

What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

“Drs. Collado, Marrero, and Reyes have provided the ‘why’ and the ‘how to’ of empowering families to create thriving students from a personal perspective! It is filled with keen, practical and useful strategies to help administrators and teachers make the connections that are critical for students’ success.”

Mary Ellen Elia

Commissioner of Education, New York
President, Success for Students, Inc.
Tampa, Florida

“*Empowered Families, Thriving Students* provides clear strategies and wonderful wisdom. This is a must read for anyone committed to helping children flourish in school and in life.”

Ulysses Navarrete

Executive Director, Association of Latino
Administrators and Superintendents
Washington, DC

“Drs. Collado, Marrero, and Reyes turn belief into behavior, translating respect for community wisdom into daily practice and treating trust as disciplined work. By recognizing families as partners, the authors give leaders practical steps to improve relationships and student learning.”

Nancy B. Gutiérrez

President & Lead Executive Officer,
The Leadership Academy
New York, New York

“This book is a very practical approach to engaging families as authentic partners in the education of their children. The authors present a strong case for student success that is grounded in a systematic plan of action that engages all the collaborators who shape students’ experiences and learning environments.”

John Hardman

Senior Instructor, IDEAL Program Director, Department of
Educational Leadership and Research Methodology,
College of Education, Florida Atlantic University
Boca Raton, Florida

“Empowered Families, Thriving Students is a clear, actionable roadmap for schools ready to stop talking about family engagement and start building it. One of the most powerful examples illustrated how a school reimagined the role of the family liaison—connecting families through cultural events, personal outreach, and leadership opportunities. This is what real partnership looks like.”

Brad Johnson

#3 Global Guru in Education
Author, *Room 212* and *Coffee with the Custodian*
Cumming, Georgia

“A powerful tool for educators, for not only planning on how to enhance parents’ participation, but also for self-reflection. It is critical that we educators stop perpetuating deficit-based mindsets. This book offers vignettes, action steps, and most importantly addresses anti-bias and culturally relevant competencies.”

Maria C. Castilleja

Retired Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction
Sweetwater Union High School District
Long Beach, California

“Empowered Families, Thriving Students empowers educators to lead with heart, serve with purpose, and rise to their highest calling.”

Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch

Founder and CEO, Educational Achievement Services, Inc.
Henderson, Nevada

“Empowered Families, Thriving Students is an inspiring and practical guide that shows how strong school-family partnerships can transform education. The authors offer clear strategies, real-world examples, and a hopeful vision for building trust and collaboration between educators and caregivers.”

Gustavo Balders

Superintendent, Beaverton School District
AASA, President
ALAS, Past President
Beaverton, Oregon

Empowered Families, Thriving Students

Dedications:

W. B. Collado:

To my family, your unconditional love and pride in my work as an educator are my sources of strength and inspiration. My sincere gratitude goes to my mother, my aunts, and my uncles, who dedicated their lives to teaching with over 150 years of collective service and were great educators: Maria (my mother), Tia Dominica, Tia Juanita, Tia Ana, Tia Simona, and Padrino Victor. It is an honor to follow in your footsteps.

Alex Marrero:

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To my children, Alexa and Axel—you are the reason I strive to build a more empowered future for all families. Your laughter, questions, and wonder keep me grounded and dreaming.

This book is born of sacrifice, sustained by love, and dedicated to the enduring power of family.

Belinda Reyes:

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Empowered Families, Thriving Students

Unlocking the Potential of
Family–School Partnerships

Washington B. Collado

Alex Marrero

Belinda Reyes

Foreword by Douglas B. Reeves

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FOREWORD

BY DOUGLAS B. REEVES¹

In this immensely practical book, Washington Collado, Alex Marrero, and Belinda Reyes have provided an exceptional guide for school leaders, teachers, families, and community leaders for collaborating to support student success by fostering family empowerment. Although many books are long on philosophy and short on practical application, this book is precisely the opposite. Whatever your role in the educational system or community, you will find practical guidance on the what, why, and how of supporting the kind of family empowerment that leads to student success.

¹Dr. Reeves is the author of more than 40 books and 100 articles on educational leadership. Twice named to the Harvard University Distinguished Authors Series, Doug is the recipient of several national and international awards for his contributions to education. He has shared his research in 50 states and more than 40 countries. He can be reached at Douglas.Reeves@CreativeLeadership.net or 781 710 9633.

The 14 strategies included in the following pages provide essential guides for school and community leaders on how to forge the essential collaboration among families, teachers, students, community leaders, and educational leaders to focus on student achievement and well-being. What is especially impressive about this book is the relentless focus on student success. Although the authors recognize the challenges that new arrivals to the United States face, they make no excuses but rather challenge all of us, from first-generation to eighth-generation residents, to support our neighbors and ourselves in building stronger communities. It is especially impressive that the authors challenge us to go beyond traditional “meetings and meals” to get to substantive communication among all community members.

An especially important element of this book is the use of a combination of nationally recognized evidence and the personal experience of the authors. It is too often the case that even the best-intentioned advocacy for students slides into polemics. This book prefers evidence and rejects rhetoric. The end goal is not justification based on the oppression of underserved students, but rather the success of these students despite the challenges that they have faced. In sum, the strategies are practical, the vignettes are authentic, and the evidence is compelling. This is a book not merely to be read, but to be studied and discussed in community-wide forums.

—Douglas Reeves

Boston, Massachusetts

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We sincerely thank the educators who dedicate their lives to engaging and empowering families, building communities rooted in love, trust, and shared purpose—places where students can truly thrive. To the families who generously contribute their time, whether through involvement, participation, or advocacy, your selfless commitment serves as a meaningful reminder and a source of inspiration. Together, your efforts strengthen the gratitude that families and communities feel for educators because they see teaching as a calling made stronger through partnership. Our students deserve every moment of collaboration. A heartfelt thank-you to all the educators and families whose voices and stories inspired the vignettes in this book. You brought heart, truth, and hope to these pages, and we are deeply grateful. May this book serve as a guiding light for collaboration, understanding, and the endless possibilities that come when schools and families work as one.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Washington “Nino” B. Collado was born in the Dominican Republic, in a small town called Jánico (Ha-Nee-Co). His mother, María Tejada, along with seven of his uncles and aunts, were all teachers. After his mother’s death, Dr. Collado and his three sisters moved to the United States to live with their father in New York City.

After earning his bachelor's degree from Queens College, Dr. Collado taught Spanish and English as a Second Language in New York City Public Schools. He and his family then moved to Florida where he taught in Miami-Dade Public Schools. He later joined Broward County Public Schools' Multicultural Department to develop curricula and provide training for teachers and administrators on the contributions of Latinos, African Americans, and women throughout U.S. history. He became an assistant principal at Broward County Public Schools and later served as a principal. He has spent 17 years as a principal at the middle and high school levels and served as president of the Broward Principals and Assistants Association (BPAA). During this time, he earned his doctorate in Educational Leadership from Florida Atlantic University.

In February 2021, Dr. Nino Collado received the Principal of the Year award for Broward County Public Schools, the sixth-largest school district in the country. Dr. Collado is currently an adjunct professor at Florida Atlantic University, where he teaches courses on educational leadership and serves as an associate at Creative Leadership Solutions.

Throughout his career, Dr. Nino Collado has dedicated a significant portion of his time to teaching and mentoring others. He has traveled to numerous countries and more than 30 states as a motivational speaker on topics related to school leadership and family engagement. He has also appeared as a panelist on CNN Español, NPR (New York), Telemundo, Univision, and others. Additionally, he has written more than 100 articles for newspapers and magazines, including the *Miami Herald*, and has authored or coauthored six books, including his latest book *Four Pillars to Guide Visionary Educators* (2025). He and his wife Carmen R. Collado are proud parents of four sons: Mario, Alejandro, Miguel, and Victor.



Dr. Alex Marrero has served as the Superintendent of Denver Public Schools since the Spring of 2021. As the son of a Cuban refugee and a Dominican immigrant, Dr. Marrero understands the diverse needs of his students firsthand and advocates for them. Under his leadership, Denver Public Schools has achieved its highest-

ever graduation rates, increased proficiency rates to all-time highs, and implemented its first-ever equity-based strategic plan. His efforts have significantly raised salaries and established living wages for all employees, while enhancing school safety and cybersecurity. His strategies have successfully moved over two dozen schools off the State Accountability Clock. Dr. Marrero established the Latine Education Advisory Council (LEAC) to enhance educational outcomes for Latino/Hispanic students, launched the International Educators Institute to aid new international teachers in adapting to the educational system and community, and opened Community Hubs throughout the city and county of Denver. These hubs connect students, families, and community members with free services to increase their economic self-sufficiency and academic success.

Dr. Marrero's leadership has been widely recognized with several awards, including Superintendent of the Year by the District Administration Leadership Institute and the Colorado Association of Latino/a Administrators and Superintendents,

for 2024. District Administration named him one of the Top 100 Influencers in Education in 2024. He was named a “Superintendent to Watch” in 2022 by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) and one of “5 Superintendents to Watch in 2023” by the organization K–12 Dive.

Beyond his role in Denver, Dr. Marrero is deeply involved in educational leadership on a national scale. He serves as president of the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents and an Executive Board Member for the Council of Great City Schools where he also is the Chair of the taskforce for Boys of Color. The U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security invited him to serve on the Homeland Security Academic Partnership Council and Colorado’s governor also selected him to serve on the Business Experiential Learning (BEL) Commission. In addition to these various roles, he holds adjunct professorships at Boston University, Manhattan University, and St. Peters University.

Dr. Marrero’s leadership philosophy is centered on empowering every student, regardless of their background, to overcome obstacles and become innovative leaders in their fields, reflecting his personal journey and commitment to educational excellence.



Dr. Belinda Reyes is the Chief Executive Officer of Reyes Executive Coaching and Leadership Solutions and serves as an adjunct instructor at the University of Central Florida. In the K–12 school system, she has served as media clerk, teacher, and in various district and school capacities including principal,

and most recently assistant superintendent. Dr. Reyes has dedicated herself to advancing education at all levels. She has earned accolades as a turnaround leader and mentor, making significant strides in addressing achievement gaps among Hispanic students and narrowing disparities between Black students and their peers. As a researcher-practitioner, her contributions to dual-language education have been widely recognized, with her research published in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Florida Sunshine State TESOL Journal* and the *University of Central Florida Journal of English Learner Education*. Her work has reached audiences in 47 countries, reflecting her global influence.

A staunch advocate for public education's role in strengthening democracy, Dr. Reyes has presented at prestigious forums, including the International Association of Scholastic Excellence (INTASE) World EduLead conference in the Asia Pacific region, where her expertise in global citizenship and educational innovation was showcased. Dr. Reyes' efforts focus on fostering systems that engage families, enhance instruction, and accelerate learning for vulnerable populations, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all. Dr. Reyes was awarded the 2025 American College of Education Alumni Achievement Award in recognition of her exceptional leadership and outstanding service.

Beyond her professional roles, Dr. Reyes is dedicated to mentoring future educational leaders. She has guided emerging administrators within her district and beyond, including through organizations such as Florida Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS). As a graduate of the national ALAS Superintendent Leadership Academy and the American Association of School Administrators Aspiring Superintendents Academy for Women Leaders, Dr. Reyes is committed to developing skilled leaders who empower diverse communities.

INTRODUCTION

In our extensive experiences as principals, teachers, superintendents, and as parents ourselves, we can assert that most educators and families agree that family and community engagement strengthen our schools, their operational practices, and academic outcomes. The collaborative efforts of families and educators create a powerful force for supporting students academically and socioemotionally. Often, the aspiration to create a structure for effective family and community engagement in school systems is reduced to a well-elaborated vision statement without any framework for its implementation in daily practice and planning. However, it does not have to be that way. Instead, we offer an evidence-based process to cultivate the family partnership with school that we, as educators, aspire to have at our schools.

Our purpose in writing this book has been practical and aspirational: to provide educators, school leaders, and community advocates with an actionable framework for building strong,

equitable, and culturally responsive relationships with families that ultimately drive student success. Family engagement is not a side initiative nor a one-time event; it is the foundation of sustainable educational progress. However, in too many school systems, it remains undervalued or poorly executed. This book aims to change that by offering a cohesive roadmap that moves from foundational trust to transformational partnership.

Laying the Foundation: Vision, Equity, and Trust

Chapter 1, *From Vision to Action: Crafting Tailored Family Engagement Plans*, opens with a clear call to engage with purpose. It then introduces readers to the necessity of designing school- or district-specific family engagement plans.

Too often, families from minoritized backgrounds, whether due to race, socioeconomic status (SES), language, or immigration status, are perceived through a deficit lens. Chapter 2, *Overcoming Deficit-Based Views*, guides educators in recognizing and dismantling these views, replacing them with asset-based strategies that activate families as coeducators, celebrate cultural storytelling, and emphasize the role of empowerment.

Trust becomes the connective tissue in Chapter 3, *Establishing Trust for Lasting Relationships*. Without trust, even the most well-designed engagement plan will falter. Through community scans, asset-based celebrations, and a focus on physical and psychological safety, this chapter examines how schools can become places where families feel seen, heard, and valued.

Chapter 4, *Building Capacity for Authentic Partnership*, introduces a three-tier model of involvement, engagement, and empowerment, helping educators assess their school's current state and its potential for growth. We offer readers guidance on crafting context-specific family engagement frameworks that evolve as families take on deeper roles within the school

community. We highlight the Family Leadership Institute as a powerful vision of what can happen when families are given the tools to lead, advocate, and inspire systemic change, moving from partnership to leadership.

Expanding the scope of engagement beyond the school walls, Chapter 5, *Building Lasting Community Partnerships*, emphasizes the power of the village. It showcases how local organizations, institutions, and businesses can become allies in student achievement. Educators are guided through strategies to build, sustain, and celebrate community partnerships that reflect and reinforce the cultural pride and social capital of the neighborhoods they serve. This chapter affirms that schools cannot and should not do this work alone.

Chapter 6, *Strengthening Students' Academic Potential*, addresses one of the most critical goals of engagement: supporting academic success. Whether families are navigating early literacy milestones or preparing their children for postsecondary pathways, this chapter provides frameworks and strategies for building families' academic knowledge and efficacy. These strategies encourage schools to align goals, provide accessible training, and foster two-way feedback loops that position families as academic partners.

Chapter 7, *Reimagining Traditional Practices for Greater Family Empowerment*—the final chapter—reimagines traditional events such as Open House and parent-teacher conferences as opportunities for transformative relationship building. This chapter encourages educators to embrace innovative approaches that foster leadership, agency, and shared purpose.

Features and Benefits

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This book is intended as a practical tool full of implementable strategies. To that end, each chapter has features that are designed to enable you to adapt the strategies to your specific

context so that you can implement them in culturally responsive ways. Our goal is not only to explain the “why” but also to facilitate the “how.”

- Each chapter is focused on two strategies aimed at empowering families.
- The strategies are illustrated by vignettes. These are stories drawn from the authors’ personal experiences with schools and families. Although fictionalized for the purposes of illustration, each story is based on actual events.
- Each strategy concludes with clear and implementable action steps so that you can immediately put this text to good use.
- Because empowering families requires that we analyze our own mindsets and preconceptions, each strategy is followed by self-analysis questions to prompt your thinking and reflection.
- Each chapter ends with Chapter Takeaways highlighting the key points of the chapter.
- Each chapter ends with Reflection Questions for large, big-picture questions on the theme of the chapter.

A Call to Reflective Action

This book serves as a guide for those seeking concrete, research-informed strategies to strengthen family–school partnerships. It is a mirror that asks educators to reflect on their own beliefs, biases, and practices. Moreover, it serves as a manifesto for a more equitable and inclusive education system—one where families are not merely guests but cocreators of the learning experience. Let us begin this work together, not as a checklist to complete, but as a commitment to uphold.

The 14 strategies presented throughout this journey are not abstract ideals; they are grounded, research informed, and tested in various educational settings. Each strategy is connected to practical examples, reflective questions, and action steps that encourage readers to pause, plan, and personalize the approach within their schools and communities.

This book is a guide and a call to action. It argues that when families are genuinely engaged and involved as partners, leaders, and cultural assets, the outcome is not only stronger schools but also more just and vibrant communities. We welcome you to join us on the journey to authentically cultivating the power of family and community engagement in our schools.

FROM VISION TO ACTION: CRAFTING TAILORED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PLANS

CHAPTER 1

“Historically, the family has played the primary role in educating children for life, with the school providing supplemental scaffolding to the family.” ●

—Stephen Covey (1989)

All families bring a colorful tapestry of various cultures and histories to the school community. When these histories and cultures are shared with the school and other families, the school becomes a vibrant community that celebrates and honors family backgrounds as welcome assets to the school. We encourage educators to embrace the challenge of learning about their students’ home lives and identifying the strengths that families offer, so that they, in turn, can develop engagement plans that incorporate those traditions and strengths. This chapter delves deeper into encouraging educators to take responsibility and ownership for developing cultural competency, specifically tailored to their unique context and community. Strategies 1 and 2 provide examples and action plans to enable you to foster family leadership and advocacy in culturally relevant ways.

Taking on the responsibility to center engagement efforts on the needs of the people we serve requires learning about the

obstacles and taking actions to remove them. In our experience, families are more likely to attend fun after-school events that welcome their entire family. To encourage participation in other, perhaps less fun, school activities, we have found that it is essential to make them feel welcome, to consider creative options for the care of younger siblings to free up families' attention, and to act with the mindset that families want to be involved and want to put in the effort. After taking inventory of the current level of family engagement, the next step is to strategically plan to strengthen family voice and active family leadership. Chapter 1 presents two strategies to facilitate the creation of a strategic plan that transitions from family engagement to family empowerment.

STRATEGY 1

Develop a School- or District-Specific Engagement Plan ●

STRATEGY 2

Establish Collaborative Goal Setting and Family Participation in Decision Making ●



Strategy 1: Develop a School- or District-Specific Engagement Plan ●

Developing a school- or district-specific engagement plan ensures that the unique needs of your school and community are met. Identifying action plans that value the individual contributions of the families in your community, as well as the contributions of your school to this partnership, deepens the partnership. Schools can collaborate with families and community members to create engagement plans tailored to

their school community's unique characteristics. This involves assessing community needs, cultural values, and available resources to design initiatives that resonate with families. Work must occur to build understanding and foster mutual respect, creating meaningful and actionable plans for engagement. The following vignette illustrates how Principal Reyes successfully created context-specific engagement plans informed by efforts to learn about the specific needs of the families in her school community.



Addressing the Disconnect Between Perception and Reality

Lancaster Elementary in Orlando, Florida, was built in the 1960s to accommodate the needs of military families. When the military base closed, the community experienced a shift in population—people of color became the majority group in the community. Lancaster Elementary began serving as a One-Way Developmental Center for multilingual learners and housing units for students with disabilities. A significant amount of the population was unhoused or indefinitely displaced while living in rundown pay-by-the-week hotels, with 98% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In 2006, Principal Belinda Reyes was appointed to lead the school and worked diligently to change mindsets: to educate the educated and to learn from those who had not had access to a formal education.

Change staff mindsets, change practices

School faculty and staff took ownership of their responsibility for identifying and addressing the disconnect between the staff's perception and the reality of the families. The staff at the school were extremely committed to the success of the students, but they held expectations for families based on their own middle-class experiences. Changing educators' mindsets when working with immigrant and impoverished families requires empathy, education, and a commitment to fostering strong, inclusive relationships. Principal Reyes recognized that the most effective way to change mindsets was to modify practices and enable faculty, staff, and families to have positive interactions with one another. Staff perception evolved to the point

(Continued)

(Continued)

where staff could recognize the barriers preventing some families from fully participating. Additionally, staff learned to create an environment of support that allowed families to be fully engaged in their children's education.

Learning how class differences affect behavior and mindsets

The first step was engaging the teachers and leadership team in Ruby K. Payne's "A Framework for Understanding Poverty" workshop (based on Payne, 2005). In this workshop, they gained skills in several topics, including using strategies to impact the achievement of students living below the poverty line, understanding how economic class affects behaviors and mindset, and developing stronger relationships. As they reflected on potential biases and assumptions, Principal Reyes began making home visits with teachers to foster relationships in a safe environment for families.

Make context-specific changes based on your findings

Using what they learned from the workshop and the home visits, the staff began to make changes in how they designed family engagement goals and practices. On an annual basis, the principal, teacher, families, and students created a school engagement plan tailored to each family. Upon completion, the plan was a written understanding and commitment to the roles each plays in the student's academic and social-emotional well-being. Although the school had a position of Family Liaison to provide basic resources and school supplies, Principal Reyes reimagined the position to intentionally connect families in all areas of the school in addition to providing basic needs and connections to social services.

Mrs. Caterina Morelli, the Family Liaison, was essential in ensuring each plan was executed with fidelity. As an Italian American, Mrs. Morelli did not share the same cultural background as the multilingual learners at her schools; therefore, she made it her business to learn about the students' cultures and get to know the families on a personal level. The respect she showed to families earned Mrs. Morelli the trust and respect she needed to connect with them on a deeper level. Families became excited about contributing to the school. After learning about the talents individual families could offer, Mrs. Morelli provided opportunities for them to contribute by creating

volunteering opportunities tailored to those talents. Some of their personal favorites were creating a school friendship garden and stocking the school store. These were activities families could do during the school day while caring for their young children.

Mrs. Morelli also addressed other barriers. She ensured that the meetings for the Parent–Teacher Organization and School Advisory Committee occurred one after the other during a time that families had identified as ideal for increasing family participation. Staff maximized the presence of a captive audience by using that time to celebrate student progress toward school goals and to share with families the impact they were making in their children’s education.

Continue learning

Family surveys were used to further engage families. Survey data led to the creation of honor roll assemblies every quarter—this event was a favorite among families. Although common in many schools, this was the first time families at Lancaster Elementary had the opportunity to celebrate their children’s accomplishments in this public forum. Instituting honor roll assemblies was a way to communicate positively about students’ academic and behavioral achievements and the high expectations that the school, staff, and families had for all students. The result was that an increasing number of children met these high expectations.

Students seeing their families involved in school, coupled with increased communication, led to an increase in academic achievement and a decrease in behavior referrals, allowing teachers and students to maximize instructional time. The sense of pride shared by students, families, and teachers alike was unmatched. ●

The critical work of family engagement happens at the school level, where relationships are built through daily interactions. Whether it is at the bus stop, family pick-up line, or school event, relationships are initiated in those micromoments. School districts can also support district-wide outreach efforts by providing schools with training and support to conduct these outreach efforts. The following vignette provides an example of such work in action.



Designing Engagement to Meet the Specific Needs of Specific Families

Hurricane Maria was a catastrophic hurricane that caused over 2,200 K–12 students to seek shelter in Osceola County, Florida, in November 2017. The superintendent gathered district leaders to clearly convey the message that these students were not “displaced students,” they are *our students*, and the district and community would work together to ensure their acclimation and success during this time of transition.

The Multicultural Education Department was composed of highly skilled, dedicated, and caring individuals with a passion and purpose for serving students. Mrs. Naira Alvira served as the Bilingual Community Liaison and reached out to other departments and community organizations for support. Multiple regional “family gatherings” were scheduled at the high schools where traditional Puerto Rican food (such as arroz con gandules, pernil, y flan) was served. At the same time, students and staff played salsa music as well as “La Borinqueña,” known as the Puerto Rican national anthem, to welcome and honor the heritage of the new families. All displaced families and their hosts in Florida were invited to participate in the experience, which included booths offering various community resources, free uniforms and clothing, meal vouchers, free haircuts, and classes for families.

Although all the resources were valuable, the family classes were vital. These classes provided families with the opportunity to learn about their rights and responsibilities regarding their children’s education. For example, they were provided with the name and contact information of the specific school-based English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Education Specialist, who would provide translation services, serve as an advocate for their child, and act as a liaison between the family and the school. Understanding the attendance policy was also key. Many came from Puerto Rico, where many schools did not have substitute teachers. This meant that when the teacher was absent, there was no school. In contrast, the United States has a policy of mandatory attendance for students, and schools provide substitute teachers to ensure that education is not disrupted.

To emphasize that the school intended to meet the context-specific needs of the families in this community, the family gatherings were conducted in

Spanish. After a warm welcome, families had the opportunity to choose which booths to visit and which classes to attend. Topics included the importance of attendance, academic support, ESOL accommodations for learning, who to ask for what, and the hidden norms of the school system. Families were invited to engage in dialogue, not only with district staff but also with one another. They laughed and cried together. Together, they brought the room to life. ●

The following suggested actions are offered as a guide for creating a context-specific engagement plan in your school or district.

ACTION STEPS



For Developing a Context-Specific Engagement Plan

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- Provide faculty and staff with cultural competency training that highlights diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and challenges to foster mutual respect.
- Provide faculty and staff with resources, support, and cultural competency training that highlights the particular needs of students living below the poverty line.
- Promote relationship building through home visits and open communication where families can share their perspectives.
- Challenge faculty and staff to engage in self-reflection and set an expectation of asset-based thinking.
- Provide support systems for families by connecting them to social services, English language classes, and needed school supplies.
- Celebrate diversity through cultural events and curricular materials that reflect the cultural history and practice of your context-specific student population.
- Commit to building trust over time and showing genuine care. This is vital to authentically engaging families. ●

ACTIVITY

Develop a Context-Specific Engagement Plan for Your School

Please consider the steps and actions offered in the Action Plan below. Take a moment to reflect on how these steps can be applied to your school community. Use the column on the right to jot down your ideas on how you might tailor these steps in your school or district.

CONDUCT CULTURAL COMPETENCY TRAINING		
Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Partner with organizations or experts specializing in cultural awareness and equity in education to deliver professional learning workshops.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include interactive activities, such as role-playing and case studies, to help faculty and staff understand diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences.	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schedule regular follow-ups and reflection sessions to reinforce learning and address new challenges.	

PROMOTE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING		
Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Organize Home Visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make home visits a team effort, ensuring educators are paired with translators if needed, to connect meaningfully with families in their own spaces. 	
Implement Open Communication Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement open communication systems such as multilingual newsletters, family forums, and real-time messaging platforms to encourage dialogue and feedback. 	
Create Listening Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create Listening Sessions where families can share their experiences and perspectives directly with educators and provide translators as needed. 	

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**ENCOURAGE SELF-REFLECTION AND
ASSET-BASED THINKING**

Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Embed Self-Reflection Activities in Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include self-reflection activities during faculty meetings or professional learning communities, such as journaling or group discussions on implicit biases and assumptions.	
Promote Asset-Based Mindsets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote an asset-based mindset by showcasing success stories of students and families who have overcome challenges, emphasizing their strengths and contributions.	

PROVIDE RESOURCES AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING		
Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Ongoing Professional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer ongoing professional learning opportunities focused on addressing poverty, trauma, and the needs of multilingual or immigrant students. 	
Create a Resource Hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a resource hub for faculty and staff, including toolkits, articles, and access to community organizations supporting diverse student populations. 	

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**ESTABLISH SUPPORT SYSTEMS
FOR FAMILIES**

Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Connect Families to Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Identify and connect families to local social services for housing, healthcare, and employment assistance.	
Partner with Organizations within and Outside of Your System	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Partner with community centers or the district's multilingual services department to offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for families, boosting their confidence in engaging with the school.	
Provide Access to Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ensure families have access to essential school supplies through partnerships with local businesses or charitable organizations.	

CELEBRATE DIVERSITY		
Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Host Cultural Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host annual or quarterly cultural events where families can showcase their traditions through food, music, and storytelling. 	
Mirror Student Diversity in the Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate books, materials, and activities into the curriculum that reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of your student population. 	
Establish an Inclusion Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an Inclusion Council to plan and oversee inclusive initiatives throughout the school year. 	

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BUILD TRUST OVER TIME		
Step	Actions	Identify next steps to support these actions in the context of your school or system
Create Expectations for a Compassionate Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Train educators to adopt a compassionate and patient approach when working with families who may initially be hesitant to engage.	
Develop a Family Ambassador Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop a Family Ambassador Program powered by engaged families who mentor others to foster a welcoming and trusting school environment.	
Celebrate Milestones and Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create regular opportunities for celebrating milestones and progress, such as quarterly awards, family nights, and student showcases.	

Gauging the capacity of your team and available resources is important. Foster a sense of shared ownership by involving families, students, and educators in the planning and implementation of the plan. A solid foundation is more important

than speed, so you may choose to begin with small, manageable initiatives and scale up as you build trust and confidence among the families and educators. Tracking progress through surveys, parent-teacher conferences, as well as academic and behavioral metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan is key to holding all key players accountable and elevating the impact of the work. Moving toward family empowerment requires systemic commitment on the part of the school administration, school personnel, and the larger school community. To begin this systemic change, consider the steps outlined in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Four Steps to Systemic Family and Community Engagement

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Step 1: Start With a Plan	Create a Plan of Action for . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Service-focused offices that provide information or orient families• Parent-teacher conferences• Informational meetings: Open House, etc.• Cultural activities and other celebrations• Community service projects• Identifying community allies: government, professionals, faith-based, business, first responders, etc.• Enhancing extracurricular activities• Establishing homework and academic assistance• Gaining knowledge about district services• Surveying community services and information• Eliciting, establishing, and assigning responsibilities
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Step 2: Build Capacity so That School Staff Can Better Serve Families	Build capacity for teachers, guidance counselors, and support personnel on best practices, resources, and strategies for serving families with special needs and situations that affect the student. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify district offices to partner on engagement goals• Establish teams to serve families and the community• Equip office personnel to provide service and information• Identify goals and objectives (mission and vision) as a team• Provide personnel with training and access to information• Create a calendar to collaborate with pertinent contributors• Train personnel answering phones so that they are knowledgeable and know how to assist families in accessing credible sources
Step 3: Set up a Systemic Structure for Continued Improvement	Establish a communication process for all involved parties: community, families, students, and school staff. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assign someone to keep the school website updated• Provide information on the website in students' languages• Provide easy access to teachers' emails (within two clicks on the school website)• Provide a weekly update regarding school events in a variety of formats (text, voice, app, website, fliers) covering essential announcements as well as school activities such as cultural, academic, extracurricular, and district events• Assign teams to reach out to families. Clarify when and how they should communicate, such as phone calls, emails, letters, etc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and share a calendar of activities with families • Use social media strategically • Create systemic changes by analyzing data from ongoing communications, such as the best ways of reaching families and topics of greatest concern • Discuss ongoing topics and issues within the leadership team to reach solutions and continued improvement
Step 4: Know Who We Serve: Community Mapping	<p>Encourage families to join community groups that address education as representatives or liaisons for the school, such as city councils and other government agencies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify businesses, local organizations, government entities, school district offices, and community residents • Establish two-way discussions with community residents to establish topics of concern or interest • Conduct a survey to determine the most effective meeting setting (online, face-to-face, or a combination of both)

Source: Adapted from Figure 3.1 in Collado (2025).

Strategy 1: Self-Analysis Questions to Plan Your Actions



Strategy 1 sets the tone for a schoolwide self-analysis to clearly establish, with real data, how family and communities are partnering with the school. Consider the following self-reflection questions. What other questions should you ask to ensure that you are obtaining data specific to your school?

1. Does your school have a family and community engagement team to set goals, analyze family engagement needs, and establish appropriate goals and objectives?

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2. What is in place to learn about the cultural representations of the community, such as the languages, traditions, and history of the school or community?
3. What training and capacity building are in place in your school to move families from involvement to engagement to empowerment?
4. What systemic changes can you make in your school to make families feel more invited to participate?
5. What barriers to engagement do families face in your school? What systemic changes can you make to remove those barriers?
6. What support structures can you put in place to allow faculty and staff to engage in self-analysis regarding their role in family empowerment? ●

When families, communities, and schools continually exchange information, students benefit because, together, all the institutions in their lives have established sustainable relationships and are able to intervene within their sphere (school) or in interactions with other spheres, such as family and community. Consider Strategy 2, which involves establishing collaborations to achieve the goal of schools and families working together within their respective spheres to benefit students.



Strategy 2: Establish Collaborative Goal Setting and Family Participation in Decision Making ●

We connect with families so that, together, schools united with families can work to care for the whole child, from academic progress to social-emotional well-being. To fulfill this goal, it is critical for staff to create opportunities for families to be an active part of the process, including decision making. Identify families' strengths so you know who to tap for various roles. Find ways to collaborate with families—the more interactive the experiences are, the better. Learn how to engage families in respectful, culturally appropriate ways. Meeting families is essential to building a lasting partnership.

The establishment of a family and community partnership is a tide that raises all boats. Students feel more supported and feel more accountable academically and socioemotionally when they know that their families and the school are working collaboratively toward the same goals. Educators and staff become more aware of being service-oriented organizations, and families have a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities (Collado, 2008). According to Joyce Epstein and Steven Sheldon (2023), there are three spheres of influence in a child's life: family, school, and community. Schools that harness the potential of each sphere know how to integrate them and create a supportive structure of collaboration between families, school, and the community by strategically overlapping the spheres of influence (Epstein & Sheldon, 2023).

The Flamboyant Foundation has created a repository of resources on family empowerment. The repository provides tools to ensure that families are engaged and empowered in the academic process. The three stages of the process are as follows: a) attendance, b) content and delivery, and c) consistent, two-way communication. Each stage includes reflection questions and actions. We encourage you to explore these resources online at flamboyantfoundation.org (Flamboyant Foundation, 2023). For families to participate effectively in school community decision making, they must be well informed.



Build Family Bonds With Frequent and Consistent Communication

When James S. Rickards Middle School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, underwent a significant boundary redesign, incorporating a new section of the community into the school family for the first time, Principal Washington Collado recognized the need to take action to ensure that the new families felt welcome and more at ease in their new school. To help families adjust—the new and the old families—staff collaborated to produce the “Rickards Weekly Update,” delivered in multiple languages and

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various formats, including text, email, the district app, and voice. Rickards teamed up with the feeder school to provide families with the necessary information to ensure their students' success. The community began to rely on these friendly messages to maintain a sense of "knowing what is going on at the school." Because Principal Collado recorded the news himself, the community became familiar with his voice. It increased their level of trust in the administration, as well as in the knowledge that the school had implemented a plan to keep them well informed. Educators utilized the "Rickards Weekly Update" to highlight important dates and report cards, schedule family conferences, provide reminders for topic-based monthly meetings, share safety information, celebrate weekly accomplishments, make announcements about upcoming events, and convey critical information. ●

Inviting families to celebrate students' academic accomplishments (honor roll, most improved, character traits, and special awards) puts the school in a positive light and sets the tone for future conversations. If you put out weekly updates, make a point of sharing celebratory notes and accomplishments. Celebrate the accomplishments of teachers, groups, or individual students. Share news about the school community so that families can feel like participants in what happens at school. The relationships formed through consistent communication foster trust and create a setting for more positive and fruitful future interactions. Look beyond your school. Share celebrations, such as school events, awards won, sports team achievements, and teacher awards, with community leaders, businesspeople, civic and local organizations, and elected officials. Let families and the local community see your school succeeding. This lays the groundwork for inviting families and community members to participate in collaborative decision making at school.

ACTION STEPS



For Developing a Goal-Setting Plan to Empower Family Feedback on School Improvement Plans

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Phase 1: Establish a Collaborative Foundation

- Organize listening sessions with families to acknowledge past experiences and barriers to engagement.
- Provide family orientation programs to introduce the School Improvement Plan process and highlight its impact on student learning.
- Facilitate trust-building activities to create an inclusive space for dialogue and shared understanding.

Phase 2: Codesign Engagement Opportunities

- Create family advisory groups to participate in the development of initiatives within the School Improvement Plan.
- Create community input forums for families to express concerns, recommendations, and ideas for school improvement.
- Ensure family participation in curriculum discussions and goal-setting meetings to align their perspectives with educational priorities.

Phase 3: Strengthening Reciprocal Relationships

- Implement two-way communication channels such as digital surveys, focus groups, and structured feedback sessions.
- Schedule regular check-ins between educators and families to track progress on agreed-upon goals.
- Recognize and incorporate families' unique experiences and cultural knowledge into school improvement strategies.

Phase 4: Empowering Families Through Leadership Roles

- Provide leadership training for families to equip them with tools to participate in governance structures effectively.

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- Encourage families to take leadership roles in School Advisory Committees and Multilingual Family Councils to contribute to school policies.
- Develop peer mentorship programs where experienced family leaders guide new participants in school decision making.

Phase 5: Allocate Resources to Support Collaboration

- Designate Family Liaisons to facilitate connections between families and school leadership.
- Establish accessible platforms for ongoing engagement, ensuring resources and updates are available in multiple languages.
- Secure funding for family engagement initiatives to ensure sustainable support structures.

Phase 6: Leverage Technology for Continuous Participation

- Utilize Canvas or similar platforms to host engagement modules and provide on-demand learning opportunities for families.
- Integrate interactive feedback tools such as virtual question and answer sessions and polling to enhance accessibility.
- Ensuring strong family–teacher relationships complements the use of technology to foster trust and inclusivity.

Phase 7: Measure Progress and Maintain Accountability

- Conduct annual evaluations to assess family feedback and engagement impact on school improvement.
- Review key performance indicators to measure effectiveness, such as participation rates and family-reported satisfaction.
- Adjust strategies based on ongoing reflection and feedback, ensuring adaptability to meet evolving family needs. ●

Strategy 2: Self-Analysis Questions to Plan Your Actions



1. List ways families are involved in the decision-making process at your school.
2. What school or district events are organized in collaboration with families?
3. How can you increase and improve the participation of families in your school and district?
4. What capacities does your school need from teachers, staff, and families to improve the quality of family partnerships?
5. What steps will your family and community engagement team take to reach out to families to learn how best to achieve this goal? ●

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

Effective family engagement must be intentional, culturally responsive, and context specific. This chapter calls on educators to take ownership for learning about the cultural and socioeconomic realities of the families they serve to build authentic, collaborative partnerships. Recognizing that many families—especially those from low-income or immigrant backgrounds—may face structural or emotional barriers to engaging with schools, this chapter underscores the importance of meeting families where they are. Schools must create welcoming and empowering experiences, building trust through consistent and meaningful engagement and communication. The success stories illustrate how shifting mindsets, honoring family histories, and leveraging community resources can lead to improved academic achievement and enhanced social-emotional well-being for students. Schools that prioritize inclusive, equity-driven family engagement strategies set the foundation for collective student success and encourage family participation and leadership.

- **Context-Specific Plans Matter:** Schools must design engagement plans rooted in the specific cultural, economic, and social realities of their communities.

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- **Empathy Shifts Mindsets:** Educator training and direct engagement, such as home visits, help shift staff perceptions from judgment to understanding.
- **Family Leadership Is Powerful:** Schools should create leadership opportunities for families to advocate, guide, and contribute meaningfully to the school community.
- **Celebration Builds Connection:** Events that publicly recognize student and family success reinforce a shared culture of achievement and respect.
- **Systemic Structures Sustain Change:** Lasting family engagement requires institutional commitment, training, communication systems, and ongoing evaluation.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. How can you enhance your school's mission statement to better reflect a commitment to family empowerment?
2. What specific leadership opportunities can we create for families to influence school decision making?
3. What structural or procedural changes do we need at the district or school level to ensure family engagement is a sustained, systemic practice?