

## The Importance of Positive Relationships

Positive relationships between parents and teachers are essential to support students' academic progress and social-emotional wellbeing. Parents are their children's "first teachers" and support learning by their interactions with children at home and their engagement with school.<sup>1</sup> Family engagement begins at birth and continues through Grades K-12 as parents provide evolving support for their children's learning across developmental phases.<sup>2</sup> The learning supports parents provide in the home combine with classroom instruction to drive children's learning gains.<sup>3</sup> Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's development, and positive school-family partnerships can enhance the supports parents already provide for learning.<sup>4</sup> Effective family engagement empowers parents and teachers to collaboratively support student achievement and address any learning obstacles identified by parents or teachers.<sup>5</sup>

A substantial body of literature finds that students' social-emotional and academic outcomes improve when relationships between parents and teachers are positive and that interactions between parents and teachers can support students.<sup>6</sup> Based on this literature, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identify parent engagement as "a promising protective factor" for students.<sup>7</sup> The chart below shows the benefits of family engagement identified by the CDC based on a review of previous empirical research.<sup>8</sup> The American Psychological Association (APA) concludes that "parent engagement in schools can promote positive education and health behaviors among children and adolescents," leading to improvements in long-term health and educational outcomes such as school attendance, course grades, and test scores.<sup>9</sup>

### Benefits of Family Engagement in Schools

<p>Students who have parents engaged in their school lives are <i>more</i> likely to have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Higher grades and test scores</li> <li>▪ Better behavior</li> <li>▪ Enhanced social skills</li> </ul>	<p>Students who have parents engaged in their school lives are <i>less</i> likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Smoke cigarettes</li> <li>▪ Drink alcohol</li> <li>▪ Become pregnant</li> <li>▪ Be physically inactive</li> </ul>
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Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>10</sup>

In addition to benefits for individual students, positive relationships among teachers and families contribute to a positive overall school climate and strong academic achievement at the classroom and school levels.<sup>11</sup> The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) identifies family engagement as an essential element of strategies to improve school climate and school achievement.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) identifies family engagement as a key school improvement strategy, citing research conducted at public schools in Chicago that finds a correlation between family engagement and overall school achievement.<sup>13</sup>

Positive parent-teacher relationships are particularly important for the 2020-2021 school year, as parents play an expanded role in supporting their children's learning at home.<sup>14</sup> Building effective relationships with families enables teachers to leverage families' knowledge of and support for their children's learning to improve academic outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Family engagement is a shared responsibility in which both teachers and family members play a role in supporting students' development.<sup>16</sup>

## Teacher Strategies to Engage Families

Teachers should proactively reach out to families to communicate students' progress in school. Research finds that teachers' proactive communication with parents and students about learning increases student engagement as measured by homework completion and class behavior.<sup>17</sup> The checklist below presents family engagement practices of exemplary teachers identified in Massachusetts' teacher evaluation rubric and identified in the secondary literature as a particularly effective example of teacher proficiency standards for family engagement.<sup>18</sup>

### Family Engagement Practices of Exemplary Teachers

✓	Engages all families using a variety of culturally responsive practices and communication strategies that result in increased and/or more meaningful participation in the classroom and/or school community. Models this practice for others.
✓	Successfully communicates to families, student learning and behavior expectations and their purposes, such that they can be readily reinforced at home. Models this practice for others.
✓	Regularly updates families on curriculum throughout the year and prompts most families to use one or more suggested strategies for supporting learning at school and home. Consistently seeks out feedback and evidence of impact. Models this practice for others.
✓	Regularly uses a two-way system that supports frequent, proactive, and personalized communication with families about student learning and performance, while demonstrating understanding of and appreciation for different families' home language, culture, and values. Models this practice for others.

Source: Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation<sup>19</sup>

Karen L. Mapp, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the developer of the Institute for Educational Leadership's [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#), recommends that teachers begin the process of improving their family engagement strategies by reflecting on their beliefs about families.<sup>20</sup>

### Guiding Questions for Teacher Self-Reflection on Family Engagement

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**Do you believe all families have hopes and dreams for their children?**

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**Do you believe families can be your partners?**

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**Should you play a key role in starting those partnerships?**

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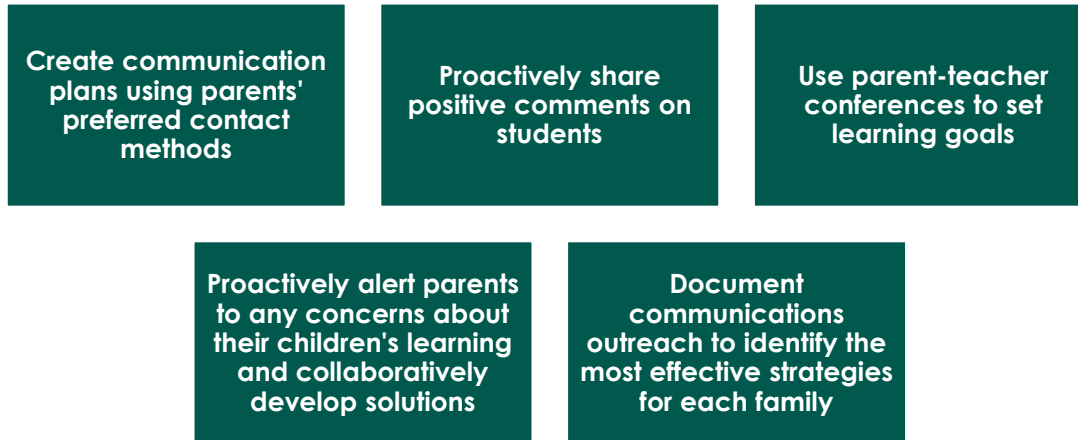
Source: *Educational Leadership*<sup>21</sup>

Parent engagement is most effective when teachers collaborate with parents as partners who respond to parent needs and concerns rather than simply asking for parent support on projects or activities.<sup>22</sup> Effective engagement takes a developmental approach to leverage families' existing skills and abilities in support of learning.<sup>23</sup>

## Two-Way Communication

Teachers can encourage collaboration through a two-way communications system in which teachers regularly solicit feedback and input from families in addition to providing information to families.<sup>24</sup> Over time, engaging in two-way communication builds trust and enables parents and teachers to participate in a collaborative dialogue about students' needs.<sup>25</sup> Two-way communication is particularly effective in improving the equity of family engagement.<sup>26</sup> Teachers can promote two-way communication using the strategies listed below.

### Strategies to Facilitate Two-Way Communication



Source: Waterford.org<sup>27</sup>

Teachers can begin improving communication outreach by reflecting on their current use of two-way communication. The checklist below presents standards for exemplary two-way communication included in Boston Public Schools' teacher evaluation system.

### Characteristics of Exemplary Two-Way Communication

✓	Teacher consistently engages in dialogue with families to exchange relevant information about students and positively impact student behavior, performance, and growth.
✓	Teacher documentation of communication with students' families provides evidence that communication is proactive, responsive, equitable, and focused on specific student outcomes.
✓	Teacher uses a wide range of communication methods that serve the needs of families, and adapts communication strategies for individual families, such as in-person communication, personal phone calls, email, and text message.
✓	Teacher regularly responds to families within 24 hours.

Source: Boston Public Schools<sup>28</sup>

Teachers facilitate two-way communication through phone calls and during parent-teacher conferences. Teachers can also promote two-way communication through technology tools such as:<sup>29</sup>

- Learning management platforms,
- Instant messaging platforms,
- Phone conferencing,
- Social media,
- Polling software,
- Feedback forms on school websites,
- Web forums, and
- Video conferences.

## Parent Strategies to Foster Positive Relationships

Parents share responsibility with teachers for fostering positive relationships and supporting constructive engagement.<sup>30</sup> By engaging with the school and teachers positively and in a supportive manner, parents reinforce students' social-emotional skills and the importance of learning.<sup>31</sup> The Early Learning Network at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln identifies three core elements of family engagement with teachers, summarized in the figure below.

### Core Elements of Parent-Teacher Partnerships

#### Communication

- Frequent, two-way communication is important to stay apprised of what is happening at school, and to let teachers know important things about your child

#### Consistency

- Creating routines and providing consistent opportunities to enhance your child's learning at home reinforces the notion that you and the teacher are working together to support them

#### Collaboration

- A collaborative, cooperative partnership involves planning and problem-solving to develop specific, positive strategies to help children achieve to their highest potential

Source: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Early Learning Network<sup>32</sup>

Although positive parent-teacher relationships support students, interactions can sometimes be difficult or lead to conflict. Parents should refrain from providing suggestions or feedback to teachers during lessons, as teachers need to address the needs of all students in their class, and may make instructional decisions for reasons that are not visible to parents.<sup>33</sup> A 2017 column in *The Washington Post*, written by a classroom teacher, recommends that parents use the strategies below to engage with teachers and ensure that any disagreements are resolved appropriately.

### Strategies to Support Positive Engagement with Teachers Around Classroom Challenges

Reach out before concerns arise by participating in parent conferences and volunteering.

Acknowledge teachers' efforts and positive influences.

Consider whether classroom issues are serious problems or simply differences in style or preferences. Focus on serious issues rather than minor concerns or irritations.

Approach the teacher with any concerns or problems before approaching administrators, and avoid discussing concerns with other parents.

Frame concerns as questions rather than demands or objections, and give teachers time to respond to any concerns.

Respect formal school and classroom policies.

Source: *The Washington Post*<sup>34</sup>

Parents can address issues constructively by taking a problem-solving approach when challenges arise.<sup>35</sup> Below, Hanover Research presents a checklist for problem-solving developed by the Government of Australia.

## Problem-Solving Checklist for Parents and Teachers

✓	<b>Identify the problem</b> Be clear and specific about what the problem is – for example, what's happening, how often, who's involved, and who's affected. It can help to use a question.
✓	<b>Identify wants, needs, and concerns</b> Allow everyone to identify their needs, wants, and concerns.
✓	<b>Come up with possible solutions</b> Work with the teacher to come up with as many possible solutions to the problem as you can. Your child's teacher has a lot of experience dealing with problems. The teacher also has strategies that have worked in the past. It's very important not to judge ideas at this point. This increases the chances of finding the right solution to your problem.
✓	<b>Evaluate the solutions</b> Once you and the teacher have listed as many ideas as possible, think about the advantages, disadvantages and consequences of each solution. If a solution has more disadvantages or negative consequences than advantages, cross it off your list. Keep doing this until only useful and possible solutions remain.
✓	<b>Choose one and give it a try</b> Pick the best idea, or a combination of ideas, to try out. Write down what you and the teacher have agreed on, who will do what, and when. Decide when you'll meet again to look at how the solution is working. Give the solution 1-2 weeks to work before you talk about it again.
✓	<b>Assess how it went</b> Consider everyone's opinions and acknowledge everyone's efforts when you look at how well the solution has worked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What has worked well?</li> <li>What hasn't worked as well?</li> <li>What could we do differently to help the solution work better?</li> </ul>

Source: Raising Children Network<sup>36</sup>

## Parent Strategies to Support Students in Online Learning

Parents face particular challenges supporting their children during the transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, especially in the elementary grades, need help using technology to access synchronous or asynchronous virtual instruction.<sup>37</sup> Parents also need to provide students with structure and social-emotional supports while children are at home for extended periods.<sup>38</sup>

Parents supporting their children in online learning should provide technical support but limit academic support to enable students to develop independence. Parents can help students practice using technology resources before school to access these resources independently during instruction.<sup>39</sup> The figure below presents recommendations for parents to support students during online learning developed by the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (MVLRI), a state-funded initiative to support online learning in Michigan.

### Recommendations for Parents to Support Students in Online Learning

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**Set up a study space, including the technology required, and be prepared to resolve technical issues that may come up.**

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**Follow the school day and have your child commit to dedicated work time.**

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**Help your child establish and maintain a regular schedule for working on their virtual course daily.**

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**On the first day, help your child log in, see what the rules in the class are, open tabs, access the discussion board, and submit assignments—these are things they may not have done before.**

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**Don't wait to see if your child needs assistance—whether it's tutoring or another support service. Help your child contact the teacher if they need more help.**

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**Maintain a policy that you must be able to see the child's screen when he/she is taking a test.**

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**Establish communication guidelines with your child at the start of the course.**

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**Review the course schedule, plan, or syllabus with your child and discuss expectations.**

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**Help your child set goals to stay on pace. Review the course schedule or syllabus, pacing guide, or assignment calendar with your child often to help keep them on track.**

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**Be aware of, and note important course dates.**

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**Reinforce that online courses are just as important as face-to-face courses.**

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**Monitor your child's progress weekly and refer to the pacing guide for the course to ensure they remain on track.**

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**Provide motivation, encouragement, and support—this goes a long way.**

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Source: Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute<sup>40</sup>

Parents can also reach out to teachers to collaborate around supports for students during online learning.<sup>41</sup> Parents possess expertise about their child's strengths and learning needs, while teachers can provide parents with recommendations for support based on their expertise in curriculum and instruction. Combining these areas of expertise results in stronger relationships and outcomes for students.<sup>42</sup> Teachers recommend that parents use the strategies listed on the following page to communicate with teachers to support online learning.

## Recommendations for Parent Outreach During Remote Learning

Proactively establish relationships early in the school year

Share insights about your child's strengths and learning needs

Ask about curriculum, student supports, and any other concerns

Establish common expectations for communication

Create a plan to reach your child's learning goals

Engage with your school's parent teacher association (PTA)

Source: *The New York Times*<sup>43</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Taylor, N. "Am I Really My Child's First Teacher?" National Association for the Education of Young Children. <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/childs-first-teacher>
- <sup>2</sup> "The Family Engagement for High School Success Toolkit: Planning and Implementing an Initiative to Support the Pathway to Graduation for at-Risk Students." Harvard Family Research Project and United Way Worldwide. p. 3. <https://jsri.msu.edu/upload/resources/FEHS.pdf>
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- <sup>6</sup> Kim, E.M. et al. "Congruence within the Parent-Teacher Relationship: Associations with Children's Functioning." Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools, November 2012. p. 3. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=parent+teacher+relationship&ft=on&id=ED537826>
- <sup>7</sup> "Parent Engagement in Schools." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health, November 25, 2019. [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent\\_engagement.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent_engagement.htm)
- <sup>8</sup> "Parent Engagement: For Parents and Families." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health, November 21, 2019. [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/factsheets/parentengagement\\_parents.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/factsheets/parentengagement_parents.htm)
- <sup>9</sup> "Parental-Youth Communication." American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/safe-supportive/parental-engagement>
- <sup>10</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: "Parent Engagement," Op. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> "How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success." Waterford UPSTART. <https://www.waterford.org/education/how-parent-involvement-leads-to-student-success/>
- <sup>12</sup> Montemayor, A. "Family Engagement for School Reform." Intercultural Development Research Association, August 2019. p. 1. <https://www.idraeacsouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Lit-Review-Family-Engagement-for-School-Reform-IDRA.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> Weiss, H.B., M.E. Lopez, and H. Rosenberg. "Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform. National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement." Harvard Family Research Project, 2010. p. 3. [https://sedl.org/connections/engagement\\_forum/beyond\\_random\\_acts.pdf](https://sedl.org/connections/engagement_forum/beyond_random_acts.pdf)  
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- <sup>19</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: "Classroom Teacher Rubric." Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation, August 2018. pp. 10-11. [http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/model/PartIII\\_AppxC.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/model/PartIII_AppxC.pdf)
- <sup>20</sup> Thiers, Op. cit., p. 43.
- <sup>21</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 44.
- <sup>22</sup> Ferlazzo, L. "Involvement or Engagement?" *Educational Leadership*, 68:8, May 2011.
- <sup>23</sup> Thiers, Op. cit., p. 42.
- <sup>24</sup> "How Two-Way Communication Can Boost Parent Engagement." Waterford.org. <https://www.waterford.org/education/two-way-communication-parent-engagement/>
- <sup>25</sup> Graham-Clay, S. "Communicating with Parents: Strategies for Teachers." *School Community Journal*, 15:1, 2005. p. 120.



<sup>26</sup> “Expanding Schools’ Capacity for Effective Two-Way School/Home Communication.” Madison Metropolitan School District, January 23, 2015. p. 3.

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<sup>27</sup> Chart contents adapted from: “How Two-Way Communication Can Boost Parent Engagement,” Op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: “Two-Way Communication.” Boston Public Schools Office of Human Capital. <http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bostonpublicschools.org%2Fsite%2Fdefault.aspx%3FPageID%3D383>

<sup>29</sup> Bulleted text adapted from: “Expanding Schools’ Capacity for Effective Two-Way School/Home Communication,” Op. cit., pp. 9–10.

<sup>30</sup> “The Family Engagement for High School Success Toolkit: Planning and Implementing an Initiative to Support the Pathway to Graduation for at-Risk Students,” Op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Fredericks, L. et al. “Schools, Families, and Social and Emotional Learning: Ideas and Tools for Working with Parents and Families.” Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005. <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/schools-families-and-social-and-emotional-learning.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim with very minor alterations from: Sheridan, Op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Braff, D. “The New Helicopter Parents Are on Zoom.” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/parenting/helicopter-parent-remote-learning.html>

<sup>34</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Bell, B. “Seven Ways to Build an Alliance with Your Child’s Teacher.” *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/11/30/a-teachers-perspective-how-to-build-an-alliance-with-your-childs-teacher/>

<sup>35</sup> “Problem-Solving Strategies for Parents and Teachers.” Raising Children Network. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/working-with-schools-teachers/problem-solving-for-parents-teachers>

<sup>36</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “How Parents Can Support Their K-12 Student in Online Learning.” University of South Florida. <https://www.usf.edu/education/about-us/news/2020/parents-support-k-12-student-online-learning.aspx>

<sup>38</sup> “School’s Out: A Parents’ Guide for Meeting the Challenge During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” NYU Langone Medical Center. <https://nyulangone.org/news/schools-out-parents-guide-meeting-challenge-during-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>39</sup> Braff, Op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: “Parent Guide to Online Learning.” Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute, 2017. [https://michiganvirtual.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/parentguide.pdf#\\_ga=2.44289892.1727705814.1584546002-1459747571.1581971323](https://michiganvirtual.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/parentguide.pdf#_ga=2.44289892.1727705814.1584546002-1459747571.1581971323)

<sup>41</sup> Cusumano, Op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Armas, Op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Cusumano, Op. cit.