



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND
TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT

Partnering with Families from Diverse Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds

Research-based Strategies for Educators

Developed by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center

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A large body of research, as well as the experiences of educators and families across the globe, show us that outcomes improve when families are engaged in their children's education. The impacts are amplified when families and schools work together. This partnership can lead to higher student grade point averages, higher math reading scores, increased attendance, and overall better mental health and behavioral outcomes.⁶ As our schools serve increasingly diverse student populations, it is crucial for school leaders and educators to put in place processes and practices to effectively engage with students' families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

More than 5 million students in the United States K-12 education system are considered to have limited English language proficiency and are provided English Language supports by their schools.²¹ While often referred to as multilingual, bilingual, or English Learners, it is important to remember that students' identities encompass much more than their English proficiency level. Multilingual students, like their peers, benefit from their families' active engagement in support of their education, English Language instruction, and other learning activities in and outside of school. Multilingual learners may have migrated from another country or are descendants of relatives who were foreign-born and migrated to the United States.

Families from multilingual backgrounds may face unique barriers to engagement such as limited English proficiency, lack of bilingual support from schools, and unfamiliarity with the United States public school system. This is understandable given the vast differences in education systems across the globe, the different perspectives on the role of educators and families, language barriers, cultural considerations, and limited opportunities and resources. As a result, studies indicate that foreign-born parents are less likely to participate in their children's school than parents born in the United States.²⁴

Family engagement with school is a predictor of school success.¹⁵ In today's increasingly diverse and multicultural society, schools and districts must adapt old approaches and develop new ways to effectively engage with families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is essential for creating a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students and is linked to improved students' educational performance and increased sense of belonging in school.²⁴ Recognizing the importance of inclusive and equitable education, schools can empower multilingual families in practical ways to be active partners in their children's education.

In this research brief, we have summarized 25 research studies. From these studies, we have gathered six overarching strategies for educators and school administrators to foster meaningful partnerships with families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The six strategies are:

1. Build a school environment that welcomes and respects families.
2. Cultivate positive mindsets about multilingual and culturally diverse families among all school staff members.

3. Address barriers families encounter in school policies and practices.
4. Provide opportunities for families to learn how they can support their children's education.
5. Orient families to the school system.
6. Embrace the linguistic and cultural diversities of families in your school community.

Each of the six strategies in this brief is backed by research cited in the endnotes. For each strategy, we provide a broad overview accompanied by a discussion of associated outcomes for students. We then describe opportunities and ways schools can implement the strategies. Finally, we include a reflection guide at the end of the brief. This guide is useful for understanding how schools are already working to partner with families and the steps to take for improved family-school engagement.

Strategy #1

Build a school environment that welcomes and respects families.

Creating an inclusive school environment that genuinely welcomes and respects families, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, is pivotal in today's diverse educational landscape. A positive school climate, marked by safety, support, respect, and inclusivity, profoundly influences family engagement by shaping families' perceptions of the school and their eagerness to participate in various activities with their children and events at school.¹¹ Such a climate is closely associated with heightened student engagement and academic achievement.¹³ Moreover, this nurturing atmosphere, allows schools to draw from families' vast funds of resilience, wisdom, and cultural heritage. Strong school-family partnerships, combined with effective communication, form the foundation of a positive school climate, emphasizing the crucial role of family in a student's educational journey. To elevate this partnership, fostering open channels of communication, creating avenues for family participation in school decision-making, and equipping school staff with training on cultural sensitivity and inclusivity are essential.² Effective schools cultivate genuine family partnerships, positioning families as collaborators with the school in support of their child's education.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS

- Celebrate cultural diversity and promote respect and inclusion for all school community members.¹¹
- Provide cultural sensitivity training to help staff understand families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.^{11, 13}
- Incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and experiences in the curriculum.
- Incorporate cultural artifacts in school space (cultural arts, historical pictures, and flags) to strengthen multilingual families' connection and sense of belonging to the school's history and values.^{4, 18} For example, "Welcome" written in languages of families at the main entrance of the school or a display of the flags of countries of origin in the hallway and school spaces creates a sense of belonging to families and students.
- Recognize and celebrate the cultural richness that diverse families bring, while simultaneously addressing challenges and leveraging them as learning opportunities for the entire school community.¹⁰

Strategy #2

Cultivate positive mindsets among school staff members surrounding family engagement.

The perceptions teachers and school staff have of families shape how they interact with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Positive attitudes toward each family's engagement, cultural sensitivity, using effective communication, and accurate perceptions of families are crucial elements that support family-school engagement. This will ultimately lead to improved academic outcomes for multilingual students. A proactive and inclusive approach the engaging with all families recognizes the immense value of diversity, viewing it as a dynamic force that enriches the learning environment, fostering deeper understanding, and empathy.

Conversely, negative perceptions of multilingual students and families can also impact family engagement. For instance, educators may assume that multilingual families are disinterested in their children's education or lack the knowledge or skills to support their children's learning when they do not attend school events. However, parents and families may have work schedules or other commitments that keep them from attending school events – despite their deep commitment to supporting their children's education. Educators' unintentional negative perceptions towards multilingual families can also lower educators' expectations for these families and their children. This contributes to less engagement of families and poorer academic outcomes for multilingual students.⁴ It is not merely about fostering a positive mindset, but rather developing a comprehensive, empathetic, and enlightened perspective that sees every family as an indispensable partner in the shared journey of education and growth.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS

- Provide professional development opportunities for staff to increase their awareness of multilingual families' backgrounds and experiences. This can reduce negative perceptions and increase understanding of the strengths and assets of these families.
- Encourage educators and school staff to really get to know families. Some ways to do this include home visits, hosting parents and families at the school, and sharing meals with families. For example, school staff and leaders can participate in community events. Such hands-on engagement demonstrates the school's genuine interest in understanding and embracing families and their cultures. Over time, the ongoing efforts to engage with families and communities result in more meaningful relationships, a positive school climate, and a sense of belonging for all students and families.

- Incorporate culturally relevant materials, celebrations, and activities into the curriculum. This can help to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity among staff and students.^{2, 10}
- Have family and community leaders serve as “tour guides” to take teachers around their town to important places in their community. Guides and teachers eat together and debrief what they have learned.
- Engage multilingual families in school activities, providing regular updates on student progress, and soliciting their input on school policies and practices. This can help to reduce assumptions of disinterest and increase engagement with school activities.
- Provide easily accessible language translation services to facilitate communication between families and school staff.¹⁷ Make sure school staff and families have clear guidance for how to access these services.

Strategy #3

Address barriers families encounter in school policies and practices.

Improving family-school engagement with multilingual families and families with diverse cultural backgrounds begins by examining school policies and practices that create barriers for families. For example, many families juggle demanding work schedules while striving to participate actively in their child's education. When school meetings are scheduled during their work hours, this limits the participation of families. They are excluded from a valuable opportunity for communication.

Recognizing parents' busy work schedules not as a limitation but as a commitment to their family's well-being, we can explore strategies to promote better communication and participation.¹⁵ Schools can adopt creative methods to involve parents, such as utilizing technology to share information or offering alternative meeting times that accommodate different schedules. By acknowledging and respecting the demands of parents' work, we foster stronger relationships between families and schools.

Some families might lack access to the internet, computers, or smartphones, making it difficult for them to receive important updates or participate in virtual meetings. Schools can bridge this gap by offering printed materials, providing access to computers at schools, or even exploring partnerships with local libraries and community centers. Schools should be aware that some families may feel intimidated by the education system, perceiving themselves as less knowledgeable than school personnel. For example, a family who does not speak English and is new to the United States may become overwhelmed with information in the new school system. Schools can adapt new processes, creating an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere, providing opportunities for open dialogue, and involving parents in decision-making for their child's education.

Consider policy changes that facilitate family engagement, such as promoting flexible attendance policies, holding meetings in convenient locations for families, or providing transportation options for families to attend meetings. If a district were to implement a policy mandating provisions of flexible meeting times for PTA/PTO, parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, or other school meetings and events for families, this action could effectively lead to school events that accommodate more families, consequently enhancing family engagement with school. By addressing these structural barriers, schools can create an environment that welcomes and supports family participation in school events and activities that nurture family engagement and support student success. This requires a collaborative effort among school administrators,

policymakers, and community members to prioritize these changes and allocate resources to ensure their implementation.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS

- Ensure existing policies are inclusive of all families and are not creating unintended barriers to engagement.¹¹ For example, the Columbus City Schools' Language Services Department has a dedicated team of bilingual liaisons who provide language assistance during parent-teacher conferences, meetings, and other interactions. They also offer translated materials, including report cards and important school documents, in multiple languages spoken by the district's diverse community. Such initiatives promote inclusivity and strengthen the partnership between schools and non-English-speaking families in Ohio.
- Provide training for staff on how to implement policies that support family engagement, ensuring that policies are implemented effectively and consistently across the school.
- Provide families with support that encourages family engagement and students' success such as after-school programming, mentoring, tutoring services, and academic counseling.¹³
- Partner with community organizations such as local libraries, community centers, and non-profit organizations to provide resources to families. These resources may include fresh produce, school supplies, clothing, job fairs, after-school activities, tutoring, or mentoring.¹⁵
- Provide transportation services to families to come to the school for meetings. Partner with community organizations to provide transportation services or identify other transportation resources available to families.
- Offer flexible scheduling for parent-teacher conferences and other school events.
- Provide on-site childcare during school events or meetings.²

Strategy #4

Provide opportunities for families to learn how they can support their child's education.

It is crucial for the academic success of multilingual students that their families can support their children's learning at home and at school. By doing so, parents and families actively contribute to their child's academic success and overall development. This support fosters better communication between children, families, and the school community, which creates a positive learning environment. Additionally, it may help preserve and enhance the child's native language and cultural identity, promoting inclusion and a sense of belonging.^{17, 20} Ultimately, empowering families with knowledge and resources enables them to actively participate in their child's education, leading to improved outcomes and stronger school-family partnerships. By establishing partnerships, celebrating diversity, providing language support, offering parent education, connecting families with resources, and empowering parents as leaders, we can create a supportive and inclusive environment where all families feel valued, respected, and actively involved in their children's education.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS

- Provide resources and guidance for families in their home language to support learning at home, such as reading materials, educational apps, and homework help.¹⁶
- Provide clear and frequent communication to parents in their preferred language using families' preferred modes (phone, email, text message, newsletter, social media pages) about school events, student progress, and resources available to families.¹²
- Provide families with ample opportunities to engage with the school to support their child's education or to address any concerns. For example, schools can invite parents or family members to come and share their stories with other students, be a chaperone for a field trip, or be a member of the organizing committee for school events.
- Involve parents in decision-making by forming parent groups, conducting surveys, and creating opportunities for the parents to provide input on school policies.
- Establish strong partnerships with ethnic community organizations to provide additional support and resources for families.⁸ For example, schools can be a part of community events or cultural celebrations happening in the communities. This opens a new opportunity for schools to know families better in a different setting.

- Host workshops for multilingual parents on topics such as navigating the education system, understanding report cards, and communicating effectively with teachers.

Strategy #5

Orient families to the school system.

Families with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds may have different perceptions and experiences with education. These experiences shape what parents expect from the school and the roles they see for themselves. This can impact both academic success for students and the overall local educational community.⁸ Without a clear understanding of the processes, expectations, and resources available, families may not feel connected to the school community and be less likely to interact with the school. Limited knowledge about school policies, procedures, and resources may lead to exclusion, disempowerment, and diminished educational outcomes, perpetuating inequities.⁸ For example, parents with no previous experience with the school system might feel overwhelmed and sometimes intimidated by the new system and feel they are less knowledgeable and have less influence. This hinders a student's academic success and perpetuates the cycle of inequality within our society. By actively engaging English language families in the education system, schools can create a culturally appropriate, inclusive, and equitable environment that empowers all families to engage, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS

- Provide orientation programs designed for new families, giving them an overview of the school system, policies, and procedures. These programs can also offer guidance on resources available to support their child's education.
- Use multilingual communication methods such as translated documents, interpreters, and bilingual staff, to ensure that families understand important information to actively engage with the school.
- Establish parent mentorship programs to connect new families with experienced families already familiar with the school system. Mentors can provide guidance, answer questions, and offer support to help new families navigate the school.
- Designate family liaisons within the school staff to serve as a direct point of contact for families, offering guidance, addressing concerns, and facilitating communication between families and school personnel.
- Collaborate with community organizations that work with immigrant and diverse families. These organizations can provide additional resources, workshops, and support to help families navigate the school system.⁵
- Conduct home visits that support a more personal connection between schools and families. This approach allows school staff to understand the family's environment, cultural context, and better support their child's educational needs.^{19, 23}

Strategy #6

Embrace linguistic and cultural diversity.

Linguistic and cultural barriers pose significant obstacles when engaging the families of multilingual learners in the school system. These barriers hinder effective communication, limit access to information, and impede meaningful involvement of parents in their children's education. The impact of such barriers cannot be overstated, as they exacerbate the already existing disparities faced by multilingual students and their families. Language barriers contribute to difficulties in understanding school policies, procedures, and academic expectations, leading to confusion and disconnection, ultimately preventing parents from actively participating in their children's educational journey.^{3, 9}

It is also important to consider how linguistic and cultural diversity creates unique strengths and assets for the engagement of families of multilingual learners. Embracing this diversity enhances communication, promotes access to information, and fosters meaningful family engagement.²² Embracing cultural nuances and values as assets can create an environment that respects and supports the needs of multilingual families. Schools can implement family-friendly strategies, prioritize culturally responsive practices, provide language support services, and cultivate genuine partnerships between schools and multilingual families, to transform barriers into opportunities for growth and success.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS

- Provide language support services such as bilingual staff, interpreters, translated documents, and multilingual communication channels.¹⁴
- Develop a culturally responsive environment that respects and values the diverse cultural backgrounds of multilingual families. This can include incorporating culturally relevant materials, celebrating cultural events, and incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum.
- Implement family engagement programs that specifically address the needs and interests of culturally diverse families. These programs can include workshops, parent education sessions, and support groups focusing on navigating the education system, understanding academic expectations, and fostering a positive home-school partnership.
- Use culturally responsive communication methods that are clear and easily accessible to families. This includes providing translated materials, utilizing digital platforms with language translation capabilities, and using visual aids or graphics to supplement written or verbal communication.

- Employ cultural brokers or liaisons who can serve as a bridge between the school and culturally diverse families. These individuals can help build trust, facilitate communication, and provide families with culturally sensitive support and guidance.
- Initiate home visits by school staff to bridge the gap and foster trust and meaningful partnership between school and families.
- Provide ongoing professional development for teachers and staff that focuses on cultural competency, understanding diverse family backgrounds, and effective communication strategies.
- Involve parents and community members in decision-making processes, committees, and school activities. This creates opportunities for meaningful engagement, collaboration, and shared decision-making that respects and incorporates the perspectives of culturally diverse families.

Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify currently aligned practices and opportunities for improvement.

Strategy What can you do?	Glow What can we celebrate about our current work?	Grows What are our next steps?
1. Build a school environment that welcomes and respects families.		
2. Cultivate positive mindsets among school staff members surrounding family engagement.		
3. Address barriers families encounter in school policies and practices.		
4. Provide opportunities for families to learn how they can support their child's education.		
5. Orient families to the school system.		
6. Embrace linguistic and cultural diversity.		

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