



Enhancing Family Engagement with Family Voice

Climate Connection is a monthly publication of the NYS Center for School Safety.

Engaging families in education is a well-established and effective strategy to support prosocial student behaviors, academic achievement, and social-emotional learning. Schools commit valuable time and resources to building school-family partnerships through professional development, tools and technology to facilitate communication between home and school, and information sessions to help parents support academics or better understand concerns - such as mental health and bullying - that may impact their children. Moving beyond these typical family engagement strategies toward opportunities for "family voice" can help schools be more culturally responsive and trauma-informed, while supporting your school's DEI efforts.

What is Family Voice?

"Family voice" recognizes that parents and caregivers are the experts on their children, and it is important to establish ongoing opportunities for families to express their values, concerns, needs, and experiences within systems and services. When we intentionally invite family voice we build authentic school-family partnerships built on mutual understanding, collaboration, and shared decision-making. With open communication, we enrich our understanding of their experiences, perspectives and priorities, resulting in empathy and greater cultural awareness.

How can we create opportunities for family voice? Schools often use surveys to collect information from families, and when parents/caregivers have a particular concern they are encouraged to communicate with teachers, administrators and other school staff. In addition, Open House, Parent-Teacher Conferences, and volunteer opportunities on school/district committees encourage family voice. However, some caregivers, especially those who identify with historically marginalized communities, may have had negative (and even traumatic) experiences with systems, such as education. These experiences could make it difficult for them to trust that their voices will be welcome or heard. Some families may need extra encouragement or a personal invitation to share their voice. Consider working with trusted community partners - such as the faith-based community, refugee services, cultural organizations or grassroots advocacy groups. Another strategy is to engage with families outside of the school at a place that is familiar and safe, such as a library, soup kitchen or local park.

What are some barriers and how can we reduce them? Sometimes, *language barriers* make it difficult for parents and caregivers to effectively express their concerns, to share their family's experiences, or to ask for assistance. While schools sometimes rely on the students to facilitate communication, caregiver may not be as open when the topic is sensitive. Identifying resources or technology to assist with translation is very important. In addition, there are myriad of *practical barriers*, such as work schedules, transportation, and care for younger children. Consider providing childcare and a meal, or hosting events off-site to minimize transportation concerns. Community partners can help address some of these barriers. For example, you can work with employers to host a caregiver forum during their lunch break or collaborate with the local pediatrician's office to screen for education and/or family support needs.

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Recommended Resources to Support Family Voice



[Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement](#) (American Institutes for Research, 2018) provides an overview of evidence-based strategies and shares examples of school and district practices that can be modified to meet the needs of any school community. The report explores strategies to:

- clearly communicate and demonstrate a commitment to equitable family engagement
- standardize practices that support equitable family engagement
- build culturally responsive relationships between staff and families
- engage trusted community advocates to improve understanding and relationships
- engage with families in the community at places where they feel most comfortable

[Building Relationships Bridging Cultures: Cultural Brokering in Family Engagement](#) (University of Washington College of Education, 2015) describes the use of cultural brokers - individuals who serve as bridges between family and school to promote reciprocal collaboration and culturally responsive systems. Strategies focus on developing family capacity and skills to navigate the education systems, supporting cultural awareness and understanding, and building system capacity for change.

[Building Authentic School-Family Partnerships Through the Lens of Social Emotional Learning](#) (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023) offers strategies that support equitable collaboration through the sharing of family voice, lived experience and family identity, including case examples. The report outlines four guiding actions:



- building trust and relationships by creating opportunities for families to share their priorities, interests, concerns, knowledge, and strengths.
- addressing roles, practices and structures that promote power dynamic.
- establishing structures that promote shared understanding to support collaboration, mutual understanding and agency.
- engaging families in continuous improvement process from data gathering to collaborative decision-making in an effort to problem-solve and promote change.

Looking for resources in your community?

Visit the [Families Together in New York State](#) directory to learn about the array of formal and informal family support services and find an organization in your school community.