



Making Data Meaningful in Educator-to-Family Communication



Maria Paredes, Rebeca Cerna, Laura Buckner, and Carla Guidi

Schools collect vast amounts of data about students—the sources range from attendance records, classroom activities, and standardized assessment scores to homework completion, behavior, and local school climate surveys. School leaders and educators are becoming increasingly skilled in sharing and using data to make important decisions about programs, interventions, resources, and policies. Concurrently, school leaders and educators are increasingly attuned to the benefits of effectively engaging with family members as educational partners, including such engagement’s strong connection to student learning and school improvement (Bryk et al. 2010).

However, families are mostly unaware of where to access data and how to interpret available data sources (Patton 2013). Educators can advance their practice in sharing data with families to build the collective capacity for making data-informed decisions. These decisions may include determining the strengths, areas of growth, priorities, and goals that can help inform a district's Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) as required by California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) or can inform district and school safety plans and School Plans for Student Achievement. Cultivating strong partnerships with families can improve student academic outcomes, attendance, and overall engagement (Paredes 2021). Sharing student progress data, including behavior and discipline data, and setting improvement goals with families as a focal point of family engagement practices can be transformative in advancing meaningful home and school partnerships (Paredes, O'Malley, and Amarillas 2012; Sandwick, Hahn, and Hassoun Ayoub 2019; Sheridan et al. 2016). By exchanging information about student learning with families, schools can strengthen and expand the learning support system to include learning support at home.

In addition to supporting student learning, cultivating partnerships with families can build trust between schools and communities and can lead to a more inclusive school climate (Ishimaru 2014) and help create positive, nurturing school environments (California Department of Education 2022). Such environments support the overall well-being of students, including mental health and the feeling of being included in the school community (Biglan et al. 2012; Forsyth, Adams, and Hoy 2011). By inviting families into educational environments as full partners and contributors, schools and districts can tap into assets and perspectives that they would otherwise miss out on (Hashmi, Cerna, and Stern 2022).

This document describes strategies for sharing data and engaging in data-driven discussions with families to improve student and school outcomes. It includes tips for considering how to invite families into data conversations, effectively engaging with families around student and school data, and determining which data to share with families. A vignette from Azusa Unified School District

in California illustrates how collaborating with families to make data-informed decisions can build trust and draw on community assets to improve school outcomes. The document concludes with a short list of resources to consult for further information on family engagement and Participatory Systems Change.

Cultivate Data-Sharing Partnerships with Families

As with any family engagement initiative, building positive, trusting relationships is a crucial first step. School leaders and educators can cultivate strong relationships with families by reaching out in culturally responsive ways, ensuring that all families feel welcome, and, as much as possible, coleading events alongside family leaders (California Department of Education 2017). *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships* offers evidence-based strategies to build the capacity of educators and families to work in partnership with each other to improve student learning and education systems (Mapp and Kuttner 2013).

School leaders and educators should also consider how to embed elements of Participatory Systems Change in their data conversations. Participatory Systems Change is a collaborative process for addressing and overcoming inequities by engaging diverse community members in data conversations that involve identifying, designing, deciding on implementing, and assessing priorities, actions, and investments (Valdez, Cerna, and Hashmi 2023). The process is guided by the following six principles that can have a powerful impact on how schools and districts include families as true collaborators:

- » Share power and center self-determination.
- » Elevate community strengths and attend to place.
- » Build individual and collective capacity.
- » Promote culturally responsive and sustaining change.
- » Prioritize transparency and accessibility.
- » Illuminate oppression and take liberatory action.

The following list includes tips for applying the principles of participatory planning to data-sharing conversations and related decision-making in partnership with families.

Tips for Embedding Principles of Participatory Systems Change in Data-Centered Conversations

- » **Prioritize participation from historically and currently marginalized families**, and do the work up front to ensure that all families are able to participate fully in data conversations. Doing so may include providing translation, child care, opportunities for virtual participation, or meeting times that accommodate varying work schedules.
- » **Allow ample time for families to ask questions**, offer suggestions, and provide solutions.
- » **Honor family perspectives and assets** as essential to the data analysis and decision-making processes.
- » **Show a real commitment** to using feedback from families during data conversations. Asking for input from families without taking any action will slowly erode trust and willingness to engage.
- » **Be aware of historical and community contexts** that shape the experiences and perspectives of students and their families.

Support Families' Capacity to Understand and Discuss Data

When educators meaningfully involve families in data conversations, it allows for transformative partnership that can benefit the students. Sharing data with all educational partners supporting an individual student can offer a more complete picture of the student, including the student's strengths and what supports may be needed for the student to learn and thrive in the school environment. Reviewing school- and district-level data with families can invite fresh perspectives and a shared sense of accountability to support all students.

The following list provides suggestions for effectively engaging families in data conversations that are meaningful to them and that align with the goals of a school or district.

Tips for Engaging Families in Data-Centered Conversations

- » **Make the data meaningful:** Help families understand the context for the data, and focus on how the data highlights areas of strength and opportunities for growth.
- » **Make the data user-friendly:** Display the data in a visually appealing and accessible manner. Use visual aids to model how to read and interpret the data.
- » **Make the data actionable:** Tell a story and show families tips, ideas, and resources so they can consider a range of options.
- » **Define the goals:** Explain the goals that the school is trying to reach. Ask for the families' input on the goals. Help them understand any compliance requirements, resource allocations, or other potential barriers related to the decisions they are being asked to make.
- » **Share data regularly:** Equip families to continuously monitor and support progress. Having channels for more frequent communication allows families to stay informed and make adjustments to support their students' learning and development.

Determine Which Data to Share

Choosing which data to share with families depends on the purpose of engaging with them in data conversations. Regardless of the topic or purpose, it is important to offer multiple sources of data. For example, report cards alone do not provide enough information for families to get a full picture of their students' learning. Data about grades should also be paired with whole-child data, including

information on positive behavior, student self-assessments, and qualitative data about students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

For school improvement activities, families should have access to school climate data, college- and career-readiness data, and any other source that may help them see a full picture of the school. This data should also be disaggregated so that data conversations can focus on addressing root causes of inequities. In addition to focusing on student data, a school or district may want to collect and share feedback from the families themselves. For example, the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CalSCHLS) system offers a parent survey to gather feedback from family members on the perceptions of parental involvement, supports for students, and other school climate measures.

The list in the box to the right provides examples of common data-sharing scenarios in which families might be involved and the types of data that can be shared.

Types of Data to Share with Families: Sample Scenarios

- » Sample Scenario Goal: Support Individual Student Learning
 - Data to share: Grades, progress-monitoring results, attendance records, positive behavior reports, office discipline referrals and other reports from teachers or school staff, information about students' problem-solving ability and critical-thinking skills, staff focus group results
- » Sample Scenario Goal: Improve School Climate
 - Data to share: Universal screening results, local school climate student survey results, student empathy interview results, feedback from family members
- » Sample Scenario Goal: Create a School Improvement Plan
 - Data to share: District and state assessment scores; data related to preparedness for transitions (e.g., into kindergarten and middle school); assessments for high school course placement; staff, student, and family interviews

Many of the ideas put forth in this brief are represented in the following vignette from Azusa Unified School District.

The Role of Parent Advisory Councils in Azusa Unified School District

Based on an Interview with Dr. Jennifer Edic Bryant

During Dr. Edic Bryant's time at Azusa Unified School District (AUSD), she was the Director of Metrics and LCAP. Dr. Edic Bryant worked with AUSD as a consultant to continue the district's successful LCAP community engagement practices. She currently consults in the service of supporting family engagement visioning and strategic planning for districts across California and the United States.

When LCAPs became a requirement in California for districts to improve student outcomes, AUSD used this opportunity to move from focusing on family involvement to pursuing family engagement. AUSD's strategic plan was to actively engage families in decision-making and providing feedback on LCAP goals. Instead of asking for family member volunteers, AUSD recruited representative family members from their school sites for their Parent Advisory Council (PAC). Representatives are responsible for sharing information from their respective school sites, and they share back decisions and summaries from meetings to their school sites.

Through the PAC, AUSD learned that in order to make long-lasting, sustainable improvements, all educational partners (for example, family members, educators, administrators, classified staff) needed to have the opportunity to communicate their different needs and wants for improving student outcomes. This realization led to the creation of the PAC+, which included family members, educators, administrators, and school staff. “We realized we all needed to hear each other’s voices. Parents and staff needed to meet,” said Dr. Jennifer Edic Bryant.

During the initial PAC+ meetings, family members were hesitant to share their perspectives in front of educators and staff. In response, AUSD was strategic in its recruitment efforts by focusing on recruiting family members from all schools and from specific demographics (for example, parents or caregivers of emerging multilingual students, students with disabilities, students in migrant education, students in foster care). This effort allowed for greater representation of family members and increased their comfort level to participate and engage in conversations during PAC+ meetings. Building relationships in the PAC+ provided a strong foundation for working through difficult conversations because parents felt comfortable providing input for decisions on how to best utilize funding and how to address the group’s perspectives and priorities. Throughout the PAC+ meetings, the group engaged in ongoing data review conversations as part of their continuous improvement efforts.

Five PAC+ meetings were held throughout the school year with both English and Spanish interpretation services available. The goals of these four-hour meetings were to build the capacity of parents to understand the local context of the community and AUSD’s strategic plan for student success. They reviewed the district’s annual survey data, LCAP metrics, and budget data. Reviewing budget data created greater transparency about expenditures. To support budget data reviews, AUSD created user-friendly budget documents that aligned with LCAP goals. The district also provided opportunities during PAC+ meetings for the group to discuss feasible budget solutions to address the strategic goals and PAC+ priorities.

AUSD built trust with the PAC+ teams by involving families in the data decision-making process for school improvements. Being transparent with the quantitative and qualitative budget data served as a vehicle for building trust with the community. Parents were able to share their unique backgrounds and varying professional expertise to address how to best create solutions to budget constraints.

Dr. Edic Bryant emphasized the importance of the local contextual strengths and needs for each school community. To create a similar advisory group at your school or district, gather information to determine what group structure would work best, use a framework and evidence-based practices to guide the group development, build the capacity of family members by providing context, and, most importantly, become familiar with the community of your school. Understanding the community and its assets will guide how to best engage families in meaningful ways.

Additional Resources to Explore

Family Engagement Toolkit: Continuous Improvement Through an Equity Lens <https://www.wested.org/resources/family-engagement-toolkit/>

Participatory Systems Change for Equity <https://www.wested.org/resources/participatory-systems-change-for-equity/>

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