

Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement



A Report From



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The Framework in Action: *The Learning Community School in Central Falls, Rhode Island*

The Learning Community demonstrates how family engagement can be sewn into the fabric of a school and contribute to phenomenal student outcomes.

Like its surrounding community, this K-8 school has a high proportion of Hispanic students (81 percent) and students of color (96 percent). Most are low-income (85 percent), and many are English learners (33 percent). Notably, students at the Learning Community far outpace their counterparts across Rhode Island on state tests. Compared with Hispanic students across the state, the school's Hispanic students are nearly twice as likely to demonstrate proficiency on the state's English language arts (ELA) and math tests, and its English learners are more than three times as likely to do so compared with Rhode Island's English learners. The Learning Community's middle school was the state's top-performing urban middle school in both ELA and math. Most telling is the demand from the community – the Learning Community is a charter school with a 1,200-student waitlist and 98 percent retention from kindergarten through eighth grade. Drawing on observations and interviews with school staff and families, this case study illustrates how the school has made family engagement a cornerstone of its success.

Process Conditions in Action

The school's focus on trust-building is apparent from the moment families enroll their children. Each newly enrolled family participates in a 30- to 45-minute welcome meeting with a codirector of the school, who shares the school's core beliefs:

- Families are the greatest strengths in their children's lives.
- Families have a right to be involved in their children's education.
- It is the job of all school team members to engage all families.
- All family engagement efforts should build trusting relationships to support the healthy development and education of students.

Most of the principal's time in these meetings is spent listening, with a few standard questions to guide the conversation:

- What are you most proud of about your child?
- What are your hopes and dreams for their experience at the Learning Community?
- What experiences have you had with schools in the past?
- What do you want to contribute, and what do you want to learn about?
- What do you want to know about us?

As families engage with the school community, they see that family-facing initiatives have a distinctly asset-based framing. For instance, its annual open house has a celebratory environment, including a tradition where families write and draw their hopes and dreams for the year. Those dreams then get placed by the classroom doorway so that students are reminded of their families' love for them every single time they walk into class. Monthly parent café events are codesigned with families and linked to learning goals for students. One mother said, "Whatever they are teaching our kids, they are showing us. They don't rush. They listen and help us help our kids."

Families at the Learning Community don't dread school events or feel obligated to attend, which is perhaps why 95 percent come to conferences and the annual open house, even though many parents work long hours and multiple jobs. Families look forward to their time at the school because they know they are seen as indispensable contributors to their children's education, and their ideas are valued. One parent said, "The commitment this school has toward parents is just very different. They show you that you really matter. Other schools, if you don't show up, that's on you. Here, they're always waiting for you."

Organizational Conditions in Action

Like the hidden foundation of a house, the family engagement infrastructure at the Learning Community supports its positive outcomes. Leaders at the school have focused for many years on building staff capacity and creating an environment that promotes authentic engagement. They see it as their responsibility to ensure that family engagement is systemic across the school, integrated into every strand of their work, and sustained with meaningful resources. This infrastructure enables teachers to lean into the work. One teacher said, “You can’t have family engagement be a part of the DNA of a school unless the administration provides the support. Families are going to rely on me, and I’m not going to feel free to ask [hard questions] if I’m going to be expected to fix it all.”

The following are a few examples of behind-the-scenes leadership moves that provide the infrastructure for family engagement.

Hiring Practices

Every job candidate is asked, “Why do you want to work in this community?” Whenever there is a deficit-based response, “our pencils go down,” said Sarah Friedman, cofounder and former codirector of the Learning Community. “When I walk that person out, I’ll say, ‘You need to know that what you said is offensive. You shouldn’t be saying those things about families that are here.’”

Professional Development

Every year, the Learning Community hosts a summer institute designed and led by teachers to address evolving student needs and set the priorities for the year. Dozens of parents are invited to share their views. Reflecting on the experience, one parent said, “They took notes, and a few months later, they implemented the majority of the things we said. They just literally follow through.”



Experimentation and Ongoing Professional Learning

The school's leaders understand that staff learn to engage families by actually *engaging* with them, and that professional learning time is a valuable resource for ongoing improvement. Soon after the school's founding, the faculty undertook a period of experimentation that included activities like riding the bus with children, holding teacher office hours in the community, and visiting families at home for Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. They also examined who did most of the talking during family conferences. These initiatives were meant to strengthen family engagement, but just as importantly, they provided opportunities for staff to reflect on their experiences together and develop plans for continued improvement.

The Family Liaison Role

Maria Duque is an administrative manager, but most schools would call her a family liaison. Her job isn't to build and maintain relationships by herself, however. For Friedman, "everyone in the system has to be in contact with families directly," so Duque's job is to facilitate contact among members of the school community and to coordinate events. It seems that everyone at the Learning Community has a story of being "Duque'd" – that is, being reminded that they are responsible for contributing to the school's community. "She asks if [parents are] okay when they don't come to an event," a teacher explained. "She doesn't aim to blame. But she doesn't take no for an answer." The school's leaders have conceptualized Duque's role as focused on building trust and solidarity within the school, not as managing all relationships.

Conclusion

The Learning Community story underscores the power of a strong infrastructure for building a liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused family engagement practice. It is easy to become enamored with the school's programming, but the success of initiatives like its open house and parent café is in the behind-the-scenes efforts to ensure that family engagement is fundamental to everything the school does. "Families have a right to know what we're doing," Friedman said. "We're not doing them some favor. The love and the trust that comes back is transformative. Once you do that, you can't stop doing it."

