welcoming environment

Creating a welcoming environment is among the strategies districts employ the least to promote family engagement. This strategy could include holding community events at school that family members attend (discussed previously in the section on resources and opportunities), inviting families into classrooms, providing staff training to support family engagement, and offering a safe school environment for students and families.

Ten LCAPs discuss creating a welcoming environment at school sites as part of their family engagement practices. In some cases, these practices are nonspecific, with LCAPs simply stating that creating a welcoming environment for families is the goal. Other LCAPs list more specific goals. For example, six LCAPs mention creating a safe and/or clean environment for family members as well as students. Santa Ana Unified School District has a goal of establishing a process to support maintaining current facilities. Santa Ana also plans to create a welcoming and productive school environment by conducting anti-bullying awareness and safe and sensitive schools campaigns that include outreach efforts to staff, parents, and students. In Live Oak School District, the LCAP states that each site will host a welcoming social school event within the first two weeks of school, all elementary sites will hold an informational night for parents of incoming kindergarteners, and each principal will send a welcome letter to families before the first day of school.

Three LCAPs focus specifically on inviting families into classrooms. For instance, Live Oak calls for more opportunities for parent leadership in the classroom and Redwood City mentions increasing the number of parents who chaperone field trips.

Measuring Family Engagement Outcomes

As part of any effort to improve practice, it is essential to establish outcomes, indicators, and good measurement strategies to ensure that implementation is tracked and outcomes are met. At this time, there is no evaluation rubric in place for the LCAP, and California does not have an agreed upon accountability measurement system. Because of the wide variety of approaches to family engagement, any evaluation system will have to be flexible enough to capture a range of activities, but rigorous enough to establish that meaningful family engagement is taking place. In this section, I discuss the types of data collection and measures districts report in their LCAPs, and offer suggestions for how districts and the state might proceed in capturing a variety of measures of family engagement and linking these to student outcomes.

In the LCAP, districts are required to identify metrics for documenting improvements in family engagement. As do their strategies, these vary. Response rate to parent and family surveys is among the most common indicators—seven of fifteen districts use them. Districts use surveys as a two-way communication tool as well as to gather information about the extent of family members' participation in activities. Clearly, hearing from more family members is in their best interest. Districts set goals of increasing response rates by approximately two to five percentage points per year or reaching a certain response rate target (e.g., 50%). Meeting these goals demonstrates that they are improving in their family engagement or have reached a threshold of involved families.

A second indicator is counts of parent and family participation in various types of events and opportunities—9 of 15 district LCAPs report this. As I mentioned, some districts gather this information through their family survey. Others have set up information systems ranging from the low tech—counting heads at events—to more sophisticated systems that use sign-in sheets and even possibly link family engagement to students' academic records. (See the text box in this section on Redwood City School District's data system.)

The problem with both these approaches is that they put the onus of accountability on parents and families—their participation is the only gauge of both *opportunities for engagement* and *participation* itself. Furthermore, if there is high participation, it is assumed the district is using an effective approach. But if there is low participation, it is unknown what barriers families might face—if opportunities for engagement and leadership are unavailable, if available opportunities are not communicated well and families are unaware of them, or if data collection is flawed. An approach that relies only on family participation does not go far enough to hold schools and districts accountable for providing the appropriate opportunities for engagement and leadership, and for ensuring that essential supports are in place.

A more robust family engagement accountability system would include measures at the district, the school, the individual parent/family, and the individual student levels. This would help ensure that opportunities for engagement and leadership are available and appropriately scaffolded, that parents and family members take advantage of these opportunities, and that these efforts align with learning outcomes. For a system such as this to work, there must be metrics that demonstrate effective practice at all four levels, and appropriate data collections to support measurement.

Data collection systems to support family engagement

Data collections could include three types of systems: tracking systems, self-assessments, and surveys. The most effective measurement system would employ all three approaches and examine the resulting data together.

Gathering Information on Opportunities and Participation

Tracking information about family engagement at the district, school, and individual family levels is essential for documenting engagement opportunities and participation. Data-tracking systems can range from basic (e.g., sign-in sheets and headcounts) to more sophisticated systems that could be integrated with other data for more complex analysis and reporting.

Data-tracking systems are essential for gathering information about the frequency of opportunities for engagement, and participation in those opportunities. For instance, with regard to leadership, a basic tracking system would be populated with information about the number of slots on district and school committees open to parents, as well as the number of parents who take on those leadership roles. A more sophisticated system would include the roles of the committees, the frequency and location of their meetings, the names of the parent leaders and a link to their child(ren) in the district. An even more sophisticated system would track attendance at each meeting so that family participation in leadership roles and extent of each individual's participation over the course of the school year can be assessed.

Another example is schoolwide events, such as back to school nights. The district could track the availability of these events at each school—including times and dates—and individual schools would track attendance at the events. This can be done by simply counting the number of adults, or through a sign-in sheet that would then allow more individual tracking. More complex tracking systems are necessary to count family volunteering at schools, participation in parent-teacher conferences, and other ways that parents interact with their schools and districts. Tracking systems have the potential to track the extent of engagement if identifiers are used to follow individual family members or individual students' family members and their engagement across a variety of events and strategies. Districts can also track their own activities—such as providing professional development to staff—and even solicit feedback on those sessions to incorporate into a feedback loop.

Using Self-Assessments

Some aspects of family engagement are inherently difficult to track in a system, such as creating a welcoming environment or using effective communication strategies. Another approach to ensuring progress in these less tangible areas is through annual self-assessment. Using an annual self-assessment tool, districts and schools can examine their own efforts and hold themselves responsible for meeting their goals. Self-assessments have been developed by different organizations. Several examples are:

- Parent-Teacher Association's National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Assessment Guide (www.pta.org/files/National_Standards_Assessment_Guide.pdf)
- California Department of Education's and WestEd's Family Engagement Framework (www.wested.org/wp-content/files_mf/1414600912familyengagementframework2.pdf)
- Families in Schools' Ready or Not Report (www.familiesinschools.org/ready-or-not-parent-engagement-in-california-lcff/).

These self-assessments may be most appropriate for schools to monitor their own progress in achieving their family engagement goals, rather than for inclusion in a statewide accountability system. However, a well-designed self-assessment may aid district, regional, and state decision makers in determining policies, resources, professional development, and other supports needed to implement a strong family engagement strategy. In addition to assessing current family engagement practices at schools, self-assessments such as these are intended to help schools and districts develop new ideas, to monitor progress in reaching goals, to guide the development of policies and compacts, and even to aid with designing research and evaluation (PTA 2008).

Linking Family Engagement to Student Outcomes in Redwood City School District

In the 2007-08 school year, RCSD began tracking family engagement in its full service community schools. The district relies on community school coordinators at each of its sites to collect data on a range of activities and services, including on families' engagement in: leadership opportunities, education opportunities, volunteerism, school events, and school-home communication. Each school provides data to the district office to use in assessing the effectiveness of its strategies. RCSD worked with researchers at the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to link these data to student academic outcomes as well as student survey data, and to examine the relationships. Findings showed (Castrechini and London 2012):

- Between 26 and 30 percent of parents of students at community schools were engaged in some capacity at the school site in the most recent years reported.
- Elementary English Learner students whose parents were consistently engaged at school showed gains in English language development scores.
- Students with family engagement in elementary school entered middle school more likely to say that their school provided a supportive environment compared to those without family engagement.

RCSD leaders used this information to delve into their family engagement practices and made the strategic decision to link district family engagement efforts more directly to student learning, with a particular focus on reading in elementary schools. In the 2014–15 school year, one RCSD school implemented a family reading program and data collection system, gathering information about family engagement with students in reading and comprehension at home. Tallying the results, school leaders found that students whose families engaged with the at-home reading program made substantially larger gains in literacy during the school year.

Collecting family survey data

Family surveys are a very common method for gathering input about schools' and districts' effectiveness in supporting students' learning, and every LCAP reports using one. They are also a key mechanism to support two-way communication—as one of the only opportunities for family members to share their thoughts on how their schools measure up. In this way survey response levels can be thought of as an indicator of family engagement.

Many districts report using response rates to the LCAP as a measure of family engagement, and increases in these response rates as indicators of improvement. But this has the potential to misrepresent the perspectives of the general family population. For instance, if only the most engaged family members respond to the survey, the results will be biased toward their views. There is no agreed upon standard for what family survey response rate indicates a threshold for meaningful engagement.

It is not the purpose of this report to offer guidance on survey methodology, but a few precautions are important in fielding a survey. As with all effective family communication, offering the survey in multiple languages and in multiple formats (both online and paper) is important so that families can select which is best for them. Reminding families through multiple methods that the survey is available is also key.

A second consideration is the survey questions—both content and wording. Survey design should ensure that questions are clear to all respondents and that respondents understand the question in the same way. There are multiple family survey examples available, but two that are recently designed and appropriate for use are:

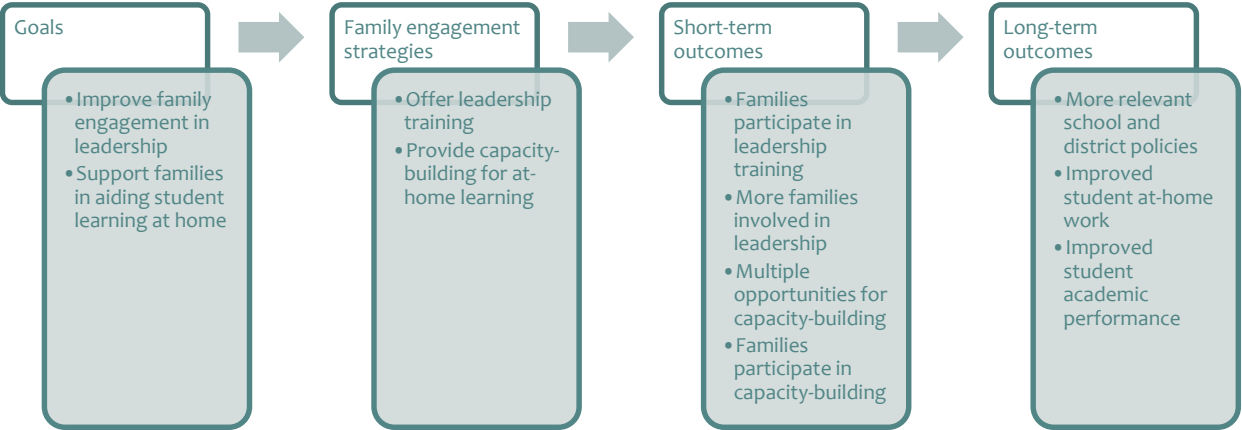
- The California School Parent Survey, a companion tool to the California Healthy Kids Survey designed and implemented by WestEd (<http://cspw.wested.org/>).
- The Survey Monkey-Harvard Graduate School of Education K–12 Parent Survey (www.surveymonkey.com/mp/harvard-education-surveys/).

The advantage of working with a predesigned survey such as these is that the questions have already been field-tested. In addition, there is the potential to compare any results seen within the district to those in other districts in the state, or even nationally. Importantly, content should be tailored to the specific approach taken at the district or school site. If the focus is on effective communication, for instance, questions about that approach should be emphasized. Surveys should also be offered in the languages spoken by parents in the district. Eighty-four percent of English Learners in California speak Spanish, followed by Vietnamese, Tagalog, Cantonese, and Mandarin. The California School Parent Survey has already been translated into 26 languages, with both English and Spanish available online for download. Both surveys can be fielded using online and paper/pencil versions so that families with and without Internet access can complete them.

Aligning family-engagement strategies and student outcomes

Collecting annual data from tracking systems, self-assessments, and surveys is a first essential step. However, for the data to be useful in refining individual strategies and determining fund allocation, districts must align findings from these sources to their overall strategy and report their progress to district and school staff, as well as to families, for review and feedback. The goals of these efforts are two-fold: (1) to examine the extent to which district and school family engagement practices are implemented and aligned with the overall strategy, and (2) to link progress in family engagement to improvements in students’ outcomes, which is the ultimate goal of the LCAP.

FIGURE 3
Sample theory of change model



Designing a simple theory of change or logic model might aid districts in aligning family engagement practices to short- and long-term outcomes. In the example theory of change shown in Figure 3, there are just two goals (although a district might have many more). It then lists the specific strategies intended to address those goals, the short-term outcomes needed to assess whether the strategies have been implemented, and the long-term outcomes the district intends to achieve. Ideally, any theory of change would come out of collaborative discussions with multiple stakeholders in the LCAP planning process and reflect the viewpoints of multiple constituents.

The data collections described previously could then be used to populate the various points in the theory of change. For instance, self-assessment data could be used to determine whether the district or school has implemented its intended strategies. A data-tracking system could track both changes in opportunities for family capacity-building and also their engagement in these activities. Other data collections, including student data already gathered by schools and districts, could then be used to track whether these changes are having their intended effects on student outcomes. Ideally, data would be analyzed together across these sources to examine the link between family engagement practices, participation, and student outcomes.

Reporting is essential for districts, as they must link opportunities for family engagement with participation and ultimately student outcomes in order to understand whether their strategies are having their intended effects. It is also important for each district to share the results of its family engagement assessment with the school and family communities. That way school administration, teachers, and family members will understand where the opportunities for engagement exist, how they are being utilized, and what effect, if any, they are having on student success. With these multiple constituents, it will be important to tailor content and presentation style to best reach the intended audiences.

Conclusion

This report documents the many ways that 15 California school districts have planned for enhanced family engagement as reported in their district Local Control Accountability Plans. The literature on best practices in family engagement identifies four key strategies: providing resources and opportunities for family engagement, using effective communication practices, sharing responsibility and leadership, and creating a welcoming environment. District LCAPs address all four in a multitude of ways, with the highest concentration in the area of resources and opportunities, and the lowest in creating a welcoming environment.

Two related contextual issues critical to family engagement practices surface in the literature: (1) capacity-building for both parents and school staff and (2) attention to cultural and linguistic differences between school staff and families. Attention to both is essential for implementing a successful family engagement framework, but the majority of LCAPs do not mention them specifically. There are examples of staff training, which sometimes focus on specific front-line employees like clerical staff or bus drivers, but no district offers a strong centralized plan for training everyone on enhanced and culturally appropriate family-engagement strategies.

Although there are reasons to believe that family-engagement strategies should vary by student age group (Paredes, O'Malley, and Amarillas 2012), no LCAP reviewed in this study specifically ties its strategies to student age group. Strategies such as volunteering in classrooms and parent-teacher conferences may be more appropriate at the elementary level, whereas involving families in decision making may be more appropriate in high school.

Districts identify metrics for assessing family engagement practices and all 15 LCAPs focus exclusively on family participation metrics—participation in key school-based events or leadership opportunities and response rates to district family surveys. No LCAP identifies a process for tracking opportunities for family engagement offered by schools and districts, but these are key metrics for ensuring that schools and districts are doing their part to give families the chance to engage with their students' learning.

Because of the variety and combinations of approaches, no one set of guidelines for districts emerges from this study. This result points to the importance of tailoring family engagement practices to the needs and strengths of the particular district and community. However, it also potentially indicates the lack of specific guidance about what the best family engagement frameworks look like and which elements California school districts should be sure to include. This possibility highlights the need for more guidance from the state—potentially through its in-progress accountability system and rubrics—to help districts be sure they have met the goals of each priority area.

Perhaps as a result of the LCAP format—which asks districts to report their practices for each priority area in a cumbersome table—family engagement is often not included alongside other learning strategies, but is its own separate category. It is difficult to determine from the LCAP review the extent to which districts are using family engagement as an integrated part of their overall approach to student learning, which is the ideal, or as an add-on handled separately from instructional practice. Future research could look more carefully at this issue.

As plans for California's new accountability system and rubrics to assess the quality of district LCAPs move forward, policymakers and education leaders should consider metrics that focus on three levels: the district, the school, and the family. Data collections should be established to track opportunities for family engagement as well as participation itself. This way districts will be able to use their data collection systems to understand where their efforts are succeeding and where they are facing challenges, and act accordingly.

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