



Family Engagement: Authentically Integrating Essential Competencies

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The combined impact of COVID-19 and the resulting economic instability it created—along with the increased recognition of systemic racism in education—have exacerbated the conditions of and increased the urgency for improving family engagement as a key part of school transformation. Incremental action toward change is no longer sufficient. Engaging in school transformation today requires solutions that address the whole child, the whole family, and the whole community to repair past failings and reimagine a future in which all students can thrive. Schools, families, and communities are searching for new ways to partner with each other so that the needs of many can be heard and addressed with respect and empathy (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Supporting and lifting up families in this ever-shifting reality requires that all contribute toward the process of school transformation.

What are some ways educators can begin building partnerships with families that invite knowledge-sharing and collaboration? How might families and school-based educators learn from each other? What actions can be taken together?

“To transform our schools, we need a nuanced and antiracist way to engage in ‘improvement.’ We need mechanisms for listening to elders, community leaders, and students and families at the margins who can collaborate with us to reimagine outdated approaches.”

—Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan (2021)

This brief addresses these questions and builds on work that is already underway. Education administrators are committing their leadership efforts toward initiating and sustaining systemic change by creating intentional partnerships with families, using resources such as the [*Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*](#) as a guide (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

- » *Professional learning on family engagement*, often a first step for initiating systemic change, typically includes strategies for building the capacity of schools to become welcoming and inclusive places to support the cultural and linguistic diversity of families (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2022).
- » *A focus on building authentic relationships with families* is beginning to bring about an atmosphere of purposeful, equitable family engagement that can be felt throughout schools, districts, and communities (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2022).
- » *Solutions that respond to systemic inequities* highlighted during recent educational justice movements (Warren, 2018) and the lingering impacts of the COVID pandemic are being collaboratively developed and tested in communities across the country.

This brief presents practical considerations for addressing the field’s continually evolving understanding of culturally responsive practices and offers ideas that can support family-facing practitioners to engage in deep, reflective conversations with each other and the families they serve about transformative family engagement.

With the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement’s publication (2022) of *Family Engagement Core Competencies*, the field now has an anchor resource for grounding its knowledge and practice within the context of anti-racism and cultural responsiveness. The *Core Competencies* publication synthesizes research and knowledge gleaned from leadership convenings, conversations with educational partners, and results from field surveys around family engagement practices. **The resulting domains and competencies (Table 1) provide family-facing practitioners with a unifying set of tools, strategies, and dispositions to guide their work.** The rest of this brief fleshes out these domains and competencies further.

Table 1. The Family Engagement Domains and Core Competencies

Domain 1: Reflect	Domain 2: Connect	Domain 3: Collaborate for Learning	Domain 4: Lead Alongside Families
Competency 1: Respect, Honor, and Value Families	Competency 3: Build Trusting, Reciprocal Relationships With Families	Competency 5: Co-Construct Learning Opportunities With Families	Competency 7: Take Part in Lifelong Learning
Competency 2: Embrace Equity Throughout Family Engagement	Competency 4: Foster Community Partnerships for Learning and Family Well-Being	Competency 6: Link Family and Community Engagement to Learning and Development	Competency 8: Advocate for Systems Change

Note. National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2022.

“The question is whether all of us, as citizens and as parents, are willing to do what’s necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms but in our homes and communities.”

—Former President Barack Obama (2011)

An Exploration of Family Engagement Core Competencies: A Body of Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Family-Facing Professionals

Domain 1: Reflect

The Reflect domain asks family-facing professionals to consider the ways they respect, honor, and value the families they interact with (Competency 1). Being able to reflect involves perspective-taking and consideration of the lived experiences of others at macro and micro levels. Consider the following practices:

At the macro level:

- » *Reflect* deeply on the families and communities served, noticing the wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity.
- » *Study* and *analyze* the historical background of Family and Community Engagement (FACE) in the educational sector. For an example of California's detailed timeline, refer to *Family and Community Engagement Timeline and Context in California* (Parent Organization Network, 2020).
- » *Understand* how family engagement evolves over time to match the changing needs of students and families.

- » *Identify* the places and spaces within a community where students and families learn.

At the micro level:

- » *Think about* how your own experiences as a child shape your worldview.
- » *Recognize* and *value* the diversity of strengths that each family brings to their child's learning journey.
- » *Understand* the many ways that families and caregivers support and contribute to their children's lives.
- » *Analyze* how social and economic status (SES), geography, and language impact students' learning journeys.
- » *Learn* about the lived experiences of students and their families, exploring how unique circumstances (e.g., special needs, eldercare responsibilities, incarceration of a family member, the experience of homelessness, migrant families) impact family well-being and their child's learning journey.

Take a Moment to Ground Your Thinking

As you **reflect** upon the ways you *respect, honor, and value the families you interact with*, think about your own definition of "culture." Below, from an online publication by Pappas and McKelvie (2022), are some ways that culture has been described that reflect its language origins and its links to social anthropology.

- » Culture is "fluid and constantly in motion" and "key in our interconnected world," according to Cristina De Rossi, anthropologist at Barnet and Southgate College in London.
- » Culture is "shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization," according to the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.

In what ways do these ideas about culture impact your own understanding of culture and of your families' cultures specifically?

The Reflect domain also asks family-facing professionals to embrace equity when engaging with families (Competency 2). Understanding this core competency suggests that practitioners take the following actions:

Look inward:

- » *Understand and practice cultural humility and cognitive flexibility* (the abilities to hold multiple, often competing, ideas and perspectives in mind at the same time; to think critically; and to solve complex problems with grace).
- » *Explore implicit biases* and how they impact your thinking and expectations and how they enter into your conversations.
- » *Practice continuous learning* to better understand the strengths that families and students embody.
- » *Consider systemic inequities* and how they shape students' and families' experiences in communities and schools.

Reach outward:

- » *Listen deeply* to families and *spend time* in responsive conversation with them.
- » *Engage* in conversations to shift unproductive attitudes about families and communities.
- » *Be present* in conversations with families to encourage, hear, and understand their truths.
- » *Reach out and connect* with families to build authentic, long-lasting relationships that acknowledge individual, societal, and generational trauma. "Generational trauma is the harmful effects of historical mistreatment or abuse. The symptoms of these traumas are passed down from generation to generation" (Chapple, 2023).
- » *Share* your knowledge of community resources and *connect* families to providers.

Take a Moment to Ground Your Thinking

As you **reflect** upon the ways you *embrace equity throughout family engagement*, think about how implicit bias (unconscious attitudes that influence one's judgments, decisions, and behaviors) might negatively impact relationships with families. Below is a 4-step process from Pfister and Wu (2023) for practicing cultural humility (deliberate self-reflection and a reckoning of one's own values and biases) in the moment.

- 1. Slow down.** Pause and bring consciousness to what otherwise might live beneath the surface. Notice what you are noticing.
- 2. Get curious.** What might you be missing here? How might other people view this situation?
- 3. Capture more objective data.** What other data might you collect to help you round out your interpretation? What are the facts?
- 4. Change your response.** Adopt new behavior or revise your approach based on what you learn in this process.

Domain 2: Connect

The Connect domain asks family-facing professionals to consider how they build trusting, reciprocal relationships with families (Competency 3). The framework approaches this competency by identifying areas where effective engagement practices can be established and nurtured.

Strategies for setting the stage for connection with families:

- » *Relationships*—Develop trusting relationships that value families as partners in their children's education and are built over time through consistent, frequent, and purposeful opportunities to interact.
- » *Purpose*—Center your conversations with families around supporting their children's learning journeys,
- acknowledging the value and strength that each family member brings to the table, and meeting families where they are.
- » *Communication*—Reach out to families using various modes of communication (in person; by phone, text, or email; or through your school's parent communication platform) that are understandable and transparent and that convey action and reflect professionalism. Personalized communication is also important, as it demonstrates to families their value as partners.
- » *Environment*—Create welcoming and accessible spaces across your school sites and community that embrace diversity, encourage conversation, and contribute to family safety and well-being.

Take a Moment to Ground Your Thinking

As you consider the ways you **connect** and *build trusting, reciprocal relationships with families*, think about how you create inviting spaces where families can gather and feel encouraged to share their knowledge, thoughts, and concerns. Below are some ideas from Shaikh (n.d.) to get you started.

First impressions matter:

- » Does the design of your activities reflect cultural humility and/or provide an environment that encourages openness to discuss difficult topics?
- » Are you greeting families on campus with visible signs written in their native languages?
- » Is your tone and body language welcoming to families? Have you made an effort to address them by their names?
- » Have you highlighted books in your curriculum or in your library that celebrate the cultures, traditions, and practices found in your community?
- » Are photos or other visual examples that represent the diversity of your community included in school materials and posted throughout campus and in your classroom?

The Connect domain also asks family-facing professionals to be intentional about the ways they foster community partnerships for learning and family well-being (Competency 4). The framework approaches this core competency by outlining ways that schools can establish and expand community networks, enabling families to access the support they need.

Strategies for developing enduring community partnerships:

- » *Inventory* spaces within the community where your school families already gather or would feel most comfortable meeting. Consider spaces that would

welcome the diverse array of your community's families.

- » *Map* your community assets to build a resource list of community organizations and the people who lead them. Think expansively to include the full range of resources that families might need.
- » *Connect* resource providers to each other and create collaborations that establish service hubs. Bringing service providers under one roof enables families to easily access the services they need.
- » *Share* resource information with families via social media, in-person events, and online webinars. Find ways to link families to each other so they can build their own networks of support.

Take a Moment to Ground Your Thinking

As you consider the ways you **connect** and *foster community partnerships for learning and family well-being*, create an inventory of your community's resources that identifies and celebrates the gifts of service and support offered in your community.

This process, called community asset-mapping, **identifies community strengths and resources, uncovers underutilized strengths and resources, and helps communities develop solutions to community needs**. An **asset** is anything the community identifies that adds to the community's quality of life. This looks different from community to community (Clark, 2017).

Here are some toolkits to help you get started:

- » [***Participatory Asset Mapping: A Community Research Lab Toolkit***](#) (Burns et al., 2012)
- » [***"Identifying Community Assets and Resources"***](#) (Community Tool Box, n.d.)
- » [***Community Asset Mapping Guide***](#) (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2021)

What types of assets are most commonly found across the community?

Where are your community assets most abundant?

What areas of the community will you concentrate on building connection with?

Domain 3: Collaborate for Learning

The Collaborate for Learning domain asks educators to co-construct learning opportunities with families (Competency 5) to promote children's learning and future success. Communication is key in creating a successful learning environment. Family-facing practitioners can model what their students are learning in the classroom for parents through effective communication. As teachers and parents plan to collaborate, they begin sharing information about the curriculum, teaching strategies, and learning objectives that can help families better understand what their children are learning. This shared understanding in turn allows parents and caregivers to better support their children's learning at home. Additionally, maintaining open lines of communication allows for the exchange of and collaboration around valuable information, including updates on student progress, strengths, and behavior and on any concerns that may arise (Lin et al., 2019). Collaborating for Learning suggests that educators build upon the knowledge of the family as a resource for learning. Family knowledge allows family-facing practitioners to learn about children's communities and backgrounds.

This domain also asks family-facing practitioners to consider how they link FACE to learning and development (Competency 6). Research has shown the importance of collaboration between a child's home and school environments (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Family-facing professionals should advocate for children to experience learning activities at home and in the community in addition to those that occur at school. Children's engagement in and enjoyment of learning is amplified when the learning is aligned to their individual goals and curiosity.

Strategies for collaborating with families:

- » *Use a variety of methods* when reaching out, such as focus groups and home visits.
- » *Create continuous opportunities* to learn more about what families want for their children's learning.
- » *Include families, children, and youth* in curriculum and program planning meetings.
- » *Invite families* to lead in areas they are familiar with and in which they are experts.

Take a Moment to Ground Your Thinking

As you consider ways to **collaborate** with families, start with creating and maintaining effective communication systems. Doing so may include regular updates through a variety of modes, such as newsletters, emails, and apps (Willis & Exley, 2018).

- » When it comes to collaborating, family-facing practitioners should foster open lines of communication and engage in frequent discussions with families. Here, shared goals of both parties should be established and worked on to accomplish trust (Patrikakou et al., 2005).
- » Consider collaborating with families to codesign home-based activities that involve the whole family. One example is making a favorite family dish whereby young children can assist with simple measuring and counting activities or can tell another family member about how the dish was made, step-by-step. See *Supporting Young English Learners at Home: Family and Caregiver Activities* for more ideas (REL West, 2021).
- » Another example of a codesigned, home-based activity is playing a guessing game in which young children can build their vocabulary by using expressive and descriptive language to guess items in the household. See *Supporting Young English Learners at Home: Family and Caregiver Activities* for more ideas (REL West, 2021).

What are some ways that you collaborate with families to serve your students?

Are some approaches more successful than others? Why do you think that might be?

Domain 4: Lead Alongside Families

The Lead Alongside Families domain asks family-facing practitioners to take part in lifelong learning (Competency 7), becoming skilled and knowledgeable about resources for families. Doing so can allow practitioners to stay informed and adapt their strategies to meet the needs of family members and their situations. As family-facing practitioners build strategic partnerships to create a communitywide practice for family engagement, relationships are built, leadership is shared, and family engagement becomes part of the community's DNA.

This domain also asks family-facing practitioners to advocate for systems change (Competency 8). Student and family feedback is essential to assess, evaluate, and improve existing family engagement practices. Family-facing professionals can use feedback to understand parents' changing needs and act based on families' responses. Ensuring that efforts for transformative

family engagement are successful requires researching, participating actively, and inviting all families to become part of the change process.

The following strategies can support and advance educational systems change and family engagement:

- » *Identify* and *examine* policies and practices that advance (or inhibit) FACE.
- » *Attend* leadership meetings to understand issues within the family engagement areas.
- » *Participate* in creating a vision for family engagement that promotes partnership and equity-focused practices.
- » *Ensure* that all families are included in decision-making for their own children.
- » *Work* with parent leaders who are engaged in shared leadership at the school and system levels.

Take a Moment to Ground Your Thinking

Consider the following questions as you develop strategies for **leading alongside families**:

- » Are you creating spaces or events in which families feel comfortable to safely share their needs and perceptions?
- » Have you invited your families to share their knowledge and skills in the development of a school- and community-based vision for their children's development and education?
- » What equity-focused family engagement practices are in place?
- » How does your school site encourage professional growth in family engagement?

Spotlight on Val Verde Unified School District From an Interview With Iliana Dodge

As you read through this vignette, try to identify the places where the Family Engagement Domains and Core Competencies are being practiced.

Val Verde Unified School District (VVUSD) in Riverside County, California, serves 19,000 students across 22 school campuses. In 2018, the district joined California's Community Engagement Initiative, enacted into law through California Assembly Bill 1808. The initiative is a network of families, school and district leaders, and community partners working together to realize a shared vision of supporting its students to achieve success in school and beyond.

VVUSD identified improving its relationships with families in underserved communities as its Problem of Practice. In the years that followed, district personnel at every level have reached out to families to authentically learn from, include, and engage families in a variety of capacity-building actions. Support for this initiative came from an unwavering commitment from all levels of VVUSD—from the district's school board and the superintendent's cabinet to educators, bilingual clerks, janitors, and receptionists.

“We ground ourselves in this work, but we find our way through the strength and through the suggestions of our community.”

—Iliana Dodge, Family Engagement Manager

Developing meaningful relationships also requires a commitment to listen deeply to what families need. The district uses Voice Forms, forms that families attending the District English Learner Advisory Council (DELAC) meetings can use to bring up specific issues or actions not on the agenda, and it uses family forums as formal avenues for families to speak out and weigh in. Community engagement liaisons and specialists bring reciprocal relationships to life through informal dialogue, resource sharing, and home-school connections that are centered on learning and well-being.

As VVUSD has become better at listening to families, it has become better at responding to the changing needs and circumstances of its communities. Supporting families where and when they need assistance can involve complex solutions, many hands, and a significant investment of resources. Or it can be as simple as providing a room for parents to gather or making a phone call to resolve a utility bill.

“Family engagement works with many, many people to bring and share the excitement. It’s about valuing and appreciating our amazing collaborating agencies.”

—*Iliana Dodge, Family Engagement Manager*

After many years of planning and preparation, VVUSD is gearing up to launch its Family Engagement Community Resource and Learning Center in response to its communities’ needs and requests for expanded services. The center will have a neighborhood health clinic, a laundromat, and a community store with clothing donations initially coming from Haines and Nike. There will be spaces for after-school tutoring and parent education classes offered by a blend of district staff, community providers, content experts, and university partners. The center will be a place where families from the communities can access services and resources they need to continue to grow.

District leaders have learned that authentic family engagement requires more than a one-and-done approach. Above all, it is about serving families and being a consistent and resourceful presence. “It all goes back to the people,” Dodge says, “working from a vision of appreciation, of being thankful. This is not something you do on your own. This work could not be done without other people” (Willis & Exley, 2018).

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Acknowledgments

This brief was developed by the California Center for School Climate (CCSC), funded by the California Department of Education. We would like to thank Iliana Dodge for sharing highlights of the work that Val Verde Unified School District is doing to transform the experiences for students and their families; Dr. Karen Mapp for sharing her thoughts on the importance of policy and educational leadership in advancing family engagement; Philander Steward and Carla Guidi for their thought partnership; and Rebeca Cerna for her guidance, encouragement, and inspiration on this topic. We would also like to thank Hilva Chan at the California Department of Education and Maria Paredes and Kenwyn Derby from WestEd for their essential feedback on this brief.

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Suggested citation: Turney, C., & Akinola, Y. (2023). *Family engagement: Authentically integrating essential competencies*. California Center for School Climate at WestEd.

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