

Strengthening Family Engagement in Public Education



Executive Summary

This Leadership Conversation examines practical strategies to enhance family engagement, emphasizing the distinct roles and responsibilities of directors, superintendents, trustees, principals, educators, and staff in cultivating meaningful partnerships with families within their communities. This conversation highlights the importance of systemic and strategic approaches to engaging families, drawing on evidence-based practices from districts across Ontario and current research. Central to this discussion is the recognition of shared accountability among staff, families, and school boards in building an educational ecosystem where every student is empowered to succeed.

Introduction

The success of any educational system lies not only in the quality of instruction but also in the strength of the partnership between schools, the School Board, and families. Research consistently underscores the profound impact of active family engagement on students' academic achievement, social development and overall well-being. Yet, this engagement does not happen in a vacuum. It requires intentional and sustained efforts by the director, school leaders, superintendents, staff, Board of Trustees, community partners, faith communities, and policymakers to create environments that invite, sustain, and strengthen meaningful collaboration between families and schools.

Directors of Education, as Members of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), hold a unique and pivotal role in setting the vision and conditions for family engagement. Together with the Board of Trustees, principals/vice principals, superintendents, teachers, and staff, the Director establishes practices, policies, and a culture that empowers families as partners in their children's learning across public, French-language and Catholic schools. This goal is a district-wide, collective commitment that requires prioritization, respect for all families, the alignment of resources, professional learning, and ongoing communication to create more welcoming and accessible schools for all families.

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Building Strong Relationships Across Communities

First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Indigenous Communities

Building relationships with Indigenous, First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities in Ontario requires a commitment to respect, collaboration, and cultural understanding. As outlined by Indigenous leaders and scholars, such as Dr. Marie Battiste, the process begins with recognizing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and addressing the systemic barriers faced by First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Indigenous students. Meaningful relationships are based on acknowledging the sovereignty of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Indigenous Peoples, honouring traditional knowledge, and ensuring that they are central to the decision-making processes that affect their children's education (Battiste, 2013).

Directors and senior staff can model partnerships grounded in mutual trust, humility, and shared goals with the recognition that Residential Schools in Canada have created mistrust and intergenerational trauma among First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Indigenous peoples. [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) (TRC) calls for sustained efforts in education, urging the need to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and being and perspectives into curricula, support the development of Indigenous languages, and provide culturally relevant and trauma-informed resources (TRC Calls to Action, 2015).

[Ontario's Indigenous Education Strategy](#) developed by the Ministry of Education reflects this commitment by promoting culturally responsive teaching practices, engaging Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-Keepers in educational settings, and fostering deeper understanding between First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous communities.

Ultimately, Call to Action 10 reminds us that supporting Indigenous student success is not only a school responsibility, but a shared commitment with families and communities. True engagement begins by listening deeply, acting with humility, and co-constructing education systems that reflect Indigenous voices and values.

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Building Strong Relationships Across Communities

Families in French-Language and Catholic Schools both English and French

Family engagement in French-language and Catholic schools in Ontario is essential to the success of students. In French-language schools, it involves preserving and celebrating the French language and culture, requiring close collaboration between families, teachers, administrators and the community to meet the unique needs of Francophone students. Families are encouraged to actively participate in school life by contributing to cultural events, joining parent committees, and supporting language learning at home. In Catholic schools, family engagement is equally important for reinforcing Catholic values and beliefs in education. These schools aim to create an educational community where families, as primary educators, work alongside staff to promote both academic and spiritual development. Catholic schools regularly organize liturgical celebrations and community activities to strengthen the ties between school, family, church, and faith.

Underserved Communities

Supporting underserved families in their involvement in their child's schooling in Ontario requires intentional efforts to bridge gaps in access, communication, and trust. It also entails re-evaluating the narrow definitions and conceptualizations of parent involvement in

education that negate the significant contributions families make to the growth and development of their child outside of school.

Community-based outreach programs and partnerships with local organizations are vital for connecting families to school resources and opportunities. These efforts complement the ongoing work of staff and school boards to build meaningful relationships by recognizing and valuing the perspectives and cultural wealth of families (Yosso, 2005). They also help ensure that family voices are meaningfully included in decision-making processes, in alignment with Board and Ministry policies and regulations.

Many underserved families, particularly those from low-income, racialized, and/or newcomer communities or those with disabilities or special education needs, face barriers. These barriers may include language, cultural differences, spaces and/or virtual platforms, limited accessibility, and schedules that limit their ability to engage with the school system at a district and/or school. By building trust and providing tailored support, schools can empower underserved families to become active partners in their children's education, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes for students.

Meaningful family engagement is a key pillar for the well-being and success of students.

Transparency, Confidence and Communication

Open and ongoing communication channels are essential. This includes regular and clear communication from the school to home, as well as opportunities for parents to provide feedback and input.

Equity and Inclusion

All families, irrespective of their background, socioeconomic status, language, or disability, have a right to equitable access to information and opportunities for engagement.

Addressing instances of discrimination is a crucial aspect of creating a safe environment for students and families. Access for families with disabilities and/or children with special education needs will require staff to listen openly to their needs and proactively consider the conditions needed to fully participate in their child's education, district initiatives, and committees. Upholding the dignity of caregivers is essential to forming reciprocal relationships.

Family-Centred Approach

Recognizing the diverse roles and strengths of families, schools should strive to build genuine partnerships that respect and value a family's perspectives.

Key Principles of Effective Family Engagement

Research consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between active family engagement and improved student outcomes.

Funds of Knowledge and Cultural Wealth

The concepts of Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) challenge deficit-based views of families, particularly those from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Funds of Knowledge refers to the historically accumulated, culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or community functioning and well-being, while Community Cultural Wealth expands this framework to include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital found in communities of colour. These frameworks are vital for rethinking family engagement because they shift the focus from what families lack to what they bring. When school systems embrace these principles, they affirm that families contribute significantly and meaningfully to student learning through everyday practices, relationships, and cultural knowledge—often outside the school day. Recognizing and building upon these assets is essential for creating authentic, inclusive, and respectful family-school partnerships.

Building Trust and Relationships

Trust and positive relationships are foundational. Schools should prioritize building strong relationships with families through open communication, active listening, and demonstrating respect and appreciation.

Setting the Conditions for Meaningful District-Level Engagement

In addition to the previously described principles, the following conditions are also necessary to promote authentic and meaningful engagement.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Use data to monitor the effectiveness of engagement strategies and make data-informed adjustments.

Technology Integration

Use technology effectively to facilitate communication and engagement while ensuring equitable access for all families.

Professional Learning

Provide ongoing professional development for educators and district staff on modern, equitable, family engagement strategies. Consider learning that is co-led by staff and families.

Resource Allocation

Allocate adequate resources to support family engagement initiatives, such as funding for translation services, technology, and staff time.

Community Partnerships

Collaborate with community organizations to leverage resources and support for families.

Challenges to Overcome

It is important to acknowledge that some families may face both systemic and personal difficulties in participating in their children's education.

- Families may face time constraints due to competing commitments, multiple jobs, or other responsibilities, making it challenging to actively participate, especially during the school/workday with schools and districts.
- Lack of resources, such as transportation, translation, limited access to appropriate technology, platforms or limited internet access, can also hinder participation in school events or accessing information.
- Families who have had negative experiences with the education system in the past, such as feeling unheard or disrespected, may be reluctant to engage with schools.
- Limited knowledge about school policies, procedures and available resources can further reduce their involvement and erode trust.

- A school's culture and policies can either promote or hinder family engagement.
- Historical and systemic challenges such as Residential Schools have often prevented meaningful and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous families in district-level initiatives and schools.
- Disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes can contribute to the disenfranchisement of underserved and/or marginalized families.
- Challenges in maintaining accurate and current contact information for parents/guardians/caregivers will greatly impact efforts to outreach to them.

Despite these barriers, every district in Ontario has examples of caring, respectful, and meaningful parent/guardian/caregiver involvement from which we can all learn.

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District-Level Practices for Enhancing Family Engagement

There are strategies and approaches found in research and practice to improve family engagement beyond the school-level. The following strategies and approaches are drawn from decades of research (Moll, Yosso, Peña, Epstein, Freize).

Recognize and Celebrate Diverse Forms of Engagement

Not all family engagement looks the same and it shouldn't. Directors can lead a cultural shift and new understandings by celebrating the many ways families contribute to student learning, from storytelling and caregiving to community volunteering and faith-based mentorship. Publicly acknowledging these forms of engagement—through newsletters, assemblies, or school board reports—validates families' roles and broadens the definition of meaningful involvement.

This includes moving beyond school-based activities to valuing how families support growth at home, in community, and through culture. Embed frameworks like Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) into board practices and professional learning.

Strengthen Partnerships with Community Organizations That Families Trust

Many families engage more comfortably through community hubs, cultural organizations, faith groups, and settlement services. School boards can partner with these trusted intermediaries to build bridges, offer joint programming, and co-host forums that reach families where they are. This community-based approach to engagement reflects a more holistic view of support around children.

Include Students as Bridges and Agents in Family Engagement

Students often serve as powerful connectors between school and home, especially in multilingual or cross-cultural families. By inviting students to co-lead conferences, design school-family projects, or translate school initiatives into home-friendly language, schools affirm students' identities and agency. Directors can support this by encouraging schools to embed student voice in engagement strategies, particularly for middle and secondary grades where traditional models tend to decline.

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District-Level Practices for Enhancing Family Engagement

Co-Create Engagement Practices with Families, Not For Them

Involve families—especially those from historically marginalized groups—as co-designers of engagement strategies. Use participatory processes like listening circles, community mapping, and design-thinking workshops to surface authentic needs and strengths. Seek to understand and incorporate, where appropriate, cultural protocols and community leadership in First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, newcomer, and racialized communities.

Invest in Professional Learning That Centers Cultural Responsiveness and Anti-Racism

Equip educators, school leaders, and central staff with the knowledge and tools to build relational trust across differences. Ongoing, job-embedded learning should include critical perspectives and address systemic barriers to engagement. Build capacity to recognize and respond to both overt and subtle forms of exclusion.

Build Trust Through Transparent Communication and Relational Accountability

Move away from transactional communication toward two-way, relational dialogue. Offer diverse, multilingual, and culturally relevant forms

of outreach that respect families' time, technology access, and communication styles. Monitor for respectful interactions and continuously gather feedback from families on their experiences.

Create Measures That Reflect Authentic and Respectful Relationships and Student-Centred Impact

Shift from counting attendance at events to measuring the depth, diversity, and trust within family-school relationships. Use qualitative and quantitative data—such as family interviews, case studies, surveys, and community-led assessments—to inform continuous improvement. Link engagement outcomes to student well-being, belonging, and achievement, disaggregated by identity.

Sustain Change Through Leadership Structures, Policy, and Accountability

Establish dedicated leadership roles or teams to guide and monitor inclusive family engagement strategies across the system. Embed commitments in strategic plans, policy frameworks, and equity action plans. Report progress publicly and ensure that engagement is a shared leadership priority—not an add-on, but core to how the system serves children and communities.

“When families are seen as equal partners in education, a powerful force for student success is unlocked. One rooted in trust, cultural richness, and shared responsibility for learning.”

Conclusion

Reimagining Family Engagement as a Collective Responsibility

In conclusion, one truth rises above all others: family engagement is not a program, an event, or a checklist. It is a relationship. And like all meaningful relationships, it must be grounded in trust, mutual respect, and the recognition that families are not passive recipients of school knowledge, but active contributors to student success—often in ways that are invisible to schools but deeply powerful in the lives of children.

For too long, school systems have asked families to adapt to the rhythms, expectations, and culture of schools. This has unintentionally excluded and marginalized families whose ways of knowing, supporting, and contributing do not fit traditional models of engagement. It is time to reverse that sentiment. It is time for us to fit families - not the other way around.

This requires directors, senior leaders, staff and other organizations to make meaningful progress to forge a broader, more inclusive understanding of family engagement that does not require a physical presence in schools to be seen as contributing to your child's education. It is a culture that recognizes the funds of knowledge and cultural wealth families

bring—the language(s) spoken at home, the histories told, the skills taught, the resilience, faith, and values modeled, and the dreams passed on from one generation to the next. These are not peripheral to learning; they are central to student achievement and well-being.

It is time to expand the definition of family engagement to include diverse forms of investing in a child's development which transpires outside of school buildings. Districts must invest in practices that honour the lived experiences of families, particularly those who have historically been underserved or excluded. Let's shift the narrative—from families as helpers of the system, to families as co-educators and co-constructors of academically and personally enriching, caring, and equitable learning environments.

For Further Reflection

1. What is our current definition, in practice and policy, of family engagement?
2. Whose voices and ways of engaging have historically been valued in our system—and whose have been overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood?
3. How do we know if our current family engagement strategies reflect a one-size-fits-all model, or do they honour the diversity of the communities we serve?
4. How are we ensuring that family engagement is not only inclusive of, but also co-led by, Indigenous, Black, newcomer, families of students with disabilities and/or special education needs, and other historically marginalized families?
5. What assumptions are being made in the system about families who do not attend school-based events—and what alternative forms of support and advocacy might we be missing or undervaluing? What actions are we taking to address any incorrect assumptions?
6. How are we intentionally removing barriers—such as language, scheduling, transportation, digital access, and power dynamics—that create barriers to meaningful and authentic participation?
7. In what ways are we shifting from transactional communication (e.g., reminders and announcements) to relational dialogue that builds trust and fosters collaboration?

For Further Reflection

8. Are we equipping staff at all levels—from teachers to central staff—with the professional learning and tools they need to engage families respectfully and responsively?
9. How are we using data—not just to track attendance or compliance—but to understand the quality of family-school relationships and inform systemic improvement?
10. What structures exist in our district to ensure families are not just consulted, but meaningfully involved in decision-making processes that affect their children?
11. How do we know if families are included as co-educators and contributors of cultural wealth and Funds of Knowledge—or are we still asking them to fit into our system's definitions of engagement?

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