

Planning for Family Engagement in the Charter School Life Cycle

A Toolkit for School Leaders

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NATIONAL
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RESOURCE CENTER



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Introduction

This toolkit will provide charter school leaders and charter school operators with an understanding of:

- How family engagement strategies can influence the core work of charter schools
- How to build out a comprehensive schoolwide plan for family engagement
- Strategies to support authentic, inclusive family engagement
- What family engagement can look like at each point in the charter school life cycle, from design and opening through replication and expansion or closure

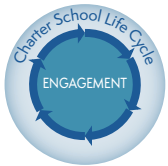
This toolkit is divided into four main sections and an appendix of tools and resources:



Section 1. Framing the Family-School Connection – Introduces readers to the importance of family engagement and its relevance to the core work of the charter sector, including a brief review of the evidence base related to community and family engagement.



Section 2. Building a Plan for Authentic Sustainable Engagement – Takes school leaders through the steps of creating a plan for building authentic, sustainable relationships with families that can be incorporated into a school's daily work.



Section 3. Engagement Throughout the Charter School Life Cycle – Presents key strategies and guidance for preparing for pivotal points in the charter school life cycle, including during times of crisis.



Section 4. Appendix of Tools and Sources – Includes templates and scripts as well as descriptions of linked resources that can support charter school family engagement teams in operationalizing their new or revised engagement plans.

This toolkit uses the term **family engagement** most frequently to refer to a school's relationships with the caregivers of current students. Section 3 expands on this definition to address relationships with caregivers of prospective students and the family recruitment process for new and growing charter schools. **Community engagement** in this context refers to a school's relationships with community-based organizations that can serve as important collaborators in **family engagement** and as providers of **family strengthening and support**.



Section 1: Framing the Family-School Connection

Family engagement is a critical component of ensuring strong schools and a high-quality education for all students. This section will introduce the essential arguments in favor of systemic, high-impact family engagement as a component of any charter school's success. It will also present key findings from research on the family-school connection and its positive impact on schools and students.

Effective family engagement is an intentional and systematic partnership of educators, families, and community members who share the responsibility for a student's preparation for school, work, and life.¹ Successful family engagement is much more than a check the box exercise – it is a centralized series of strategies that benefits individual students and whole schools. To do this work well requires that educators and families develop the knowledge and skills needed to work collaboratively, and that schools strategically integrate family engagement into overall school goals. Finally, as schools adjust to increasingly virtual and hybrid models, it is more important than ever to develop and sustain meaningful family engagement that extends beyond social events and into the core work of student learning.

As a charter school, your school is in a unique position to prioritize family engagement as a pathway for improved learning. Family engagement is especially important for the many charter schools that serve historically disadvantaged communities, families, and students – including many communities who have faced systemic, multi-generational disenfranchisement by traditional institutions. Charter schools have the opportunity to truly engage these families as authentic partners even as a school is being designed. Instead of being constrained by existing systems and misconceptions about the communities they serve, charter schools can use their autonomy and orientation toward innovation to center and uplift the assets and needs of their families. These authentic partnerships allow schools, communities, families, and students to work together to design, support, or redesign the schools that respond to the strengths and needs in communities and in which students can thrive.

HOW DOES FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING?

Learning experiences outside of school help children develop the skills and practical knowledge to be successful in school and in life.² Extended learning opportunities and experiences are driven by families. These can include summer and after-school programs, learning at home, trips to the library, camping, gardening, organized sports, storytelling, the arts, and planning and doing projects around the house. These examples can help you imagine the important role families play in promoting learning, and how these experiences can boost a child's readiness to access complex academic content in school.

¹ Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010

² Lopez & Caspe, 2014

STRENGTHS-BASED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: Your team’s mindset related to family engagement is an essential foundation for doing this work well.

High-impact family engagement activities and strategies should be strengths-based and focus on the potential of each student’s family and the community as a whole. A strengths-based approach focuses less on trying to address perceived problems or deficits and more on recognizing capacities and building upon assets. “Funds of knowledge” is an important concept that refers to the accumulation of knowledge, abilities, assets, and cultural ways of interacting that students and their family members embody in their home environment.³ Learning more about each family and their funds of knowledge helps reveal the abundance of individual and combined experiences and resources already present within your school’s families and community. This awareness helps shape a strengths-based family engagement approach that is meaningful and relevant in your school community. Consider how your school may engage family members who have a green thumb, can build a computer, speak another language, write poetry, play an instrument, or bring other skills and knowledge to your school community. How could these skills support students’ learning?

Family Engagement: An Evidence-Backed Approach

Research substantiates that developing genuine family-school partnerships supports student and school success. When families are properly equipped and able to engage with learning, their children are more successful.⁴ Precisely, students are more likely to:

- Improve their grades
- Attend school more regularly
- Enroll in higher-level programs
- Graduate and go on to college
- Be more excited and positive about school and learning
- Have fewer discipline issues inside and outside of class

When whole schools are successful in developing equal partnerships with families, those schools are more likely to:

- Sustain improvement efforts
- Improve student attendance
- Decrease disciplinary issues
- Develop positive school climate and culture
- Reduce teacher turnover and improve teacher job satisfaction⁵

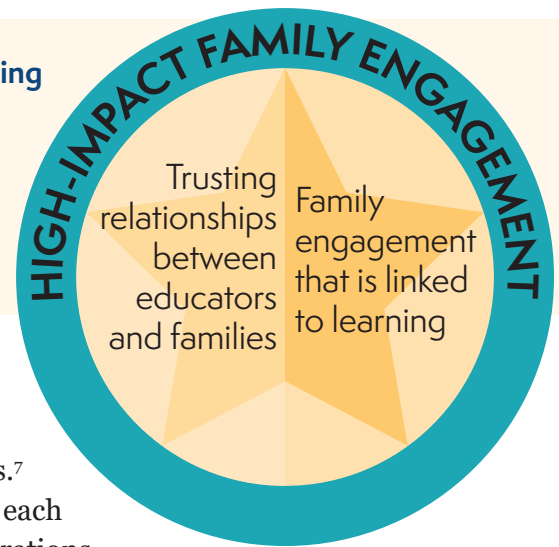
³ Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992

⁴ Henderson & Mapp, 2002

⁵ Wood & Bauman, 2017

Over the years, the term **parent involvement** has evolved to become **family engagement**. This new term acknowledges that for many children their caregivers are often grandparents, older siblings, extended family, or foster parents. Family is a more inclusive term. The word **engagement** describes an active role on the part of the family, a commitment to monitor and support learning occurring at any time and in any place, including formal and informal extended learning opportunities. For some students, this can be family time at home reading a book or watching a movie, time at the park, the library, cooking with a family member, a road trip, etc.

High-impact family engagement requires the **continuous strengthening of trusting relationships between educators and families** and the **connection of family engagement activities and efforts to student learning**.⁶ These two dimensions are your North Star when planning family engagement for impact.



Current research and evidence-based practices have put a spotlight on positive relationships between educators and families as a critical factor for effective family engagement that impacts student outcomes.⁷ This occurs when educators invest time and effort in getting to know each family. Educators learn about the family’s educational goals and aspirations for their child and become aware of their values and priorities, and this information helps them differentiate learning for that child. This close connection with families helps develop trust, and trust is at the center of effective family engagement.

Findings from four major meta-analyses show that families play five essential roles in support of their children’s education from early childhood through high school and beyond: communicating high expectations, monitoring performance, supporting learning at home, guiding their child’s education, and advocating for their child.⁸ See Figure 1.






Undergirding all of these roles is the essential role of **families as decision-makers**. Every day, families make a myriad of choices and decisions on behalf of their children, ranging from what they eat for breakfast to where they attend school. This natural and intrinsic parental behavior prepares them for a key role as decision-makers in partnership with the school. The events families attend at your school should be just as strategic and intentional as any professional development you provide to your school staff. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (see page 5) demonstrates the importance of strengthening the knowledge, skills, and confidence of educators to partner with families, while simultaneously designing and implementing school-based family engagement events and activities that boost and reinforce the capacity of families to partner with teachers to support learning. School events are successful when teachers are prepared to welcome and engage families, and when families are given meaningful and targeted learning opportunities and use them with confidence to support their child’s academic, social, and emotional growth.

⁶ CDE, 2017

⁷ Sheldon, 2002

⁸ Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Jeynes, 2007

Figure 1: Family Roles in a Child's Education

 Communicating High Expectations	 Monitoring Performance	 Supporting Learning at Home	 Guiding Their Child's Education	 Advocating for Their Child
<p>Families communicate high expectations to students by talking with them about their interests, goals, and future plans. Connecting their education to their goals, plans, and ambitions reinforces the importance of school and academic performance and how it all leads to fuller lives. By having these conversations, families set high standards for grades, attendance, and behavior, and help students stay accountable to themselves and their families. Families help create a home environment that motivates, inspires, and rewards expected behaviors and goal achievement.</p>	<p>To keep pace with their children's progress in school, families monitor performance in a variety of ways. Some use online platforms to learn about assignments, testing results, and homework completion. Other families reach out directly to the teacher or counselor to stay current on progress at school. Others rely on notes from the teacher, homework folders, report cards, and parent-teacher conferences.</p>	<p>Depending on the age of the child, families support learning at home by modeling the importance of reading and literacy development, doing math games, and connecting grade level learning to everyday activities. Some families do home projects with their children like cooking, gardening, building, shopping, and more to embed learning in real time and discuss lessons that apply to the classroom. Other families take trips to the local library, zoo, the movies, tours of universities, and other places to help broaden their child's world with new learning and enrichment opportunities.</p>	<p>Families guide their child's education by leading conversations about their future goals and planning how to achieve those goals. For younger children, families may create schedules for homework completion and chores around the house to help support time management and development of personal responsibility. For older children, families guide in selection of appropriate classes, volunteer opportunities, extracurricular activities, and experiences that support their interests and strengths and are aligned with future aspirations.</p>	<p>Families are also advocates for their children. In the early grades, families may share learning needs, preferences, and abilities with the teacher to ensure the greatest impact from instruction and to stay informed about programs, interventions, and other opportunities for their children. For older students, families start to shift the advocacy responsibility to the children to strengthen their ability to make good choices, ask questions, ask for help, and to prioritize schoolwork and enrichment activities.</p>

The research is clear: when families and educators are engaged together to support students' learning, everyone benefits.

THE DUAL CAPACITY FRAMEWORK

In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education published [Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#), offering a framework for educators and a clearer picture of the shifts in training, programming, and policy that needed to be made to create the collective capacity to work in partnership with families. The process conditions outlined in the framework were updated in 2019 to underscore the key role teacher and family relationships play in advancing school family engagement.

Consider reading and discussing this document as a school team to extract lessons that may provide direction for the efforts you are undertaking. This document was designed to provide direction for goals and the necessary conditions to chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts that are linked to student achievement and school improvement for you to develop contextualized strategies that fit your school or community.⁹

⁹ Mapp & Bergman, 2019



Section 2: Building a Plan for Authentic Sustainable Engagement

For all schools, family engagement is important for maintaining your school's health and sustainability in addition to its important supports for student learning. For charter schools, which rely on family choice to maintain or grow student enrollment, it is critical to keep your families involved and be responsive to their needs, keep the students enrolled, and share your school's successes with new families. This means that planning for family engagement is as critical to your school's success as any other strategic planning initiative.

To lay the foundation for effective family engagement, begin by establishing a school and community planning team. The team should include educators, school leaders, board members, other staff members, families, and community partners. Incorporate key individuals who have roles in different school programs to help align family engagement activities across school initiatives. Also consider how the needs of different educators, families, and students will be represented. Will someone on your team be willing and able to speak to the needs of families of students with disabilities? Recent immigrant families? New educators? What other voices in your community might be marginalized or underrepresented, and how will you bring them to the forefront?

Throughout your team identification and planning process, it is essential to consider the capacity of families and staff to engage in high-impact family engagement work. Do your staff members have the mindsets to drive inclusive communications with families, and the time to engage in conversations about student learning with each family? Do families have the resources necessary to engage with teachers in substantive ways, and do they receive the knowledge and skills that will help them support their students' learning goals? The Dual-Capacity Framework (see page 5) considers these and other questions as you build families' and teachers' capacities.

When forming the planning team, consider the following questions:

- Who has been successful at engaging diverse families in your school?
- Who will represent the voices of classroom teachers and staff to the team?
- Who are parent leaders who can speak for underrepresented families in your school?
- What barriers could be mitigated so that traditionally underrepresented families have the opportunity to engage in the planning team? For example, could you provide childcare, interpretation services, or adjust your meeting times?
- Who is influential in your school that can help promote the goals of the initiative?

The collective perspectives will enrich the process.¹⁰ The planning team will:

- Discuss and make decisions about **core beliefs** and family engagement that will drive your planning and practices going forward.

¹⁰ Epstein, 2009

- Agree on a **vision** that will drive staff decisions related to family engagement priorities and practices.
- Generate key **objectives** and outcomes so your team can allocate the time, energy, and other resources necessary to achieve your goals.
- Review school **policies and practices** for alignment with research on high-impact family engagement to ensure your work focuses on building relationships and improving student learning.
- Determine **capacity development** needs and resources and plan for these as you establish goals and action items.
- Suggest **strategies** that support student outcomes and fit the orientation of the school.
- Make choices for **evaluating** the combined efforts.

The combined voices of the planning team create the plan or road map your school will follow. By creating a cohesive plan, driven by central goals and designed with input from a variety of educator, community, and family perspectives, you will lay the foundation for building high-impact family engagement into your school's system. At the same time, you will be building a coalition of professionals within your school who understand the importance of systemic family engagement designed to build strong relationships and support student learning. Rather than being an add-on or one more thing to do, family engagement will be identified as a core element of your instructional program, benefitting all of your school's stakeholders and ultimately supporting students.

A note about underrepresented families: Which families or groups of families in your school are underrepresented? What can each staff member in your school do to connect with underrepresented families individually and as a group?

Some educators use the term “hard to reach families” but the phrase we will use in this report is **underrepresented families**. When you think of underrepresented families you might think about a time when you called a family but found out their number has been disconnected or when families did not respond when you sent emails or texts. While the perception might be that these families are hard to reach, this phrase implies a deficit mindset and often an error in perception that is not conducive to productive family-school relationship-building. Few families identify themselves as difficult to reach and may report that they receive little communication from the school.

The relevant point is that certain approaches to reaching some families are not working, and other approaches need to be tried. Otherwise, some families will become underrepresented in your school's planning and decision-making. Don't become frustrated; there may be many reasons as to why some families are not accessible via the methods that are most convenient for you and your staff. Be positive, thoughtful, creative, and persistent, and you will learn how to build partnerships with these families. Some common reasons families shy away from participating with traditional school communications and events include:

- Have had negative experiences with schooling that led to distrust.
- Feel that the school only calls to give negative news about their child.
- Do not understand the educational system and expectations of families.
- Are speakers of other languages and feel lost.
- Work during school hours.
- Lack technology or internet access.
- Children are in shelters or foster homes.
- Multiple children are in different schools.
- Have limited literacy.
- Are experiencing a crisis, such as housing instability, job loss, or medical emergencies.

Consider strategies that can help your school team mitigate some of these challenges:

- Start the school year with positive communication as soon as student registration occurs.
- Take time to help families make appointments with their child's teacher.
- Help families understand grade level learning priorities for their child.
- Schedule time to discuss parent compacts and expectations.
- Share teacher contact information.
- Find out how and when they prefer to be contacted.
- Train your front office staff to be helpful, friendly, and accessible so they are equipped to set a positive tone for all families.

Each of the next five sections describes a step in the planning process and provides example goals and strategies to start your conversation. [Appendix D](#) includes a reflection tool with questions to consider as you walk through each step.

STEP 1 → **Articulate Your Overarching Family Engagement Goals**

Earlier we learned about genuine family engagement having two key dimensions, **trusting relationships between educators and families** and **connection to student learning**. These are pillars of evidence-based practices that point our actions in the right direction. The goals your school team identifies for engaging with families should be grounded in these two dimensions.

Your family engagement goals, as well as the quality of your interactions and the relationships you build with families and the community, will be driven by your team's mindset and core beliefs. As a school team, it is important to examine and reflect on the values and beliefs that are held by individuals, and come to agreement on the collective core beliefs, goals, and outcomes that define your school culture as it relates to serving students and genuinely engaging their families. It starts with self-examination and then it advances toward the collective. The goals you develop should be driven by the values and beliefs you agree will serve as your compass and will anchor decisions made by educators in your team.

Some common examples of family engagement goals are listed below:

- Strengthen the capacity of families to support their children's learning.
- Improve the capacity of school staff to engage in high-impact family engagement activities and strategies.
- Establish systems of two-way communication with families.

- Equip families with information, tools, and strategies to enhance and extend learning.
- Increase family participation in decision-making.
- Create a welcoming school environment.

STEP 2 → Build a Collaborative Culture to Drive Engagement and Build Educator Capacity to Form Partnerships with Families

School leaders know that a positive school culture drives organizational success. Culture feels tangible in the connections and interactions between people in the school, the foundational beliefs and assumptions, shared values, norms, and behaviors of all. It is the way people actually act and behave in the school.¹¹ Peterson and Deal (1998) describe school culture as “the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges.” Building a positive school culture is of great significance in family engagement.

How do you want families to feel when they visit your school or speak with their child’s teacher? How do you create a welcoming, inclusive environment? Schools can begin by building a foundational level of family trust in the schools. This first level of trust comes from families knowing what is happening in the school and in their child’s classroom. When families receive frequent contact from their child’s teacher, periodic access to school data, and regularly hear about school-level progress and goals, those families trust that they know what is happening in that school. Families know what their students are learning, how a school is progressing, and exactly what expectations the school has for families to support student learning.

By coordinating classroom and school outreach efforts, school leaders can facilitate the first level of trust so that teachers and families have a foundation for building productive relationships. School leaders can support individual teachers in developing these relationships by ensuring they have the time and resources in place to do so, and in making expectations for family outreach clear. For example, you may need to provide your teachers with technology to ensure they aren’t making outreach calls from a personal phone number, and scheduling time for teachers of grade level teams to meet together to discuss their successes and challenges in family outreach. School leaders can also work with teachers to build scripts and Q&A documents to guide family engagement conversations – See [Appendix A](#) for one example.

DUAL CAPACITY FRAMEWORK AND EDUCATOR CAPACITY

It is important not to assume that educators already have the skills, confidence, and disposition to work effectively with families. Teachers and education leaders identify family engagement as one of the most challenging aspects of their work.¹² This underscores the importance of capacity development. Schools often focus capacity-building efforts at families through programs and workshops, but strengthening the capacity of educators is equally important. It is ultimately educators who will lead the way to genuine partnerships with families and they need to be equipped with professional development and coaching to be successful.

Capacity development is an ongoing process. Every year, administrators must gather evidence and identify the next level of required knowledge and competencies, secure the training and resources necessary, and then support the implementation of the new skills through coaching and feedback for continuous improvement. As you engage in this toolkit, consider how educator and organizational capacity will affect each step. Consider what goals and strategies should be articulated in relation to improving your school’s capacity to achieve your objectives and visions for family engagement. Ongoing capacity development signals to the school team that family engagement is a key priority and is valued by the administrative team.

¹¹ Mohammed, 2018; Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018

¹² Metlife, 2013

To build a school culture that lifts everyone, it is important to acknowledge that a school is a complex organization, made up of individuals who bring their own norms, opinions, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations to their work with students, families, and colleagues. To build a healthy school culture that individuals can express through their behavior, you must address their professional learning needs and help align their belief systems with relation to the kind of school you aim to represent. In [Appendix B](#), you'll find a tool for thinking through how you can help different individuals in your school develop the capacity they need to engage with families to support student learning.

STEP 3 → **Select and Design Effective Family Engagement Strategies**

At this point in the planning process, you have defined your goals driven by your core beliefs and considered how you will build a culture and capacity that will move you in the direction of developing trusting relationship between educators and families built around student learning. Essentially, you have designed a map for family engagement in your school. The next step is to identify high-impact family engagement strategies that will move you toward your goals.

Start by considering what gaps exist between your current family engagement efforts and your goals. What is missing? How can you get from Point A to Point B? You may want to start with strategies that help your school team collect data, identify priorities and needs, and include your families as stakeholders and collaborators. The next step may be to equip staff with knowledge and training to create a capacity baseline that include values, beliefs, competency, and confidence to do the work. In other words, your strategies will focus on building capacity of your families and staff as well as actively doing the work of building partnerships and engagement.

After these steps, your team will be more prepared to move into the next phase of planning and doing the work.

Some of your strategies to attain your goals related to family engagement might include:

- Conducting a needs assessment
- Mapping existing community resources such as associations, institutions, businesses, and other assets near or around the school (See [Appendix E](#))
- Offering all staff specialized training that supports building trusting relationships with families
- Offering all staff specialized training that supports home and school partnerships
- Providing targeted, welcoming environment training for front office personnel
- Conducting a family friendly school walk-through (See [Appendix E](#))
- Establishing a school family engagement team to plan, coordinate, implement, monitor, and evaluate all aspects of the plan
- Sharing your short- and long-term family engagement plans with families and soliciting feedback
- Conducting home visits

If your school is virtual, or if you are temporarily employing a virtual or hybrid model, consider the strategies that will help you develop relationships with families and share expectations in a virtual environment. What resources, communications, and structures need to be put in place to build relationships among families and educators throughout the school year? What can you do to translate elements of family visits using video calls or other technology? Examples might include:

- Ensuring your registration process functions well on mobile devices
- Scheduling time for phone calls with families whose students' engagement decreased during the transition to virtual instruction to identify any unmet needs
- Building time into your teachers' schedule for planned, virtual home visits (see [Appendix E](#) for more resources on conducting virtual home visits and other tools schools are using to engage with families in a virtual setting)

Many schools already conduct a range of family engagement activities. Some of your existing activities may fit well within your new plan, while others need to be adapted or replaced. When evaluating your current activities, consider whether they result in lower impact or higher impact on trusting relationships and student learning. **Lower impact family engagement activities are random, isolated events lacking concrete learning opportunities for families. Higher impact activities are evidence informed, collaborative, culturally competent, and focused on improving students' learning.**

Lower impact activities may be enjoyable or beneficial, but they do not inherently lead to trusting relationships or improved student learning. Activities that are lower impact may not be a good use of your staff's time and need to be discontinued. Other activities may be required by ESSA or your organization but could be tailored to provide higher impacts than in the past by applying family engagement research with your school's assets and goals. For example, Title I schools are required to have a reading and a math academic event for families. To make these events high impact, you might adjust them as follows:

- Each teacher facilitates their own meeting for their own classroom families.
- The teacher shares and discusses assessment data with families for the content area.
- The teacher models activities families can practice at home to accelerate mastery.
- Each family member wears a name tag so that teachers and families can know each other by name and form relationships.
- Each meeting starts with a team building activity to promote networking among families.
- Families have opportunities throughout the meeting to share ideas, best practices, and experiences with the teacher and other families.
- The teacher follows up with families not in attendance and provides them with details and resources shared during the meeting.
- Families have opportunities to provide feedback about the quality of the information shared and the practical application for supporting at-home learning. How can it be improved?

Figure 2 below provides more examples of common school activities or events that can be improved upon to increase impact and make progress toward your overarching goals for family engagement.

Figure 2. Increasing the Impact of Family Engagement Activities

Activity or Event	Strategies for Increasing Impact
Back to School Night	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share learning strategies • Review key grade level skills for students and discuss relevant home learning tips • Develop a communication plan
Communication between teachers and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the year with a positive call to get to know the family • Establish regular two-way calls • Email or text to share academic progress and tips
Reading/Math Night	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make content grade-level specific • Start the meeting with a team building activity to develop relationships • Model strategies families can replicate at home • Follow up with families not in attendance to share information and resources
Parent-teacher meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share performance data updates • Ask questions that deepen your understanding of the family’s goals and priorities • Model strategies to practice at home • Share information on available community enrichment activities

Reflect on activities you currently use that may not be high impact:

- What activities are mandatory, either because they are required by ESSA Title 1 or because they are directly tied to your school’s mission and goals?
- How can you personalize those mandatory activities to facilitate the building of trusting relationships?
- What is the role of lower-impact activities in your plan? How can you make those activities higher impact?
- Can you combine or adjust lower-impact activities to give depth and meaning by centering student learning?

As Figure 2 shows, many traditional family engagement strategies can be adapted to equip and support families as valued partners in students’ education. [Appendix C](#) walks readers through evaluating a traditional family engagement activity, the back-to-school open house, and increasing the impact of that activity.

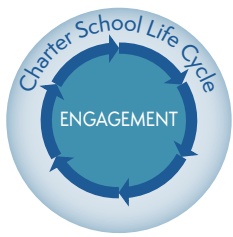
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL YEAR

As a school team, construct and review a calendar of family engagement activities planned for throughout the year. Then, review your school calendar for key grade-level instructional milestones and when they are assessed. Compare the alignment between the two calendars, and as necessary rearrange and align family engagement efforts to be in sync with important student learning objectives. Consider when students will need to acquire specific skills and when you will assess different competencies – how can your family engagement calendar align with these timelines? As teachers introduce key grade level learning objectives or skills in the classroom, your family engagement event can address the subject content and family-friendly activities to do at home that can support practice and eventual mastery of the skill, mirroring the learning happening in classrooms and helping families gain clarity on the end-of-semester and end-of-year benchmarks. A proactive timeline for family engagement events aligned to student learning goals encourages families to work side by side with teachers to support learning. Instead of functioning as a year of random, isolated activities, this lens will allow your team to bring alignment between student learning goals and each opportunity for communication and collaboration with families.

STEP 4 → **Strategy Implementation, Measurement, and Continuous Improvement**

Now, you are ready to implement your new family engagement plan and strategies. It is important to consider how any changes to expectations or behaviors will be communicated, and how new practices and structures will be shared with all stakeholders. You'll want to plan for communicating all elements of your plan, receiving feedback as you go, measuring your success on a regular basis, and making adjustments as necessary.

For charter schools, this final step is especially important. Maintaining rich and evolving engagement of the families you serve is imperative to your enrollment and success as a school. Present your family engagement plan as a living, evolving approach, and plan to revisit it at least annually to assess your success and adapt future plans.



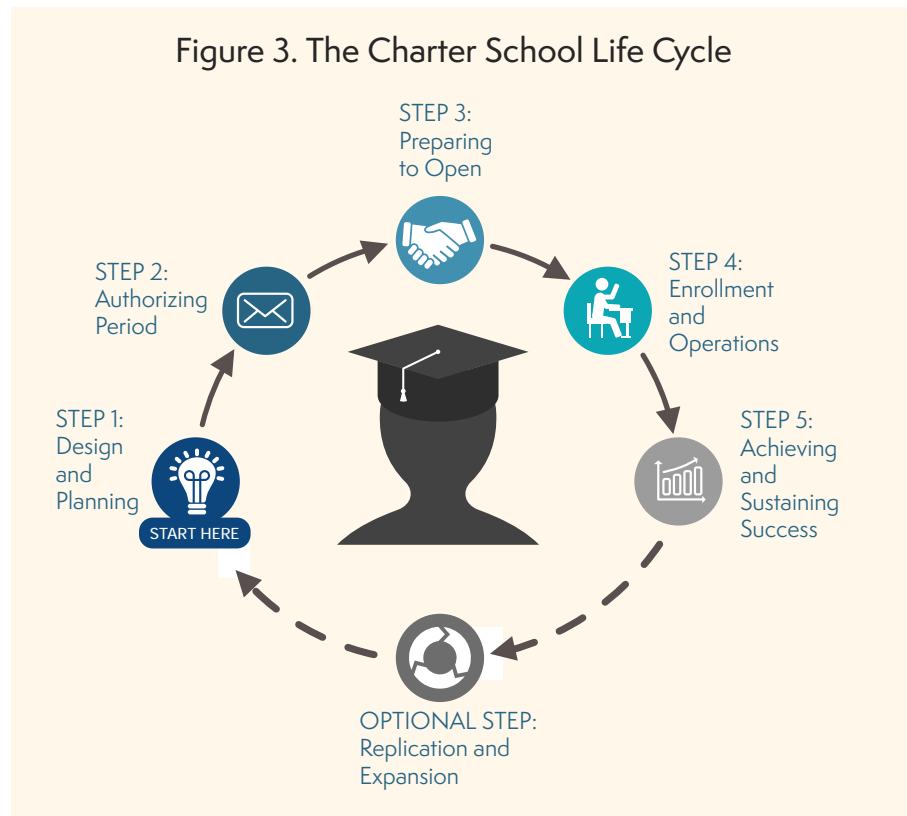
Section 3: Engagement Throughout the Charter School Life Cycle

Although all schools need continuous, sustainable practices for community and family engagement, the strategies may look different at certain points in the charter school life cycle. Figure 3 depicts the general periods in a charter school’s life cycle, from design and planning through achieving and sustaining success. Some charter schools will engage in replication and expansion, while others will eventually close. Some charter schools will engage in specific improvement or turnaround processes. In addition, all schools need a plan and foundation of support to prepare for community and family engagement in times of crisis, which could include responding to a natural disaster, an unexpected school closure, or any number of other events that can disrupt the life cycle of a charter school. In this section, we will focus on key strategies to build your school and families’ capacity at key stages:

1. Design and Planning, or Replication and Expansion – Planning for a new school, replicating at a new school site, or expanding an existing school model
2. Achieving and Sustaining Success – Engagement and outreach during school improvement
3. Crisis Management Strategies and Closures – Could occur at any point in the charter school life cycle

For each stage in the life cycle, three example goals and several strategies for family engagement and dual capacity building are included.

Figure 3. The Charter School Life Cycle



Design and Planning or Replication and Expansion

When designing and planning to open a new school, charter school founders need to collect enough data on potential families and the neighboring community to understand whom you will be serving. Your authorizer might require specific family engagement strategies to be implemented or ask that you collect certain data to incorporate into your planning. If your school is planning to expand enrollment to new grades, increase the number of seats offered to students, or replicate your model into a new school, you'll want to engage in similar strategies.



Gather data on communities and families who may be served by your school.

Example Strategies

- Engage core members of your founding team in developing a family engagement plan, including prospective families if possible (see Step 2, page 6).
- Use canvassing, door hangers, or survey postcards to learn about what families value in a school.
- Survey community families about their interests in a new school offering.
- Partner with community organizations and research public data to learn about the most common languages spoken in the community, student enrollment patterns, school performance and gaps in the educational ecosystem, and popular community organizations and programming.



Understand how family needs and assets do or don't align with your current plan.

Example Strategies

- Consider goals/strategies for recruiting staff representative of your families.
- Attend social and cultural events in your school's neighborhood and build relationship with families.
- Search for evidence-based training on cultural competence related to the families in your community.
- Use focus groups or interviews to learn what families like and don't like about current school options and to identify unmet family needs your school might serve.
- Build regular touchpoints into your school's planning, design, and opening to facilitate and react to family input, ensuring that families have a say in key decisions such as academic areas and staffing strategies.



Develop new partnerships with families and community partners to increase your access to more families and students.

Example Strategies

- Offer a summer camp in partnership with a community organization to test your instructional model and build relationships with families.
- Develop relationships with professional community organizations such as recreational centers, health clinics, and social service providers to learn more about the neighborhood families and their needs.
- Learn what community events have wide turnout, and consider how your school's staff can be incorporated into those events.

Achieving and Sustaining Success

When a school is undergoing targeted improvement efforts, it can risk family engagement falling by the wayside as programs and strategies focused on improving test scores become more urgent. However, families are essential partners in school improvement and family-teacher relationships can be an important indicator of a school’s likelihood to achieve improvement.¹³ If your school is struggling or in the middle of improvement or redesign efforts, consider how your family engagement strategies can be leveraged for whole school improvement.



Provide all families with current and accurate information on their child’s and the school’s performance on a regular basis.

Example Strategies

- Proactively share information about a school’s improvement status and improvement plans with all families, both in writing with translated resources and in venues that allow for questions and discussion.
- Engage the community in school improvement plans, publicly sharing the school’s plans for change in advance and soliciting opportunities for support by families and community organizations.



Ensure that educators understand the needs and assets of the families your school serves.

Example Strategies

- Provide opportunities, training, and structures for educators to reflect and learn about their own biases that may lead to incorrect assumptions about underrepresented families.
- Engage families and community partners to educate your team about the history, assets, and needs of the community. Consider taking educators on asset mapping tours of the community so they can see where their students live and where families spend time. (See [Appendix E](#))



Build educators’ capacity to engage with underrepresented families and to provide rigorous, culturally responsive instruction.

Example Strategies

- Communicate clear and specific expectations about your educators’ outreach to families and follow up to learn where they struggle and need additional supports.
- Provide access to translators and translated documents and communication templates to facilitate outreach to families whose primary language is not English.
- Institute a home-visiting program.
- Include family engagement strategies in school improvement plans and classroom academic goals and objectives.

¹³ Bryk et al, 2010

Crisis Management and School Closures

The need for crisis management could occur at any point in the charter school life cycle. Planning in advance for crisis will allow you to be prepared if your school is faced with a natural disaster, unexpected transition to virtual or hybrid instruction, or closure. Many charter schools developed innovative and productive methods of engaging with families during the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. All schools are best suited to crisis planning in advance, before a crisis actually occurs and pulls your time, staff, and resources in other urgent directions.



In the event of a sudden transition to virtual instruction, engage with all families on at least a weekly basis.

Example Strategies

- Review the data from your spring 2020 family engagement to find out what worked well for families and what did not. If you were not able to implement a family outreach process in the spring, consider implementing multiple forms of touchpoints – online surveys, text messages, phone calls – and evaluate which methods work best for engaging different families.
- Review or develop your plan for documenting and sharing information on family engagement strategies. Will a new teacher be able to access information about their students’ families? Will they know which families prefer text communication over email, or which families require interpreter services?
- Provide staff with mental health support services and time to reflect on the stories shared by families and the reactions and grief they may need to process in order to support families and students.



In the event of a natural disaster, have a plan in place to identify and serve family and educators’ needs.

Example Strategies

- Identify resources that support best practices in emergency management planning for schools, such as [federal resource centers](#).
- Educate your leadership and staff on trauma-informed care and the resources that you may need to incorporate into your instruction and practices after a disaster.



In the event of school closure, ensure a smooth transition for all families and students into their next school environment.

Example Strategies

- Communicate proactively and honestly with families about a school’s status. If the school is experiencing any challenges that could eventually lead to closure, such as decreasing enrollment or poor outcomes, be transparent about these challenges as well as how the school is facing them. Be honest about both your challenges and plans for mitigation to build trust.
- Engage with your authorizer and any resources they offer around supporting families transitioning out of your school in the event of closure.

Conclusion

Charter schools at any point in their life cycle can use this toolkit to develop inclusive, high-impact family engagement strategies to deepen relationships between home and school and to advance student learning. Each charter school team will need to consider their unique context, capacity, and families as they translate this work into action. For tools to support this work, and for references to inform further research, the Appendices of this document provide additional supports.





Section 4: Appendices – Tools and Resources

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Appendix A: Sample Q&A Template for Family Outreach

Welcome to My Classroom

I want to get to know your family, your strengths, and your needs, so I can be a more responsive partner in your child's education. The information you provide will help me be a better advocate for your child. When possible, provide examples and stories that help illustrate your answers.

1. What are your hopes and dreams for your child?
2. I would like us to be in regular contact. What is the best way and time to reach you?
3. Are you available during school time? Are you open to helping in the classroom?
4. What makes your child happy?
5. What activities or tasks frustrate your child?
6. What does your child enjoy most: music, art, sports, or something else?
7. What is your child most curious about?
8. How does your family like to spend quality time together?
9. How does your child make friends?
10. Is there anything else you would like to us to know about your child?

Appendix B: Capacity Building for Different Groups of Educators

Understanding and working to shape your school culture relates directly to how educators will interact, connect, and collaborate with families as genuine partners. Many teachers do not feel their formal teacher preparation programs provided them with the skills necessary to successfully engage families.¹⁴ To build your teachers' capacity to engage with parents, a first step is understanding your teachers and their different needs.

School culture is complex, and this is represented in the different abilities, needs, and practices of different teachers. It is important to understand the different groups of teachers in your school and how you can support all of these groups as effective members of family-school partnerships. In a study of 34 schools, 4 groups of educators with distinct characteristics were identified: Group 1 believed that all of their students were capable of learning and that they have a direct impact on student success; Group 2 are educators new to the school and are trying to learn the norms and expectations of the school culture; Group 3 are educators who are overwhelmed with the demands of the work and are trying to survive day to day; and Group 4 are the ones opposed to change and organize in order to stop any new school reform initiative.¹⁵ You likely have these same groups of teachers represented in your school. How will you design your family engagement strategies to work within these groups?

This reflective tool can help you consider the different strengths and needs of teachers in your school towards developing a full team ready to engage families to support student learning. Use the questions below and table on the next page to plan your next steps.

Questions to consider:

- How many of your teachers are new to teaching? What formal preparation have these teachers had to engage families in your community?
- How many of your teachers are new to the community? How can you learn about what ties to the community exist within your teaching staff?
- Which teachers have the most success engaging families? How can they be supported in sharing their lessons learned and promising practices?
- In what ways are your teachers reflective of the families you serve? In what ways are they not?

¹⁴ Metlife, Inc., 2013

¹⁵ Muhammad, 2018

Category	What teachers and staff would you place in this category?	What are their needs?	What strategies can build the capacity of this group to engage with families?
Group 1: Confident educators			
Group 2: New educators			
Group 3: Overwhelmed educators			
Group 4: Educators opposed to change			

Appendix C: Back to School Open House

Traditionally a school open house serves to welcome a new school year, help familiarize families and students with school programs and priorities, introduce the school staff, and share roles and responsibilities of educators and families. The start of a new school year is an exciting time for students and their families, but often attending an open house feels bland and forgettable. Rethinking your open house as a key opportunity to draw and engage families to be partners and turn the event into a high impact family engagement strategy is a great start. Remember your north star when planning family engagement for impact: **continuous strengthening of trusting relationships between educators and families** and the **connection of family engagement activities and efforts to student learning**.¹⁶

This interactive tool walks you through the process of evaluating a traditional family engagement activity and planning to increase the impact of that activity. The example used here is for a school open house, but you can also use the questions and table below to apply to other family engagement activities.

- If your school is beginning the school year virtually or in a hybrid model, how will your open house look different than in years past? As you redesign your delivery method, what are the key goals of the event you want to accomplish?
- Which aspects of your school's open house would you qualify as high engagement for both families and educators? What are their intended outcomes?
- What refinements could be applied to increase the impact of the event?
- How will you measure outcomes from your newly redesigned open house event?

¹⁶ CDE, 2017

Core Components of Current Open House	Is this component current higher impact or lower impact?	Could this component serve to build trusting relationships or supporting student learning goals? If yes, which one?	What refinements might be necessary to achieve this goal (building trusting relationships or supporting student learning goals)?	What resources would you need to make these refinements?	How could you measure success for this component?

Appendix D: Reflection Questions

STEP 1 → **Articulate Your Overarching Family Engagement Goals**

1. How do we acknowledge our own biases so that we can embrace more inclusive beliefs?
2. What hiring practices will help you recruit educators whose beliefs about families are aligned to your school's core values? How will you share these beliefs with new hires?
3. What do your core beliefs reflect about your team's knowledge of the families you serve? Is that knowledge grounded in data, or is more information needed?
4. What knowledge and skills can help educators become more equipped and confident working with families? How does this translate into goals you establish for your staff?
5. What skills do families need to participate in decision-making and school governance? How does this translate to your goals around family capacity?

STEP 2 → **Build a Collaborative Culture to Drive Engagement and Build Educator Capacity to Form Partnerships with Families**

1. How can you learn about your teachers' beliefs about students and families? What work needs to be done to bring those beliefs into alignment with the core beliefs your team articulated in Step 1?
2. What resources – including time – do your teachers need in order to build strong partnerships with families?

STEP 3 → **Select and Design Effective Family Engagement Strategies**

1. What information do you need to collect and from whom to understand the family engagement assets and gaps that exist?
2. How will your school create dedicated time for genuine and integrated family engagement?
3. Which families in your school are underrepresented, and how can you increase their engagement?
4. What school policy and processes will support the success of your family engagement plan?
5. How can the school support families in monitoring student performance and achievement?
6. What current school activities can you improve to make them higher impact?

STEP 4 → **Strategy Implementation, Measurement, and Continuous Improvement**

1. Who are the influential stakeholders who need to give feedback on your plan? For example, should your school board review?
2. How will you communicate your plan to new families, and make clear the commitment you are making to support their engagement?
3. What will successful implementation look like? How will you measure it?
4. Who is charged with evaluating your success, and on what basis?
5. How will you continue to stay in touch with the changing needs of your school and students, and adjust family engagement strategies to support student success?

Appendix E: Toolkit

[Beginning of Year Relationship Building: A Strategy Guide for Educators](#)

Flamboyant Foundation

This toolkit provides resources for educators looking to engage with families in ways that promote trust, communication, and shared power; acknowledge and challenge educators' biases; promote racial equity; and focus on grades and social-emotional development. Resources include scripts for calling families, example prompts to include in student and family questionnaires, and strategies for hosting community-building events.

[Tools for Educators to Listen and Learn from Families During COVID-19 School Closures](#)

NYU Steinhardt's Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools

This Google doc is tailored to support educators as they connect with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The document includes tips on preparing for outreach to families, sample scripts, guidance for follow-up conversations, and surveys that can be used to deepen family engagement and support during virtual instruction.

[Family-Friendly Partnership School Walk-Through](#)

Georgia Department of Education's Georgia Family-Friendly Partnership Initiative

This resource leads teams of educators and families through the process of planning and executing a family-friendly school walk-through. The goal of a family-friendly school walk-through is to provide information about whether families and others feel they are welcomed in the school's environment, and to guide the school toward new strategies for developing an increasingly inclusive and welcoming environment.

[Stay Home, Stay Connected: Maintaining Relationships in a Time of Social Distancing](#)

Parent Teacher Home Visits

This resource includes tools for virtual home visits, strategies for maintaining teacher-family ties during school closures, and tips on talking to students about COVID-19.

[Home Visit Toolbox for Educators](#)

Parent Teacher Home Visits

This webpage of resources provides examples of tools that can be customized for educators conducting home visits. The compiled tools include sample letters to families to communicate about the home visit, a frequently asked questions document, and a visit log and debrief guide.

[Identifying Community Assets and Resources](#)

Community Tool Box

This interactive resource provides a step-by-step guide to community asset mapping. The resource leads the reader through foundational information about community assets, how to identify community assets, and how to leverage identified assets, and provides additional resources throughout for further reading on a variety of related topics.

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