

WHAT KINDS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ARE MOST EFFECTIVE?

From participating in the PTA, to talking about college, to helping with homework, family engagement means different things to different people. Though there is widespread consensus that family engagement leads to better student achievement and preparation for life, there is less agreement about the specific practices and strategies that are most effective.

It is essential that schools understand what kinds of family engagement offer the most “bang for the buck.” How should schools and families spend their limited time, energy, and resources to partner with one another? Answering this question is particularly important for schools that are working to engage families who face barriers because of their work schedules, language ability, distance from school, and trust in the school system.

Increasingly, scholars are trying to determine what kinds of family engagement are most important in predicting student achievement. Using a statistical approach called meta-analysis, researchers have combed through hundreds of studies about family engagement and looked across their data to address this issue. Highlights from these findings include:

Helping children understand the importance of education matters most.



Across four major meta-analyses that investigated the impact of different forms of family engagement, the ways that families demonstrate the importance of education was the largest predictor of student achievement. These practices, called academic socialization, encompass families having high expectations for their child, discussing aspirations for the future with their child, fostering child accountability for learning, and talking about the value of education. Reinforcing and promoting these beliefs and practices can be a key family engagement strategy for schools.

Home-based family engagement also helps predict student achievement.



The meta-analyses also demonstrated that a variety of strategies parents use at home matter. Parenting style, supporting child reading, providing supervision, and engaging in home learning activities are all important for supporting a child’s success. An implication from this finding, as well as the important role of academic socialization, is that schools must recognize and foster forms of family engagement that are often “invisible” to them inside a school building but ultimately help support student achievement.

How families participate in school is also important.



More traditional forms of family engagement, including volunteering, attending parent-teacher conferences, attending events, and communicating with school staff are also important in predicting student achievement. Researchers posit that these strategies help families feel comfortable interacting with the school and school staff, as well as help them understand, support, and advocate for their child's education. As part of their strategic planning for family engagement, schools may want to examine the goals of their school-based engagement opportunities and requirements.

There is conflicting evidence about homework help.



Two out of the three meta-analyses that investigated the impact of families helping their children with homework found a negative relationship between this practice and student achievement. The researchers explain that this may be due to: 1) the quality of homework is poor enough that it harms student achievement, 2) families use improper help strategies that interfere with its effectiveness, and/or 3) families may spend more time monitoring if their child is struggling in school. Schools would be wise to look critically at their homework practices and guidance to families about how to support it if they want to make homework help a central part of their family engagement efforts.

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