



#5 in the Ed Direction School Turnaround Model Series

# Parent Engagement in Student Success

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Recent studies have identified a handful of key factors that are correlated with high performance in schools—and, unsurprisingly, parent involvement nears the top of the list.

Definitions of parental engagement vary according to experts, but Joyce Epstein’s framework contains the six most widely-accepted elements:

- **Communicating:** regular discussion between parents and teachers about the child’s progress and needs
- **Parenting:** efforts to build positive and education-friendly home environments
- **Volunteering:** parental support of school activities and events
- **Learning at home:** bolstering classroom education with additional learnings in the home
- **Decision-making:** involvement in school and district level committees, advisory panels, and other decision-making organizations
- **Community collaboration:** family support of greater community initiatives and groups<sup>i</sup>

School leaders who want to improve student performance can tap into a combination of these elements. In this paper—the fifth installment in our School Turnaround Model Series (hyperlinks to the full series can be found at the end of this paper)—we explain the impact of parental engagement, especially in turnaround schools, and then identify three actions that leaders can take to improve engagement levels in their schools: 1) training teachers, 2) empowering parents, and 3) fostering community.

## The Value of Engagement

Research has shown that parental engagement in schools significantly increases student achievement. For example, education researcher John Hattie measured the impact of parental aspiration and expectations on a child’s education, and found that parental engagement is associated with as much as two years of growth in student achievement.<sup>ii</sup>

A more recent study for the U.S. Department of Education examined the impact of outreach to parents on student achievement in 71 Title I elementary schools. Outreach was defined as, “how much teachers communicated with parents of low-achieving students through meeting face to face; sending materials on ways to help their child at home; telephoning both routinely and when their child was having problems.” The study found that student test scores in mathematics and reading were respectively 40% and 50% higher in schools where teachers reported high levels of

outreach to parents than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach.<sup>iii</sup>

While the relationship between parental engagement and student achievement may seem intuitive, there are also dozens of studies authored on the topic prove it.<sup>iv</sup>

In addition, parental engagement is critical to the development of a child’s relationship with education. When parents demonstrate interest in education and set related expectations, children learn to value education. When parents highlight the connection between education and career, they show their children that school is both valuable and relevant. As a result, children feel a greater sense of daily purpose and are motivated to attend class and excel: “When students report feeling support from both home and school . . . they have more self-confidence and feel school is more important. Data indicate that they also are less disruptive, earn higher grades, and are more likely to go to college.”<sup>v</sup>

## Encouraging High Engagement

High parental engagement is possible at any school. Where high engagement fails to occur organically, school leaders can follow three actions to boost engagement: properly training teachers (setting the stage), empowering parents—especially via data-driven meetings, and fostering parent-school community.

### SETTING THE STAGE BY TRAINING TEACHERS

Teachers are on the front lines: they interact regularly and directly with parents, so they have the greatest opportunity to increase parental engagement. However, teachers must be motivated and adequately prepared for this responsibility.

Teachers will feel motivated to engage with parents when they see proven value. School and district leaders can present or distribute compelling stories and research to show how parental engagement benefits teachers. Leaders can set school-wide goals and celebrate teachers who have been successful in their outreach efforts to parents.

To help teachers interact successfully with diverse families, leaders should provide necessary skills and tools. For example, teachers must be able to navigate cultural differences in order to serve rising numbers of enrolled students from ethnic minorities.<sup>vi</sup> To support teachers, school and district leaders can:

- Host training or information sessions on cultural diversity and strategies for communicating with

diverse families, especially highlighting conflicting or sensitive cultural norms

- Work with community leaders to better understand the unique needs of local populations
- Provide interpreters for the most commonly spoken non-English languages
- Provide translation services so that teachers and schools can send communications and materials home to parents
- Request feedback from parents on their communications with teachers to identify areas for improvement and ensure that teachers are interacting in a professional and respectful way.

### EMPOWERING PARENTS

Schools can spur parents to become more involved in their child's education by supporting home teaching efforts and by sharing opportunities for direct school and district involvement. Teachers and schools can engage parents by:

- Proactively distributing or lending teaching materials so that parents can easily continue classroom learnings in the home
- Regularly providing assessments of each child's progress and areas needing improvement
- Giving students homework that requires the involvement of parents<sup>vii</sup>
- Sharing information on upcoming opportunities to participate in school and district activities and meetings
- Hosting workshops, discussion groups, and classes to train parents on topics such as positive disciplinary techniques and teaching basic math skills

To more effectively connect parents with their students' progress, many schools have adopted Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT), an engagement strategy developed by WestEd.<sup>viii</sup> APTTs replace traditional parent-teacher conference nights with three data-driven meetings per year. In these meetings, parents are introduced to a foundational grade level skill. They are shown how the students in their child's class are performing on that skill, and how their children specifically rank. Then, parents receive activities and materials that they can use at home to help their children improve in the relevant skill. Research has shown that APTTs have significant impact in the schools in which they have been implemented:

*Student achievement in both math and reading is up for students whose families have access to APTT compared to students whose families do not. The program also seems to increase student engagement, confidence and*

*attendance, as well as improve parent-teacher communication and parent self-efficacy for supporting student learning at home. Some principals report that the model promotes a sense of community within the school that decreases discipline problems among students and that parents are more comfortable reaching out to other families to resolve conflicts.<sup>ix</sup>*

Equipping parents with the tools needed for direct engagement breaks down barriers to involvement and empowers them to engage more productively in their child's education.

### FOSTERING COMMUNITY

Schools and teachers can also increase engagement by promoting strong school communities. Emphasis should be placed on building healthy relationships between parents and teachers, as well as within a united larger school community.

A recent study of Chicago schools showed that the quality of relationships between parents and teachers is a predictor of school quality: "When the 30 most highly-rated schools were compared with the 30 poorest, a battery of questions about the quality of relationships proved to be one of the best predictors."<sup>x</sup> Teachers and schools can improve relationships with parents by opening communication channels, seeking feedback, and celebrating highly-involved parents.

Trusting relationships begin with good communication. Channels between parents, teachers, and school leaders should open and accessible. Teachers can:

- Make sure their contact information is easily accessible
- Quickly respond to communications from parents
- Send brief email updates to parents
- Schedule phone calls with parents

Additionally, teachers at many schools have found success making home visits with their students' parents and families either informally, or formally through programs like the Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) program.<sup>xi</sup> These programs are typically designed to give parents and teachers an opportunity to discuss students' goals as equal partners outside of school. Visits are voluntary for both parents and teachers, but teachers are compensated for their time. Research has shown that students whose families participate in home visits have fewer absences and improved test scores.<sup>xii</sup>

Regardless of the method, the goal of teachers and schools alike should be to build relationships with families and keep them regularly involved in their child's educational progress.

Teachers and schools should also use these channels to solicit feedback from parents. Feedback can come through formal questionnaires and surveys or through informal, honest conversation. Insights gained allow teachers and schools to better align their efforts to reach out to and include parents. Parents who feel that their input is valued and impactful will be inspired to engage more with schools.

Schools can further strengthen their relationships with parents by celebrating their involvement and achievements in newsletters, emails, or assemblies. School leaders can share stories or award parents who have been highly involved in school activities or have taken a leading role in their child's education. This lets parents know that their hard work is noticed, valued, and appreciated. It also inspires less-involved parents to step up.

By fostering relationships *between* families, schools facilitate information sharing and reinforce a sense of community. Schools can provide parents with opportunities to come to campus and engage with one another, such as by:

- Hosting casual, adult-only social events for the parents of a classroom or grade
- Arranging small groups wherein parents can share with each other how they support their child's learning at home
- Encouraging them to share tips and best practices, advice, and goals

Through events and experiences like these, parents will develop a relationship with the larger school community. They will feel greater belonging and responsibility, which will inspire increased involvement with the school and their child's school experience.

## Conclusion

"It takes more than engaged parents to produce high student achievement,"<sup>xiii</sup> but parental engagement must happen in concert with high standards, effective leadership, and teaching quality. The benefits of parental engagement are widespread, significant, and proven. Schools and teachers must join in partnership with parents to better support students and strengthen school communities.

In this paper, we have provided a targeted approach for improving parental involvement in schools and districts. While these examples are by no means exhaustive, they provide an excellent framework that any school can implement successfully.

## The Ed Direction School Turnaround Model Series

In case you're just tuning into this series, we invite you to read through the other five white papers. As you can see, this paper is number five of six, and the whole series is listed below:

1. [The School Turnaround Success Model](#)
2. Teaching
3. [Leadership in School Turnaround](#)
4. Collaborative Coaching
5. Parent Engagement in Student Success (this paper)
6. Implementation Science

## About the Authors

**Dr. Trent Kaufman** is a co-founder of Cicero Group and founder of Ed Direction, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Cicero Group. Dr. Kaufman has a doctorate in Education Policy, Leadership, and Instructional Practice from Harvard. He has written two books (Harvard Education Press, Wiley Jossey-Bass) that are used by thousands of educators worldwide to better leverage data in K-12 leadership and assessment.

**Kalisi Uluave** helps schools execute comprehensive transformation programs that significantly improve student outcomes. His teaching career spanned 13 years in both public and private school settings, which gave him a diverse set of experiences that he now leverages as an educational consultant. Kalisi has extensive experience teaching secondary math and providing leadership for a variety of academic and extracurricular programs.

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*Ed Direction ([www.eddirection.com](http://www.eddirection.com)) is a premier provider of school turnaround services. We collaboratively partner with existing school and district staff to maximize student achievement. Throughout the process, we provide personalized support implementing evidence-based practices to increase student success.*

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<sup>i</sup> Epstein, Joyce L. "Framework of Six Types of Involvement." Unicef. Center for the Social Organization of Schools. Web. 30 Sept. 2016.

<[http://www.unicef.org/lac/Joyce\\_L\\_Epstein\\_s\\_Framework\\_of\\_Six\\_Types\\_of\\_Involvement\(2\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/lac/Joyce_L_Epstein_s_Framework_of_Six_Types_of_Involvement(2).pdf)>.

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<<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Parent-Involvement/Parent-Involvement.html>>.

<sup>ii</sup> Hattie, John. *Visible Learning*. Routledge. 2009

<sup>iii</sup> Westat, and Policy Study Associates. "The Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance (LESCP) in Title I Schools." US Department of Education, 2001. Web. 03 Oct. 2016.

<[http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lescp\\_highlights.html](http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lescp_highlights.html)>.

<sup>iv</sup> See generally Henderson and Mapp, *A New Wave of Research*. National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. 2002. Web. 29 Sept. 2016. <<http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>>.

<sup>v</sup> Henderson and Mapp, 2002.

<sup>vi</sup> "Enrollment and Percentage Distribution of Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools." Digest of Education Statistics. National Center for Education Statistics, 2013. Web. 29 Sept. 2016.

<[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_203.50.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_203.50.asp)>.

<sup>vii</sup> A Johns Hopkins University study of 700 sixth- and eighth-grade students examined the effect of interactive homework on language arts scores. The study found that "The more [interactive] homework students completed, the better their grades in language arts."

Henderson and Mapp, 2002.

Epstein, J. L., Simon, B. S., & Salinas, K. C. (1997). Involving parents in homework in the middle grades. Research Bulletin no. 18, 4 pages. <http://www.pdkintl.org/edres/resbul18.htm>

<sup>viii</sup> "Family & Community Engagement: Academic Parent-Teacher Teams." WestEd. 11 Oct. 2016. <<https://www.wested.org/service/academic-parent-teacher-teams-aptt-family-engagement-in-education/>>.

<sup>ix</sup> O'Brien, Anne. "The Power of Academic Parent-Teacher Teams." Edutopia. George Lucas Educational Foundation, 26 Nov. 2012. 11 Oct. 2016. <<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/academic-parent-teacher-teams-anne-obrien>>.

<sup>x</sup> Payne, Charles M., and Mariame Kaba. *So Much Reform, so Little Change: Building-level Obstacles to Urban School Reform*. Evanston, Northwestern U, 1998. Print.

<sup>xi</sup> Parent Teacher Home Visits. 11 Oct. 2016. <<http://www.pthvp.org/>>.

<sup>xii</sup> "Research." Parent Teacher Home Visits. 11 Oct. 2016. <<http://www.pthvp.org/what-we-do/results/i-research/>>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Henderson and Mapp, 2002.