

FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT LAB



WHITEPAPER

Family Engagement: An Essential Component of Every Schools' Student Success Strategy



Can Family Engagement Positively Affect Teacher Retention and Student Outcomes?

Schools across the country are grappling with wide-ranging challenges including teacher shortages, chronic student absenteeism, opportunity gaps, and more. Equally challenging is the identification of solutions for these complex challenges, particularly at the district- or school-level. Among schools and systems that have identified effective solutions, a common theme is their investment in high-quality family engagement.

To understand the profound impact of ongoing communication and collaboration between teachers and families, we will take a look at the family engagement research; identify signs of an under-investment in family engagement; and we will share high-impact strategies for building successful, learning-focused family-school partnerships.

What is family engagement and what impact does it have?

Family engagement is a shared responsibility between schools and families to collaboratively support students' learning and development. With strong family engagement, students are able to develop and practice key skills across multiple settings, inside and outside of the classroom. Schools seeking to develop effective family engagement practices have an invaluable, research-based guide at their disposal: the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnership](#). The Framework highlights how relationships between educators and families are central to supporting student learning outcomes; the essential process and organizational conditions that promote success; the importance of capacity building for both educators and families, and more.

Student Level Benefits: Accelerated Learning, Increased Attendance

A robust and growing literature base demonstrates that family engagement promotes wide-ranging positive student outcomes, including:

- Accelerated academic achievement
- Second language learning
- Social and emotional skill development
- Increased student attendance and engagement
- Higher graduation rates¹

And the influence of families is significant, with research revealing that the home learning environment can have [more than twice the effect](#) on student learning than either parents' education levels or socio-economic status.

School Level Benefits: Teacher Satisfaction, School Climate

Active involvement of families in children's education is also associated with critical school-level factors that

support student success. For example, recent [research](#) from Harvard, TNTP and Learning Heroes revealed that:

“Schools with strong family engagement practices had 6 percentage points less chronic absenteeism than similar schools without.”

Moreover, [The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#) identified involved families as one of five essential factors to improving school outcomes. Most strikingly, researchers noted that *“a persistent weakness in even just one of the essential factors reduced the likelihood of school improvement to less than 10%,”* underscoring how critical family engagement is for successful schools and positive student learning outcomes.



Family engagement is also associated with numerous positive outcomes for teachers. When families are highly engaged in school communities and support student learning, the research reveals that teachers²:

- Report higher levels of job satisfaction
- Experience increased success motivating and engaging students
- Develop deeper multicultural awareness and appreciation
- Stay at their schools (increased teacher retention)
- Adapt more positive, asset-based perspectives about students and their families

By engaging in regular two-way communication with families and inviting families in as partners, teachers

can gain access to additional insights about students' individual skills and interests, as well as another adult who is willing and ready to collaboratively support students' success. Moreover, by partnering with teachers and developing trusting relationships, families can gain regular insight into their child's academic strengths and weaknesses, as well as strategies that can be used to support their child's learning at home.

Family engagement must be seen as an integral component of a school success plan. **The research is clear: When schools build relationships with families and partner to support students' learning and development, teachers, families, and students benefit.**

Signs your district or school is under-investing in family engagement


In order to develop and sustain an impactful family engagement strategy, it is critical to understand what in your current approach is working well and what needs attention. The following are examples of signs that may indicate a school's family engagement approach needs re-examining:

- **School communication is inconsistent, is not accessible to all families, and is rarely focused on student learning.** Without an investment in ongoing, two-way communication in families' home languages, the potential of your family engagement approach will be limited. Further, a focus on sharing actionable, learning-focused information is critical if families and teachers are to effectively and equitably collaborate to support student success.
- **School staff and teachers are under equipped with best practices in family engagement.** Failure to fill in key family engagement-related training gaps for educators limits a school's potential for impact. Notably, only [51% of educator preparation programs](#) offer at least one standalone course in family and community engagement for aspiring teachers and in-service professional learning opportunities are often limited or nonexistent.
- **Parent and family participation in existing offerings is low, which is often interpreted as a lack of interest.** Many factors contribute to why families engage in the ways that they do. For example, families may not have felt welcomed or included or they may have had their own negative previous experiences with school. Existing school offerings may also be inaccessible to many families who face logistical challenges related to transportation, work schedules, child care, and more.



Introducing High-Impact Strategies for Learning-Focused Family Engagement

With limited resources and limited time, it is essential that schools and teachers are aware of high-impact family engagement strategies that are collaborative, culturally responsive, and focused on student learning. These examples are in contrast with lower-impact family engagement activities, like potlucks, performances, and generic school newsletters that are less likely to involve parent-teacher collaboration to promote positive student learning outcomes. Here are a few examples of high-impact activities that schools and teachers can implement to support students' academic success in partnership with families:

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- **Interactive parent-teacher conferences** where teachers share learning strategies, review key grade-level skills, provide home learning tips, and develop a communications plan that meets families' needs.
 - **Relationship-building home visits** by teachers that are voluntary for both teachers and families and are available for all families.
 - **Regular two-way communication (calls/texts/emails)** to share progress and tips, with families' communication preferences, home language, and literacy levels taken into consideration to ensure equitable access.
 - **Student-led conferences** with portfolios of student work, followed by conversations about academic progress and time for collaborative goal setting.

Importantly, the success of your family engagement efforts will depend on several enabling conditions, including:

- **Clear expectations set by school leadership.** A successful, impactful family engagement plan requires support and buy-in across all school staff. When leadership clearly identifies expectations around family communication and provides necessary support, teachers and families benefit.
- **Exposure to best practices.** Teachers and school staff have limited exposure to best practices in family engagement. Schools and districts can help their teachers make the most of their limited time by presenting high-impact, learning-focused strategies for family engagement during professional learning opportunities.
- **Time that is devoted to family engagement.** The availability of time for implementing regular family communication routines can be a key barrier to effective family-school partnership. By designating and preserving time for teachers to communicate with families, school leaders are communicating the importance and value of family engagement.

Family Engagement Lab: the case for consistent, learning-focused communication

Even with the knowledge of high-impact strategies and an awareness of the enabling conditions for impact, districts and schools can find it difficult to add another task to their staff's already full workload. Family Engagement Lab (FEL)³ has developed tools and strategies that make learning-focused communication and engagement with families accessible, streamlined, and integrated into school and classroom routines.

FASTalk⁴ is an evidence-based family communication tool developed by FEL to build partnerships between teachers and families by providing engaging at-home learning activities that align with their child's classroom instruction. FASTalk allows teachers to easily share curriculum- and standards-aligned learning activities that support literacy and mathematics growth, delivered to each family in their home language. With FASTalk:



- Teachers save time, while implementing best-in class communication practices through access to pre-written high-quality messages aligned with instructional materials.
- Teachers are able to consistently and proactively communicate through pre-scheduled messages, without having to spend 30 minutes per week setting up messages.
- Families get tips and activities to support their child's learning.

Importantly, students benefit when their families receive weekly FASTalk messages. [Multiple quasi-experimental research studies](#) of FASTalk have linked FASTalk to improved student academic achievement, particularly for students furthest behind their peers and for students whose parents do not share a common language with their teacher. More FASTalk students meet literacy benchmarks, achieve greater gains on literacy assessments, and demonstrate accelerated report card growth than their peers who do not. FASTalk accelerates and improves students' literacy achievement in grades TK-K and 3-5 compared to similar non-users, especially when families use the tool more often and when parents do not share a language with their child's teacher.

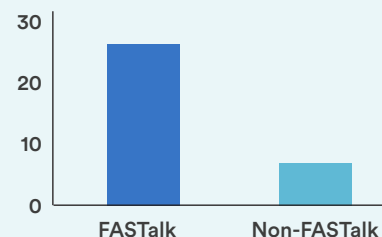
The impact of FASTalk illustrates the possibilities of family engagement to serve as a tool for advancing educational equity. Through their partnerships with districts across the country, FEL has worked with over 55,000 students and families: 70% of those students are identified as low-income, 63% are students of color, and 35% of FASTalk messages utilize the translation technology, delivering messages in languages other than English⁵.

[FEL has studied the impact of FASTalk in multiple district contexts and observed clear literacy gains that are linked to the use of FASTalk⁶:](#)

- Kindergarten FASTalk students whose family's first language differed from their child's teacher demonstrated 1.6-2.8 months of additional literacy gains when compared to Kindergarten students in the district who did not participate in the program.
- Kindergartners who recognized less than 25% of their letters and sounds in the fall, compared to non-FASTalk students, FASTalk students were 4x more likely to meet midyear literacy benchmarks.
- After 8 weeks of ELA Guidebook-aligned messages, compared to non-FASTalk peers, 3rd-5th grade FASTalk students had statistically significant higher spring literacy assessment scores, even though they initially scored lower than non-FASTalk peers in the fall.

1.6-2.8 MONTHS OF LITERACY GAINS

% of students meeting Kindergarten literacy benchmarks

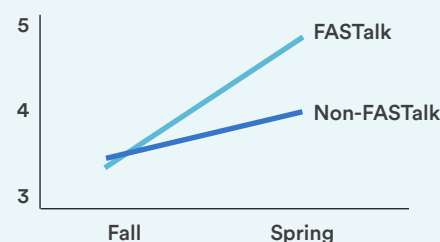


The future of family engagement

As the landscape of schooling continues to evolve—the student population diversifies⁷, technologies like artificial intelligence proliferate, and issues exacerbated by COVID-19 (unfinished learning, mental health decline, chronic absenteeism, etc.) persist—we are met with challenges and opportunities to deepen our commitment to family engagement. Namely, family engagement should be seen as a necessary component of ushering in a successful future of education for students, teachers, and families alike.

Family engagement isn't about just providing families updates on their child's learning during conferences, or inviting families to school events; instead, it's about making families an integral component to students' learning experiences and academic success through thoughtful, accessible, and consistent partnership. With advanced technologies, a commitment to student success and equity, and an understanding of families as valuable and indispensable partners in our schools, we can establish partnerships with families that dramatically improve academic success, school cultures, and learning communities.

3rd-5th Improved Literacy Outcomes



References

1. [US Department of Education Study](#), *Family Engagement to Support Student Success*
2. [US Department of Education Study](#), *Family Engagement to Support Student Success*
3. [Family Engagement Lab](#)
4. [FASTalk by Family Engagement Lab](#)
5. [Family Engagement Lab](#), *Our Impact by the Numbers*
6. [Family Engagement Lab](#), *Our Impact by the Numbers*
7. [U.S. Government Accountability Office Article](#), *K-12 Education: Student Population Has Significantly Diversified, but Many Schools Remain Divided Along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines*



Schedule a call with us today to learn more about how we can partner with your school or district to provide individualized high-quality professional learning focused on family engagement for your educators.



BetterLesson provides 1:1 virtual coaching and small group high-quality professional learning focused on supporting educators to create classrooms where students drive their own learning, exercise choice and ownership, and develop the personal agency they need to succeed. We provide job-embedded support across a wide range of topics including instructional leadership, student engagement, responsive and inclusive practices, innovative models & remote learning, and curriculum and academic content.

We have partnered with more than 50,000 educators across 47 states plus D.C., Puerto Rico and 5 countries internationally. BetterLesson's free Lab site with a continuously growing library of evidence-based strategies, has a total of almost 2 million users with an average monthly user total of more than 500,000. BetterLesson values the pursuit of educational equity and is dedicated to ensuring every student—regardless of race, income, national origin, gender identity, ability, or location —has access to an excellent education.

For more information, visit betterlesson.com

