

Reconnecting with Families: How EIR Grantees Are Reimagining Family Engagement Post COVID-19

Spring 2024



Acknowledgments

The contents of this document were developed under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Innovation and Early Learning Programs (IELP) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), by AnLar under Award # GS00F229DA. This contains resources that are provided for the reader's convenience. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, enterprise, curriculum, or program of instruction mentioned in this document is intended or should be inferred.

Suggested Citation

Lindsey, LaMicah. (2023). *Reconnecting with Families: How EIR Grantees Are Reimagining Family Engagement Post COVID–19*. Cross-project summary produced by AnLar and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; Education Innovation and Research Program (EIR).

Family Engagement

Family engagement in educational settings is a shared responsibility between schools and communities to support students throughout their lives (Ishimaru, 2019). Family engagement goes beyond the limits of one-way communication; it is bidirectional, with caregivers¹ driving critical conversations (FHI 360, 2023). Involving caregivers has been crucial to conversations centered around family engagement and its effect on student success. Greater family engagement is associated with positive academic achievement, good mental health, and student feelings of cultural affirmation and belonging (Mahony et al., 2020). Often, school culture is enhanced through partnerships with families.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its school closures linked schools and homes in ways educators and families had not previously experienced. It was a potential turning point for family engagement. While the pandemic opened the door to family engagement and necessitated that educators and school leaders think creatively about communicating and collaborating with caregivers, research suggests that creating opportunities for authentic family and community collaboration remained challenging due to barriers that hinder efforts to (1) foster collaborative decision-making, (2) build trust, (3) strengthen commitment and value, and (4) develop capacity and infrastructure (FHI 360, 2023).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic also brought about several challenges for students, families, and educators. Challenges include increased depression and anxiety, increased adverse childhood experiences, difficulties in student social-emotional learning (SEL) (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making), and exacerbated academic struggles for many students. These difficulties have highlighted the urgent need for equitable access to resources to support students' whole child development.

There are many resources for schools, communities, and families with suggestions for ways to enhance engagement ([Additional Resources](#)). Even with suggestions for best practices, engagement can be a challenge for schools due to time constraints, unclear or insufficient communication, cultural differences, and families or community members having negative experiences with education systems in the past. This paper describes how three current EIR early-phase grantees are attempting to implement family engagement strategies. It provides examples of the challenges they face with family engagement and how their programs will help bridge the gap between families, school leaders, teachers, and community members to support whole child development. It is organized around three strategies for family engagement: facilitating bidirectional communication, recognizing and affirming diverse cultural backgrounds, and using a whole child approach.

Facilitating Open, Regular, Bidirectional, and Effective Communication

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional in-person education in K-12 schools, leading school leaders to prioritize providing resources, support, and constant communication with families as students shifted to remote instruction. Although many teachers and school leaders created innovative ways to engage families in student academics during the pandemic, in some schools communication practices have unconsciously reverted to traditional unidirectional notifications to families

¹ A caregiver is a broader term and includes any person with whom the child lives who provides daily care to the child and who acts as the child's "parent" whether they are biological parents or not. A caregiver can be the mother or father, or another family member such as a grandparent or older sibling.

regarding student progress post-pandemic (Tye, 2023). While family involvement involves one-way communication, authentic family engagement involves two-way communication between schools and families, where both caregivers and school staff are included in decision-making (Kelty, 2020).

When school leaders design ways to collaborate and partner with families they increase the likelihood of student success (Park & Holloway, 2017; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Mapp and Kuttner (2013) state that caregivers are “supporters of learning, encouragers of grit and determination, models of lifelong learning, and advocates for their child’s proper programming and placements.” This is largely associated with families being actively engaged in their child’s education in addition to conventional family involvement practices of checking homework, attending open houses, and participating in parent-teacher conferences (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

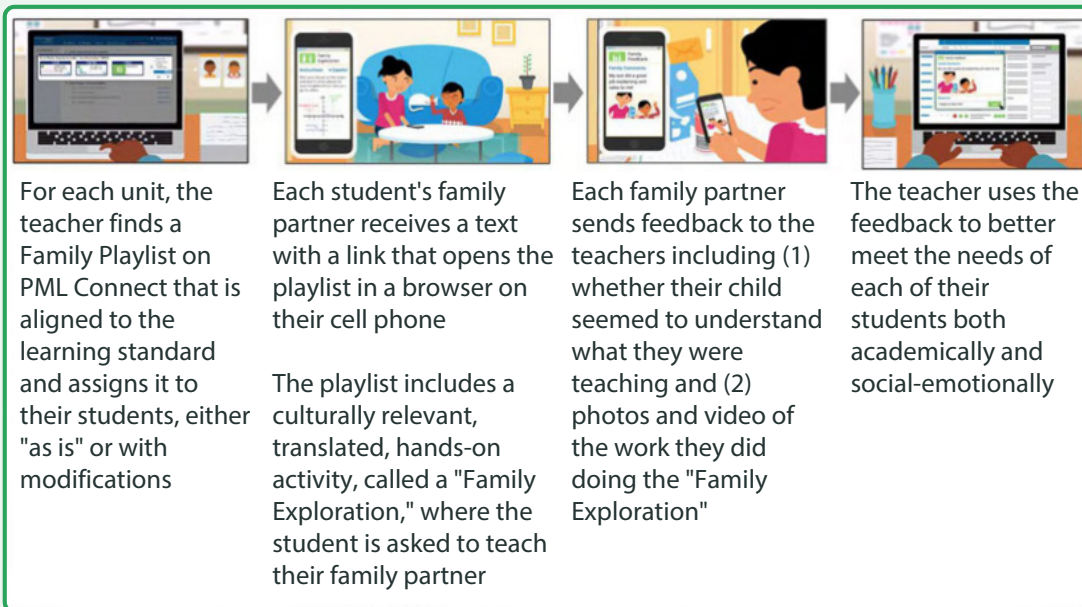
When a program has focused on developing bidirectional communication, the school is better equipped to understand the needs of families and provide them with needed resources. A 2013 i3-funded program, The Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) of Children’s Aid (CA), focused on improving parents’ capacity to effectively engage in the school community and on increasing school staff’s capacity to create supportive and welcoming environments. At the heart of the PLI were the CA parent engagement coordinators (PECs), who collaborated with parents, school staff, staff from local community organizations, and other CA staff to develop and deliver programming that met the needs of the parents and families served by participating schools. Collaboration increased throughout the program’s implementation. While the program did not have a statistically significant impact on student attendance rates, the raw data showed students in the program had higher attendance, suggesting the program may have the potential to improve student outcomes if family-school collaboration is increased (Hildreth and Butler, 2019).



Grantee Spotlight



PowerMyLearning's Family Playlists program is an evidence-based tool that has had a statistically significant impact on students' math and SEL outcomes. Developed in partnership with the Accelerate Learning in Early Grades (K-2) program, Family Playlists is a user-friendly tool that provides learning games and is accessible to all families, with 300 language settings. Teachers use Family Playlists to provide fun and engaging ways for caregivers to support their students' math homework. The goal is for students and caregivers to work together to learn and review math lessons while spending quality time together. By involving caregivers in this process, both caregivers and students can see the content and how it is aligned with grade-appropriate math standards. Once activities are assigned, caregivers receive a text message that allows them to participate in the game with their child. After the student and caregiver have completed the assigned activities, they are required to record a 1- to 2-minute video explaining the content they learned from the game. The goal is for this tool to strengthen relationships between families and schools.



Recognizing and Affirming Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

Students, their families, teachers, and other educators come from a wide variety of cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds and have different social experiences. Teachers and school leaders should work to understand the families in their community and create an environment where families share their culture. Taking a culturally affirming stance and an inclusive approach to family engagement is important because some caregivers may lack trust in the school system due to previous negative experiences with the school (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Blitz, Luann, & Bronstein 2013). Ishimaru (2017) believes creating equitable community-school collaboration requires (1) creating systemic change goals, (2) utilizing strategies that build capacity and relationships, (3) viewing caregivers with low incomes and families of color as experts on their students, and (4) using educational change as a context-specific political process. Moreover, Henderson and Mapp (2002) encourage educators to use the ABCs of family engagement, which include (a)wareness and (a)dvocacy, cultural (b)rokerage and (b)uilding trust, and (c)ommunication (c)onnected to learning. By incorporating these culturally affirming strategies, schools can bridge the gap between schools and families of color, promoting an authentic collaborative educational environment focused on whole child development.



Grantee Spotlight

EIR grantee CAST, Inc. developed Circle Up: An Integrated Whole School Model to enhance family engagement through culturally affirming and inclusive strategies. The Circle Up initiative aims to improve student social-emotional learning (SEL) and engagement, reduce exclusionary discipline, and foster cultural and equity advancements within schools. Circle Up is structured around a school- and community-based approach, incorporating an innovative integration of three evidence-based practices: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the Check and Connect (C&C) mentoring program, and Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS).



At the time of writing this summary, the project is just beginning. In practice, teachers will undergo training in utilizing the UDL framework, specifically focusing on developing university-designed academic learning environments, establishing classroom routines, and creating lessons embedded with SEL supports. Furthermore, the C&C mentoring program will involve structured mentoring for students that is focused on school engagement and academic data. The CPS methods will be utilized in conjunction with the C&C mentoring program to identify students requiring intervention to alleviate the impact of trauma on their academic progress.

Using a Whole Child Approach

Concerns about the mental health of students have been on the rise since the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows the pandemic played a critical role in the increase of major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder due to factors such as social isolation, changes in the provision of treatment services, and near-total loss of access to structured professionals (school, work, healthcare) (Li, 2022). Following the onset of the pandemic, some school leaders and educators prioritized whole child development to address the various factors that impact students' success.

Based on the whole child development approach, Sesame Workshop, another EIR grantee, has pioneered a program called Sesame Street in the Communities. This program aims to increase social-emotional competencies, school engagement, and reading achievement among pre-K- 2nd grade students. This program offers comprehensive professional development opportunities to train site coordinators (school staff) on high-quality resources supporting social-emotional competencies and resilience against ACEs. Within a 12-week cycle (comprising eight weeks of core content and four weeks covering additional topics chosen by students and instructors), students and families engage with a variety of materials derived from the popular children's show Sesame Street. These materials, including videos, storybooks, and printables, focus on resilience and other relevant subjects. Site coordinators guide caregivers and students through these resources.

When thinking about the training in whole child development, one program manager commented,

The [whole - child development experience] has opened my eyes in a way that will never be forgotten. I feel more aware of how my ideals growing up might need to change to better support the children that I serve in today's time. I am overwhelmed with emotions and don't want it to end. Thanks for a beautiful experience."



Grantee Spotlight

Transcend's Student Well-Being Model program focuses on four main components to increase student academic achievement in math and English language arts:



- Community-driven design
- Adult learning
- Student engagement
- Data and feedback

Transcend first helps develop a student well-being plan with students, school staff, and caregivers. The student well-being plan focuses on academic achievement, social-emotional development, and behavior, and is altered throughout the school year based on data and feedback. Transcend's program is unique because it recognizes that supporting students' social-emotional development, especially after the pandemic, helps teachers and families support student academic success. Transcend also uses professional development to support teachers' and families' understanding of SEL, trauma-informed practices, and restorative justice.

Transcend's three-part approach to whole child development involves:

1. CARE – This stands for compassion and assertiveness, routines, and environments. This domain focuses on schoolwide routines and practices that create a safe, connected, and predictable environment.
2. Boost - This domain is focused on personalized Tier 2 and 3 interventions for students who need an additional "boost."
3. Family Circle - This domain is focused on ensuring that families from all backgrounds feel valued and safe and can contribute to students' growth and development as equal partners in education.

Transcend's project director notes that "our school model is rooted in the understanding that children's academic success is inextricably linked to their overall well-being, and in the belief that we can – and must – attend to the development of the whole child while also achieving excellence in academics."

After participating in a training, one teacher said of the student well-being model, "I feel more aware of how my ideals growing up might need to change to better support the children that I serve in today's time. I am overwhelmed with emotions and don't want it to end."

Key Considerations for Enhancing Family Engagement

If asked, many families and caregivers would say they want to be included in their children's learning at school. Likewise, many teachers and educators would say they want caregivers and families to be engaged with what their children are doing and learning at school. Nevertheless, family engagement does not always come naturally or easily. Teachers are not always trained in how to communicate with families, and truly engaging with families can be challenging. With an ever-increasing burden of responsibilities, thoughtful approaches to meaningful family engagement can be challenging among other expectations. School staff, district leaders, and community partners from the grantees spotlighted in this summary were interviewed about their hopes and goals for their project implementation. They discussed how leadership, collaboration, and taking a culturally responsive approach improve chances for success.

Involving Leadership

Program developers noted the importance of having the support of school administrators when starting a collaboration with schools. For example, one grantee stated,

"We were definitely big believers in the top-down approach. If the leader has the vision and the mission of spreading something in their campus, it pretty much takes fire."

Additionally, having teachers who are ready and willing to engage in family engagement initiatives was seen as an asset to the overall goal of improving family engagement in schools. To illustrate, one participant stated,

"Really seeing that collaboration and the things that we create be perpetuated through all groups. When the teacher is in, they're in! And we see the work being propelled and it trickles down to the student."

Collaborating for Holistic Support

Program staff highlighted the importance of collaboration with educators and school leaders who share similar goals and visions for the success of their students and families. They expressed gratitude for schoolwide family engagement-related goals for teachers, students, and families. One project director stated,

"We really try and focus on having well-rounded support for both teachers, parents, teaching assistants, and our students."

Another participant expressed the need to build connections at different levels, using connections with district staff to help facilitate relationships with multiple schools. Similarly, two project directors shared that they used a vertical approach to communicate biweekly with district SEL coaches, administrators, and teachers. They mentioned the significance of ongoing communication, emphasizing that it enables them to build skill sets around supporting the schools, so that there is some continuity across the district even after the program funding ends.

Providing Coaching and Training to Staff and Families

In academics, families play a pivotal role in fostering students' success, particularly in the aftermath of disruptions caused by the pandemic. Initiatives like Transcend's Student Well-Being Model and PowerMyLearning's Family Playlists explore how involving families in students' education affects their academic achievement. To sustain academic improvements due to family engagement, these grantees recommend that school leaders consider ways to offer ongoing targeted training for caregivers and school staff. Including family members in training provides them with the tools to support their learners at home with academic needs, behavioral needs, and mental needs. Therefore, training targeted at whole child development for school staff and caregivers is essential to ensure a consistent and dedicated commitment to strategies that affect students' growth and development at school. When offering training or professional development to families, project staff recommend that educators and school leaders provide consistent multidirectional communication methods in accessible ways, such as multilingual software, mobile accessibility, and video conferencing.

Looking Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the role of family engagement in education as crucial for addressing students' academic, social-emotional, and cultural needs. Despite the emerging and ongoing challenges faced by educators and families due to the pandemic, it is imperative for educators to reimagine what family engagement entails to meet the evolving needs of their learners. The EIR grantees have identified promising practices to improve academic outcomes, mental health outcomes, and affirm cultural backgrounds. Staff from these projects hope to have success through (1) authentically collaborating with district leaders to increase district-wide support for creating and implementing family engagement strategies, (2) designing training to help school staff and caregivers support whole child development, and (3) devising strategies for seamlessly integrating families into school practices, such as curriculum and mentoring, to bolster student mental health and academic achievement.

Educational inequalities, accentuated by the pandemic, disproportionately affected marginalized communities, and create achievement gaps. Addressing these achievement gaps requires school leaders to promote collaborative decision-making, build trust, and strengthen commitment with families. Programs like Circle Up have recognized the importance of addressing social-emotional challenges to reduce unfair disciplinary practices and foster cultural and equity advancements within schools. As a result, these programs have designed a school-community approach that integrates aspects of Universal Design for Learning, culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy, and community-based participatory action (CPS). Circle Up recommends collaborating with partners that share similar goals and outcomes. This not only helps align district, school, and community efforts to support student success across the education continuum, but it also helps spread family engagement initiatives to other schools and districts.

The pandemic has significantly impacted students' mental health, making family engagement crucial for their recovery. Initiatives like Transcend's Student Well-Being Model highlight the importance of understanding SEL, trauma-informed practices, and restorative justice to support students' social-emotional competencies. Their school community model emphasizes the need to support students' social and emotional growth throughout their day, not just during departmentalized times. Transcend recommends using a design team that comprises a school leader, a leader of behavior (assistant principal or dean), and a few teachers to ensure fidelity to the model's implementation throughout the school year. Additionally, Transcend recommends school leaders create communication plans for school staff, caregivers, and district staff to keep everyone informed on relevant updates and the implementation plan's impact on students and families.

These projects are just beginning their implementation, and the evaluation results will take some time. However, the lessons learned from prior studies and from engaging with families through the pandemic should be used for continued innovation, iteration, and ideation about the best ways to involve families. Prior studies and resources are building blocks for creating deeper connections and more fully supporting all students. Planning for family engagement using existing frameworks and sharing what works in different settings are crucial for improvement.

Additional Resources

Federal Initiatives Focused on Family Engagement

On October 11, 2023, the Biden-Harris Administration announced [\\$11.4 million in grants](#) to 12 organizations in states and school districts across the country to improve and strengthen family engagement programs. The purpose of the [Statewide Family Engagement Centers \(SFEC\)](#) program is to provide financial support to organizations that provide technical assistance and training to state educational agencies and local educational agencies in the implementation and enhancement of systemic and effective family engagement policies, programs, and activities that lead to improvements in student development and academic achievement. This investment builds on the U.S. Department of Education's "[Raising the Bar for Parent Partnership in Our Schools](#)" initiative's efforts to engage parents, family members, caregivers, and advocates. To date, the program has awarded nearly \$83 million to expand and support parent and family engagement.

Webinars and Other Resources

During the summer of 2023, the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York and Overdeck Family Foundation, hosted a six-part [Family Engagement Learning Series](#) and hosted a series of [Parent Empowerment Pop-Ups](#). The Department also released a series of [Family Engagement Learning Series briefs](#) to complement the webinar series by highlighting bright spots in the field and sharing resources and evidence-based strategies to support student success. On National Parents Day, the Department published a parent-written blog titled "[Standing Shoulder-to-Shoulder](#)."

The National Comprehensive Center produced a [video, Partnerships for Family Engagement in High Needs Communities](#), about how the Hillsboro school district created parent leadership and collaborative opportunities for Black, indigenous, and other people of color parent groups and built parent advisory councils that consult on education planning.

FHI 360 has created [district profiles](#) to share real-world examples of school districts using evidence-based strategies for family and community collaboration. These district profiles are intended to serve as a guide to help other districts put research into practice.

The [National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement](#) has many resources, such as a resource library, toolkits, and webinars.

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition developed the [English Learner Family Toolkit](#) to help families find and choose services that meet their needs.

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Appendix A: Interview participants

Grantee Interviewee(s)	Project
PowerMyLearning • Katie James, Director of Research • Emily Amik, Managing Director • JuDonn DeShields, Chief Program and Strategy Officer • Jerry Llar, Family and Community Support Manager	Family Playlists : Improving High-Need Students' Academic Performance and SEL in Response to COVID-19
CAST, Inc. • Jess Gropen, Senior Research Scientist • Marlena Jenkins, CAST intern • Terra Thompson, Program Manager for Elementary SpED Instructional Improvement • Angel Webb, Program Manager for Elementary SpED Instructional Improvement	Circle Up: An Integrated Whole School Model to Address Learners' Social-Emotional and Learning Needs
Transcend • Ali Picucci, Senior Fellow • Katie Bowen, Partner	Student Well-Being Model: Improving High-Need Students' Learning through Community-Driven Model Centering Equity and Social and Emotional Skills