

Policies that Support SWIFT Trusting Family Partnerships

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Abstract

Trusting family-school partnerships that involve meaningful engagement can lead to positive student outcomes and better system-wide outcomes when they are supported by education policies that are thorough, thoughtful, and display an understanding of evidence-based practices. This Brief highlights federal policies for family engagement; describes examples of policy actions by the state of Massachusetts; and illustrates local policies and practices at the Dr. William W. Henderson Inclusion Elementary School in Dorchester, MA, a SWIFT knowledge development site. To guide SWIFT Center technical assistance on the Family and Community Engagement Domain in participating states and districts, we suggest four ways to weave family engagement policies and practices into the SWIFT framework.

Issue: Family Engagement

Research shows that family engagement is a strong predictor of positive student outcomes in the near term and provides long-term benefits to students, families, educational systems, and communities.¹ Improved student outcomes include positive gains in literacy and math and reductions in such behavioral indicators as in-school suspensions and other disciplinary actions. Yet many schools do not know how to foster partnerships with families.^{2, 3}

Some have suggested that coherent, comprehensive and equitable federal and state policies could support local implementation of trusting, meaningful family-school partnerships that lead to the student and system benefits cited in the research.^{1, 4} However, observers have described the current state of education policy as “random acts of family involvement” and a peripheral discussion in education reform.^{1, 5}

There is a difference between ‘random acts of family engagement’ and seeing that family engagement is a strategy toward whole-school improvement.

—Karen L. Mapp, Director, Education Policy & Management, Harvard School of Education

Federal Policies & Support

Federal and state governments are working toward meaningful family engagement through policies, including some that *require* schools make an effort to engage families in local education.^{6–9} Three such federal policy provisions are found in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Titles I and III, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).^{10–12} States, districts, and schools that receive funds under these provisions must meet the following requirements.

- **ESEA Title I** (to serve at-risk students) – Districts and schools must have a written family engagement policy that is co-created, shared with, and approved by parents; and schools that receive over \$500,000 annually must use 1% of those funds to support family engagement activities.
- **ESEA Title III** (to serve students with limited English proficiency) – The state or local educational agency must indicate how parent and community participation will be facilitated and must assure that parents are consulted in the development of the plan.
- **IDEA** (to serve students with disabilities) – Parents have the right to participate in making decisions about their children’s education, including evaluation, placement, and other support services.

Families can support child learning by modeling lifelong learning – encouraging grit & determination – advocating for proper educational programming & placement
–U.S. Department of Education, Dual Capacity Framework Report

To support family engagement policies, the U.S. Department of Education recently published “Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships,” which addresses local training and capacity building.¹³ Rather than a one-size-fits-all formula, this evidence-based framework functions like a compass for initiating and sustaining such practices as home-school

partnership strategies, adult learning, motivation, and leadership development; and it provides a scaffold for family engagement policy development. This resource is available at www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf.

State Policy Example

State policies meet and may exceed federally prescribed minimum standards for family engagement in districts or schools. In 39 states and the District of Columbia laws require local educational agencies, boards of education, or schools to enact family engagement policies. These state policies go beyond the federal requirements to include such areas as improved communication, establishment of advisory councils, and family engagement incentives. An example from Massachusetts follows.

Massachusetts Reframes Family Engagement

A few years ago in Massachusetts, significant tensions existed between families and schools, and family engagement was not a priority until the State, with the support of a broad range of stakeholders, promoted legislation supporting family-school partnerships. Policies resulting from these efforts allowed for local adaptation, growth, and evolution in district and school practices. Two applications of the legislation are found in the State’s required district and



school family engagement plans and in its teacher and administrator evaluation standards for family engagement.

District and School Plans

Massachusetts state and local education leaders jointly agreed to expand upon the minimum family engagement requirements in ESEA and developed the following six family engagement goals.

1. Involve parents in development of school review and improvement plan and process.
2. Provide coordination, technical assistance, and other supports necessary to assist schools in planning and implementing effective parent involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance.
3. Build schools' and parents' capacity for strong parental involvement.
4. Coordinate and integrate parental involvement strategies between programs, such as Head Start, Early Reading First, Even Start, and state-run preschool programs.
5. Conduct with parents an annual evaluation of content and effectiveness of parental involvement policies intended to improve academic quality of schools; identify obstacles to greater participation by parents in activities; and use findings to design strategies for more effective parental involvement, revising policies if necessary.
6. Involve parents in the activities of the schools and notify them in a format and language they can understand.¹⁴

To help accomplish these goals, the State required all districts and schools to implement activities from a provided list. They also made available technical assistance for developing a cohesive local plan that:

- invites parents to participate in developing school parent involvement policies in a format and language they can understand,
- builds parental capacity for engagement,
- creates home-to-school partnership agreements in writing and in a format and language all parents can respond to, and
- evaluates or seeks to understand whether parents are engaged with the school in active and meaningful ways.¹⁵

Teacher and Administrator Standards

Massachusetts utilized federal policy as a lever for more family engagement by introducing a required standard in teacher and administrator evaluation systems. To support districts' and schools' fulfillment of this requirement, the State also provided a package of tools, or technical assistance resources, with:

- model planning and implementation guides, including scoring rubrics;

- model personnel contract language, consistent with existing collective bargaining agreements; and
- emphasis on continuity of inclusion and compensation of teachers and other school personnel for engaging in activities that happen outside school hours.

School Policy Example

Dr. William W. Henderson Inclusion Elementary School Enacts Family Policy

The Dr. William W. Henderson Inclusion School in Dorchester, MA embraced state-led family engagement policy reforms and recognized the positive impact they could have on school climate and student outcomes.

Specifically, school leaders:

- changed school policy so that parents made up the majority of the School Site Council, providing an active parent voice in budgeting and other Council decisions;
- provided data to the School Site Council, thereby creating a unified agenda between school personnel and parents on creating priorities and taking action on behalf of students; and
- engaged parents in school budget decisions resulting in parents leading fundraising efforts to augment the school budget for new technology for the school.

When a school has to make its case with a more diverse group of stakeholders—who may ask challenging questions—the decisions are better and the school is stronger.

—Patricia Lampron, Principal,
Dr. William W. Henderson School

Policy Actions for SWIFT Trusting Family Partnerships

SWIFT Trusting Family Partnerships

Trusting family-school partnerships occur when

- family members and school staff have respectful, mutually beneficial relationship with shared responsibility for student learning;
- family members have options for meaningful involvement in their children’s education and in the life of the school; and
- schools respond to family interests and involvement in a culturally responsive manner.

Trusting Family Partnerships, as SWIFT defines them, occur when people in school and family communities have the capacity to communicate and establish priorities together. Policy can provide a framework and articulate values as catalysts for sustainable family-school partnerships. But it is the combination of the people and the policies that leads to systemic change and improved student outcomes. Good policy, in this context, addresses both the needs and the responsibilities of families, while providing clear guidance and professional development for educators.

Many family-school partnership policy implications for the SWIFT framework exist within the five SWIFT Domains. Presented here are four policy actions that can help weave family engagement into a SWIFT framework.

1. Set an expectation to build and sustain trusting family-school partnerships as a responsibility of all school and district staff, including holding one another accountable for achieving this important goal.
2. Establish clear, open, accommodating, and adaptable policies that support families' direct engagement in school leadership structure and activities, such as volunteer and visitor policies that welcome family members as trusted partners.
3. Learn about and leverage family-community engagement resources, such as OSEP's National Family Community Engagement state-by-state resources map. <http://www.ed.gov/family-and-community-engagement>
4. Write state, district, or school family engagement policies that are accessible and easy to understand by preparing documents in plain language and in families' primary languages, including information that may be traditionally considered only for staff and administrators.

Conclusion

Over 50 years of research and best practice show that when schools develop authentic partnerships with family members—with intention and purpose—positive effects can contribute to social, emotional, academic, and mental health of every student. Family-school partnership activities can run the gamut from improving home-to-school communication strategies to hiring a district team focused on families, to formally adopting policies that encourage families to serve on school-wide decision making teams. Flexibility under federal law provides states and districts the opportunity to carefully consider and determine policy priorities specific to their communities. Engagement of families in policy development is essential to align strategies that will ensure intentional and meaningful use of targeted family engagement resources and activities.

Outcomes of Meaningful Family Engagement with Schools

Students^{1, 6-9, 16-19}

- increased attendance
- better grades
- better study habits
- improved literacy and math competency
- improved social skills
- improved behavior
- higher graduation rates
- reduced dropout rates

Families^{20, 21}

- increased confidence in parenting skills
- increased involvement in the community

Schools^{19, 22}

- improved community perceptions of schools
- strengthen commitment to local schools
- staff have increased job satisfaction
- improved instruction
- better communication with family members

Suggested Citation

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