

BLOG

# PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT VS. PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

UPDATED FEBRUARY 13, 2023 | POSTED FEBRUARY 1, 2023



Parents are vital in ensuring their children's safety, security, and well-being as well as their educational success.

Parental involvement in school is key: In a 1994 meta-analysis of 66 studies and other publications, researchers found that family "makes critical contributions to student achievement from the earliest childhood years through high school." Efforts to improve children's educational outcomes "are much more effective when the family is actively involved," [the researchers concluded](#).

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT?

What many may not know is that there is an important difference between parental involvement and parental engagement.

An **involved parent** takes part in the activities already determined by the school. An **engaged parent** takes a step further, often becoming part of the school's decision-making process.

Think of the two as complimentary actions, a kind of yin and yang that together produce better outcomes for students.

Parental involvement may include classroom volunteering, chaperoning school events, participating in parent-teacher conferences and other communication with teachers. Educators largely control these activities, inviting parents to participate.

With engagement, schools intentionally give parents opportunities to offer their own input, develop on their own abilities and take ownership over ideas. Effective engagement can include training for parents of children with special needs and involving parents in key school-wide decisions.

It is driven, foremost, by parents' needs as their children's primary caregivers.

[Longtime educator Larry Ferlazzo](#) has written that while parent involvement often involves one-way communication, parent engagement involves two-way conversations. These conversations occur not just through more intentional communication but through efforts like home visits and phone calls to parents in crisis or routine check-ins "that don't necessarily only happen when there's a problem with a child."

Download the Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders](#) report. This publication introduces an assessment and planning tool to help nonprofits evaluate their parent engagement efforts and chart a path toward deeper partnerships with parents and caregivers.

## EXAMPLES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT VS. ENGAGEMENT

Parents can become involved in their children's education by:

- attending or volunteering at school functions;
- discussing school events;
- helping out with homework; and
- reading with children;

Becoming more involved creates a supportive learning environment at home.

Schools can build engagement by:

- involving parents in school-wide decision-making, from instruction to nutrition;
- developing programming for parents that trains them in key areas such as digital skills;
- inviting parents in to learn more about how schools work and how they can meet their children's needs;
- initiating "parent academies" conceived and run by parents themselves, focusing on concerns and needs that they identify; and
- encouraging parents to see their school as an institution that is part of a neighborhood or larger community.

Ferlazzo, the educator, said it best when he wrote: "A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth — identifying projects, needs and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears — listening to what parents think, dream and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners."

## PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WORK TOGETHER FOR THE BETTER OUTCOMES

Though parental engagement often produces better outcomes than involvement alone, the best school programs interact with parents in both ways. Benefits to students may include higher grades and test scores, better attendance and behavior, increased enrollment in challenging courses and improved social skills.

“As teachers, we know that families must be critical allies in creating learning communities where all children can achieve equitable outcomes,” [writes educator Ilene Carver](#). “We need to believe that all families sincerely care about their children and will do everything they can to support them. If we, as teachers, reach out with respect, family members will get involved.”

Educators say that strong connections between schools and families can help address important non-school factors — such as health, safety, and affordable housing — that account for about two-thirds of the variance in student achievement. These connections can also improve parents’ “feelings of efficacy” at school and increase community support for schools themselves.

Parent engagement is “the ultimate goal of great schools,” according to the advocacy group [Parents 4 Public Schools](#), “because it allows for not only the creation of better parent-school partnerships but also has a tremendous impact on student achievement.”

## HOW SCHOOLS CAN ENCOURAGE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Schools must build relationships, first and foremost.

One place to start? By asking families how they want to be engaged, [says Carver](#). This means asking families “what days and times are convenient for them, and what the school could do to support their involvement.”

Carver points to small discussion groups or focus groups, hosted either formally or informally, as a means for gathering family perspectives. “If families say that transportation, childcare, or the need to prepare a meal before coming are barriers, set up a ride network,” she writes, “invite the whole family, have activities for younger children, and serve dinner.”

Schools should invite teachers, staff, families and community members who can help view the environment “as a new visitor would see it,” says Carver. “How inviting is the entrance? Are there signs letting people know, in a friendly way, where to find what they’re looking for? What happens when they go into the office? Can families easily get their concerns addressed, questions answered and problems resolved?”

Putting student work in the spotlight draws families, Carver adds. “Ask teachers and parents to be ‘greeters’ and welcome families as they come in. Offer interpreters if English is not their first language. Ask local musicians (many may be parents) to provide music. And have fun!”

In areas stricken with poverty and violence, engagement is still possible, according to educators. For example: In Sacramento, California, [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#) — a collaboration among an interfaith organizing group, the local school district and the teachers’ union — has resulted in better student attendance, higher graduation rates, more parent involvement and lower teacher turnover, advocates say.

The Sacramento program arose after parents complained that it was nearly impossible to talk to teachers about their children. After the visits, advocates say, families are more comfortable coming to school.

## MORE ON PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

[Report: Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders](#)

[Report: Parental Involvement in Education](#)

[Blog Post: Parental Involvement in Reading](#)

[Interactive KIDS COUNT® Data Book: Education in the United States](#)