Family engagement as a long-term strategy for continued COVID recovery

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been tremendously challenging for students and families. Following disruptions in critical social, health, and support services, families faced immense material hardships and emotional distress. These hardships were often more acute for students of color, who were more likely than their non-Hispanic and White peers to experience the death of a parent or a caregiver. The pandemic also had the effect of widening already large inequalities in student achievement.

While states and districts have spent emergency federal funding to help students recover from the pandemic, student outcomes and well-being remain worse off than prior to the pandemic and inequalities persist, making it imperative that districts continue recovery efforts. Cultivating and supporting family engagement is one way this can happen.

Family engagement is a collaborative endeavor between schools, families, and communities that enhances educational opportunities for all students within and beyond school settings. This approach to partnership benefits families, schools, and communities collectively and aims to transform educational systems and communities to foster educational opportunity for all, rather than centering individual schools as the sole focus or entity of importance. Education leaders address systemic barriers that disconnect schools from communities, steering clear of deficit-based views that attribute school-family disconnects to individual attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. Families are equal partners with educators, valued for their strengths, assets, and leadership potential. Table 1 summarizes these key components of family engagement in relation to a narrower, more traditional perspective of parental involvement common to public opinion.

Table 1. What do we mean by family engagement?

	Family engagement IS…	Family engagement IS NOT…
Who benefits?	Collectively benefits district/school leaders, teachers, families, community members, and children Transforms educational systems and communities to create educational opportunities for all	Prioritizes school-centric goals over those of families and the community Only benefits families and students participating in activities
For what purpose?	Benefits students' social, emotional, and academic development both inside and outside of schools, and from childhood through adulthood	Solely focused on student academic performance and test scores Limited to academic or behavioral problems of students when at school
What is the expected role of families?	Families are equal partners with educators and valued for their assets, strengths, and leadership potential	Families are passive participants in school-centric activities and should defer to educator priorities and expertise
How often should schools communicate with families?	Involves regular, frequent, and ongoing communication with families	Involves infrequent school-centric activities or communication to families
What factors shape family engagement?	Shaped by institutional policies and systemic barriers that can make it challenging for families to access schools and that district/schools need to target for change	Shaped by the individual attitudes, preferences and behaviors of teachers and family members Depends on interpersonal preferences and relationships between teachers and parents

Source: Ishimaru, A. M. (2017). From family engagement to equitable collaboration. *Educational Policy*, *33*(2), 350-385. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817691841; Pineau, M.G. et al. (2019). Mapping the gaps between expert, public, practitioner, and policymaker understandings of family, school, and community engagement. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2020/06/FRAJ6996-NAFSCE-Map-the-Gaps-190704.pdf

Family engagement can improve [early literacy](#) and [math achievement](#), [socioemotional skills of young learners](#), and is associated with a greater likelihood of students [graduating high school](#) and [attending college.](#) Indeed, students do far better in school and life when families are an integral part of their educational journey.

This brief highlights how districts can leverage family engagement as a vital strategy for continued COVID recovery. We first review existing research on family engagement in a post-COVID context, highlighting critical gaps in our understanding of why families have not participated in academic supports available to them. We then identify key barriers to family engagement that districts should explore in their local context when initiating partnerships with families. We conclude with recommended strategies for districts to more effectively communicate with families about their children's academic progress to increase family uptake and participation in COVID recovery programs.

What do recent surveys suggest about families' experiences with school-based COVID recovery efforts?

On the surface, surveys about families' participation in school-based recovery programs such as tutoring and summer school can paint an alarming picture of limited parental interest. In spring 2022, researchers at the University of Southern California analyzed data from 1,483 households in the Understanding America Survey to assess parental interest in COVID recovery programs for children. They found [low levels of interest](#), with only 23% of surveyed parents interested in summer school and 28% in tutoring. Interest was notably higher among Black and Latinx parents than White parents, suggesting that families most affected by the pandemic were more willing to participate in recovery efforts.

While these results are concerning, they offer little insight on how districts and schools are recruiting families to participate in recovery programs. More critically, the survey likely [underestimates actual family interest](#), since it only asks whether respondents participated or would participate in recovery programs and does not inquire about barriers such as scheduling conflicts, transportation issues, and job demands that restrict participation.

In contrast, a recent survey by [EdTrust](#) offers more insights on how school communication can shape family participation in school-based COVID recovery efforts. In the spring and fall of 2023, EdTrust sponsored two nationally representative surveys of early elementary grade parents and teachers and received responses from 600 parents and 300 teachers for each survey. In contrast to the Understanding America Survey, the EdTrust survey goes beyond asking about general interest in school-centric activities to inquiring about specific interactions between schools and families and surrounding contextual factors.

The EdTrust survey demonstrates that family engagement opportunities for young learners post-COVID continue to be school-centric, one-off events that are not closely tied to students' social, emotional, and academic development. Moreover, most surveyed families did not report receiving information on their child's academic progress to motivate participation in COVID recovery programs. Less than half of surveyed parents and teachers reported that schools provided families with information about whether students were meeting grade-level academic expectations. Moreover, only 41% of surveyed parents received information on additional academic support such as tutoring to keep their child's learning on track. Teachers reported limited time in the day to communicate with families, and a large majority expressed a desire for professional development to build their communication skills.

While families are not participating in COVID recovery programs to the extent desired by policymakers and researchers for students to recover academically, it is not simply because they are not interested. Rather, there are critical steps that schools can take to increase families' awareness of and participation in COVID recovery programs. This starts with understanding and addressing systemic barriers that shape family engagement.

What are barriers to family engagement that districts and schools should inquire about in their school systems?

Local efforts to engage families should start with an assessment of family needs. Below, we outline some of the common barriers that affect family engagement with schools. Because there is no one-size-fits-all solution, districts should investigate these barriers in their local context and respond with tailored solutions.

Families face **practical and logistical barriers** such as limited English proficiency, lack of transportation, childcare challenges, and conflicting work schedules that make it difficult to take advantage of school-based activities or supports. In accounting for these challenges, districts can foster more inclusive family engagement opportunities. For instance, following the pandemic, families have continued to request virtual teacher meetings for their scheduling flexibility.

Negative school experiences, whether from parents' own schooling or their children's, can impede family engagement. School size, alongside staff attitudes, communication, and behaviors, can shape families' perceptions of safety, respect, and whether schools value their input on their child's education. Districts should assess families' perceptions of school climate and provide staff with training to foster a welcoming environment for families from all backgrounds.

Families seek authentic opportunities to shape school decision-making when it concerns their child's education and well-being. **Superficial involvement or exclusion from decision-making processes** can lead families to have negative experiences that hinder engagement. According to the recent EdTrust survey, parents feel that schools encourage participation in broader planning and leadership roles, but few report being asked for input on classroom or school-wide decisions that affect their child's education. This gap underscores the need for districts to foster intentional opportunities for collaboration between schools and families.

Structural factors beyond school walls can shape families' experiences at school. For example, a recent 2017 study highlights "system avoidance," where fathers who have been incarcerated fear stigmatization by staff and avoid institutions like schools. As a result, fathers who are involved in home-based schooling tend to participate less in school-based activities. This finding underscores how school climate varies across family groups and how societal structures intersect with school experiences.

How can districts communicate more effectively with families about students' academic progress?

School communication significantly impacts the ability of families to engage with their child's education. As noted earlier in this brief, providing families with clear and actionable information on their child's academic progress is a critical step toward getting students the academic support they may need. In this section, we focus on the prevalent post-COVID problem of grade-inflation and offer districts strategies to provide families with more accurate and frequent information on their child's academic performance.

During the pandemic, many school districts adopted a "do no harm" grading approach to address unequal circumstances for students. This included pass-fail grading or freezing grades prior to transitions to online learning. However, as in-person instruction resumed, a disconnect emerged between student letter grades—which families view as a primary indicator of performance—and other measures like standardized test scores. This disconnect could explain, in part, why families underestimate the value of post-COVID academic supports that test scores indicate are necessary.

One study from Washington state highlights notable disparities, such as students receiving high grades ("A" and "B") despite test results indicating they are not meeting grade-level expectations. Analysis from North Carolina shows a similar downward shift in student performance from 2019 to 2022 as measured via test

scores that is not reflected with a commensurate shift in student grades. A nationwide study of [math and high school GPAs and ACT test scores](#) further suggests that grade inflation could be misleading families on student readiness for post-secondary entry.

To communicate academic performance to families, districts should prioritize **timely, frequent updates** beyond structured opportunities like parent-teacher conferences and using information other than report cards. [Families desire regular communication](#), with some studies suggesting weekly updates as an ideal cadence. [Districts can leverage technology such as text messaging to provide families frequent notifications](#) about attendance, missed assignments, and other timely performance-related data rather than solely relying on infrequent interim or summative test scores.

Moreover, **actionable information is crucial**. As noted in the [EdTrust survey](#), families want schools to share clear assessments of whether students are on track for their grade and concrete plans to support them if they are not. Research on assessment-driven communication with students further highlights the importance of actionability. [A recent 2024 study](#) found that providing feedback to ninth-grade students based on formative assessments can significantly improve test performance on end-of-grade assessments.

Educators should be **thoughtful in how they frame and communicate assessment data** to families. This includes [explaining assessments and what they measure and moving beyond numbers and data](#) toward focusing on what the results mean for each student and their learning. Where possible, educators should situate assessment scores with other data to provide a complete picture of student performance and use data to highlight student strengths and progress alongside areas of improvement. In the context of COVID recovery and the public's growing concern with student progress in grade-level learning, educators should [orient conversations on assessment data around grade-level standards and expectations](#). Communication that is [friendly, welcoming, and invites further dialogue](#) can continue to keep families engaged.

Conclusion

Family engagement is a powerful but often underused strategy in education policy. To foster meaningful collaboration, districts and communities must prioritize building strong relationships that empower families to drive change. This begins with identifying systemic barriers to engagement and creating genuine opportunities for families to shape school decisions. To encourage family participation in COVID recovery programs, districts should improve communication with families about student academic progress in relation to grade-level expectations.

While family engagement is essential to mitigating pandemic-related learning challenges, its impact extends far beyond test scores—when done right, family engagement can strengthen educational systems and communities for the benefit of students, educators, and education leaders alike. Rather than narrowly focusing on rebounding academic outcomes, districts should aim to build resilient schools and communities through inclusive engagement. Though challenges remain, understanding the full potential and benefits of family engagement can set districts on the right path forward.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Ayesha K. Hashim draws on interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research designs to study the impacts of district-level school policies on student learning, as well as the leadership, organizational, and implementation conditions that can explain observed results. Her research covers a range of topics including the integration of technology with standards-based instruction, school choice and accountability, teacher professional development, and COVID recovery. Ayesha's work has been published in *Education Finance and Policy, Economics of Education Review*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Computers and Education*, the *American Journal of Education*, and the *Peabody Journal of Education*. Prior to joining NWEA®, Ayesha was an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She completed her PhD in education policy, MA in economics, and master's in public policy at the University of Southern California.

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