

A National PTA® Initiative

The
Center for Family
Engagement®

PTAs Leading the Way in Transformative Family Engagement



Introduction

Families are the essential ingredient to ensure a high-quality education for every student. Decades of research shows that family engagement matters for student success—students whose families are engaged are more likely to attend school, avoid discipline problems, achieve at higher levels and graduate.ⁱ Family engagement also helps schools—research suggests it is equally as important as school leadership and a rigorous curriculum in school improvement.ⁱⁱ

Although there is consensus that family engagement matters, families and educators often have different perceptions of what types of communication are most important.ⁱⁱⁱ They may point to the importance of showing up to school events, helping with homework, or monitoring report cards.

Many of these “traditional” notions of family engagement, however, rarely reach *all* families in ways that have an *impact* on student success. While familiar or even fun, they don’t always make a difference in the academic and socio-emotional wellbeing of students. This can be compounded by inequities; parents who have the confidence or relationships with school staff participate while others are face barriers that make involvement harder for them.^{iv}

Most public schools are still using the same family engagement practices as 20, 50 or even 100 years ago. Where family engagement innovations are happening, they often are limited to a few classrooms or schools.

It is time to reimagine family engagement practices and policies for greater equity and effectiveness, and to apply these transformative family engagement approaches at scale.

PTA has the network to expand the use of transformative family engagement practices beyond pockets of excellence and innovation. The 24,000+ school-based PTAs, 55% of which are Title I schools, and over 16 million students, are an untapped resource in creating long-term systems change—from classroom to school to district, state, and federal policy—that leverages family engagement to ensure the success of each and every child.

This is why we need more transformative approaches to our family engagement practices so every family is treated as a valuable partner in their child’s education.

So, what does transformative family engagement look like in schools and local PTAs? Using research findings and best practices for family-school partnerships, we use the guiding principles of the **4 I’s of transformative family engagement—Inclusive, Individualized, Integrated, Impactful**—with strategies you can use as a model to implement these principles in your school community. There are PTAs across the country with successful examples of transformative family engagement from PTAs across the country, particularly those who have participated in [National PTA’s Schools of Excellence](#) program.

What is Transformative Family Engagement?

Transformative family engagement is a shared effort of families, schools, and community leaders to advance programs, practices, and policies that empower every parent to make their child’s potential a reality.

All family engagement should transform the lives of every child in America. That’s why National PTA is investing in our mission with the Center for Family Engagement.



The 4 Guiding Principles of Transformative Family Engagement

Use these 4 I's to amplify your reach and ensure every child's potential becomes a reality:

- ▶ **Inclusive** family engagement embraces and values diverse perspectives.
- ▶ **Individualized** family engagement meets the unique needs of every family and child.
- ▶ **Integrated** family engagement connects and align with the educational system.
- ▶ **Impactful** family engagement empowers families to support their child's success.

Inclusive

Reaching all families in an **inclusive** way means that every parent is treated as a valued partner and feels like they matter. Transformative family engagement **builds relationships** with families and between families and educators, pushes us to **question our assumptions** about families and how they engage, and **invites diverse perspectives** to support each and every child.

Intentional Relationship Building

Ensuring that all families feel welcome in the school community requires more than sending home a welcome letter. Building authentic relationships helps families develop trust in each other and in the PTA. Establishing this sense of trust and connection leads families to be more engaged and more willing to participate actively in the community. PTAs have devised innovative programs to help families

establish these meaningful relationships with each other, and with the school.

Glen Oaks Elementary PTA in Texas established a Buddy Family program, where families who had been at the school for a while were paired with newer families. When the families signed up, they indicated their preferred communication methods (call, text or email) and a picnic at the school playground served as a successful kickoff event for families to meet in person. The program at **Dolph Briscoe Middle School** took buddy families one step further, and used it as an opportunity for cross-cultural exchange, pairing families who speak English as their primary language with English Language Learners.

ACTIVITY IDEA

Brookview Elementary School PTA in Ohio hosted Back to School Bingo, and the cards included every staff member's name to help everyone get to know the school family! Interested in doing something similar? Download National PTA's [Who's Who in Your School](#) activity in English or Spanish.

Other ideas ...

- ▶ Call ahead and schedule a home or community visit with new families.
- ▶ Ask families about their experiences in school or with your PTA.
- ▶ Build relationships between families and teachers by creating opportunities for them to connect outside of conferences.
- ▶ Learn about and practice elements of community organizing.

INCLUSIVE

Embracing and valuing diverse perspectives.



INDIVIDUALIZED

Meeting the unique needs of every family and child.



INTEGRATED

Connecting and aligning with the educational system.



IMPACTFUL

Empowering families to support their child's success.



- ▶ Greet families in the drop-off loop or in the school office.
- ▶ Incorporate opportunities for families to get to know each other at meetings and events.

Questioning Assumptions

Our schools and PTAs have history and experiences that may be shaping your current practices. It is important to acknowledge your PTA's history, find out how your PTA and school community have—or have not—made all families feel valued and welcomed to participate and lead. Begin by doing some research about the dynamics between your PTA and the community you are trying to reach.

There may be habits or traditions that are not welcoming of all communities, or practices that are based on faulty or outdated information and experiences. PTA leaders should question assumptions when thinking about meeting routines, choice of venues, or even when looking at the calendar for the year. It's important to continually ask if leaders are making room for new ideas and new traditions.

[The Management Center](#) offers a helpful framework for challenging assumptions about organizational practices and procedures. **Preference, Tradition, Requirement (PTR)** helps groups determine why they do an initiative in a particular way and whether that initiative can be changed. See the example illustrated in the box.

In addition to questioning assumptions about protocols, leaders need to push themselves to question assumptions about the people they serve, as well. After school staff attended a district training about serving LGBTQ families, **Scouters Mountain Elementary PTA**

in Oregon began to question some of the events they held that were gender specific.

Several PTAs have begun to change the titles of events like, Muffins with Mom, Donuts with Dad and Father-Son dodgeball tournaments. In fact, PTAs have begun to share how these event titles can be exclusive to any kind of family. Perhaps Mom works a Tuesday morning shift, when Muffins with Moms occurs, but Dad is free to go and feels unwelcome? Maybe your daughter would love to attend a dodgeball tournament but isn't allowed. By questioning their assumptions, PTAs have been making events more inclusive with great success.

In order to prioritize inclusion, PTAs must be willing to adapt long held traditions to introduce creative ways to serve students with different needs. **Greenbrier Elementary PTA** in Illinois designated the first half-hour of a school dance as sensory-friendly which included muted lighting and softer music. Throughout their event, there was also a quiet room with small group activities for children who wanted a break. Because of their willingness to reimagine events and programming, PTAs have continued to innovate and create more inclusive, successful initiatives.

Other ideas ...

- ▶ When you schedule meetings and events, have options at times that ensure all families, with a variety of scheduling needs, are able to participate.
- ▶ If you have been doing the same event for a long time that only reaches specific families, consider how you can reimagine the activity to make it more appealing to other groups.
- ▶ When your PTA makes plans for the year, bring in perspectives of families who aren't typically involved into the planning process.

Differentiating Between Preferences, Traditions & Requirements

A PTA notices that few families attend the Fall Festival which has always taken place at the school on Fridays at 4:00 p.m.

Preference – The Fall Festival takes place at 4:00 p.m. on Friday because it's the most convenient time for the people on the event planning committee.

Tradition – The Fall Festival will takes place at the school because that's where it's taken place for the last 12 years.

Requirement – The Fall Festival needs to take place somewhere accessible, free or affordable, and convenient for most families.

After evaluating what elements of the event are actually required, the group can have a discussion about changing traditions to better reflect the preferences of the wider community.

- ▶ Reflect on the identities of the people in your community. What are the dominant cultures, races, religions, etc.?
- ▶ Examine how PTA customs that reflect the dominant culture could make others feel isolated (e.g., beginning a meeting with a prayer may make Christians feel welcomed but others uncomfortable).
- ▶ Families may not feel comfortable offering personal information due to immigration status or privacy concerns. Consider how much information you actually need and will consistently use and explore alternatives or more optional information.

Inviting Diverse Perspectives

In order to thrive, PTAs need a diverse group of members and leaders who can offer a variety of perspectives and experiences. Inviting diverse perspectives means being intentional about reaching out to those who haven't always participated. It is important to do outreach and solicit each individual's views in culturally appropriate ways.

Partnering with your local community-based institutions serving specific cultural groups to identify ways you can work together to best serve families can be an effective way to address the gaps you see. **Hawthorn Elementary PTA** in Missouri reached out to the refugee case management agency in their community to ensure new families were invited to the potluck and had all the information they needed.

Another important aspect of inviting diverse perspectives is using two-way communication strategies that are accessible to everyone. At **Plaza PTA** in New York, in addition to translating every flyer and communication that went home into Spanish, they established a Spanish speaking family support group that offered guidance, advice and a sense of community, as families were acclimating to the school.

When you view diversity as an asset, rather than a challenge, it's easy to see the many ways families' unique perspectives can enrich the community. **Churchill Road Elementary School PTA** in Virginia launched a program that invites families into the classroom to read children's books in their native languages. Then the family member leads an activity to teach the class more about their culture.

Other ideas ...

- ▶ Reflect on the demographics of your school community in terms of race/ethnicity, religion, gender, language, sexual orientation, etc. Whose perspective has shaped your approach to family engagement? Whose voice is missing in decision-making?
- ▶ Create affinity groups and leadership development opportunities for groups who are not represented and included in your school and/or PTA.
- ▶ Provide forums for discussion and new learning about sharing power among diverse perspectives.
- ▶ Hold a focus group for families who are not consistently included to get feedback on how you can be more helpful and welcoming.
- ▶ Communicate in the languages your families speak—and teach the whole community the correct pronunciation of key words through videos, emails or morning announcements.
- ▶ Offer varied options for participation. For instance, some individuals will be comfortable sharing in a group setting, while others may prefer more discrete avenues.
- ▶ Think creatively about how your bylaws, committees and other policies can help your PTA reflect the students you serve.

“PTAs everywhere must understand and embrace the uniqueness of all individuals, appreciating that each contributes a diversity of views, experiences, cultural heritage/traditions, skills/abilities, values and preferences.”

Read National PTA's full Diversity & Inclusion Policy [here](#).

Individualized

Advocating for all children means empowering families with **individualized** information, tools, and connections that are relevant to them and their child. Transformative family engagement uses **personalized invitations** to reach families, provides more **tailored experiences** for them to be involved based on their and their child's needs, and **responds to their feedback** and input.

Personalized Invitations

As families scroll through their inboxes, they can easily delete a generic email invitation without much thought. When flyers come home in children's backpacks, they're easily forgotten, lost or tossed away. The most effective ways to engage families is to offer personalized outreach that makes them feel welcomed and valued.

By Middle School, some families become particularly hesitant to engage, especially if their children are no longer excited by their presence at the school. However, at **Noel Grisham Middle School PTA** in Texas, they built enthusiasm for a school-wide dessert night, and had the students invite their own families, which led to a very well attended event!

Other ideas ...

- ▶ Ask and then greet families' by their preferred names (not all families share the same last name as their child or want to be referred to by their child's name only).
- ▶ Have PTA leaders share about upcoming events during pick up and drop off times, at sports games, concerts, and other school events.
- ▶ Reach out to families individually to ask them how they want to be involved.
- ▶ Have students decorate and include the name of a family member or advocate to invite to their parent-teacher conference.
- ▶ Be specific in your outreach. Rather than writing "Dear families," include families' names in your PTA's welcome letter at the beginning of the year to better capture their attention.
- ▶ Include questions about families preferred mode of communication (email, text, etc.) and frequency of communication (monthly, weekly, etc.) in your outreach.

Tailored Experiences

Families will feel most satisfied when they are engaged in activities that meet their specific needs. Some parents don't have time or interest in attending a long meeting or event that covers multiple topics. Consider bringing in a few different speakers on a range of issues and allow families to choose one or two mini-sessions. Communicate ahead of time what aspects of your meeting agenda are for business, what are for sharing ideas or problem-solving, and what are for listening or learning together. This way parents can join you for whatever portion is most interesting to them.

Similarly, families are most willing to help when they know that their skills are being put to good use and that the work they are doing directly benefits the children. **Byram PTA** in New Jersey effectively used the expertise within the community to create meaningful after school learning opportunities for children. They tabled at an event in the community and networked to find contacts who could help to fill their gaps in after school programming. When they met a parent, who was a professional African drum and dance instructor, they worked with him to create an eight-week workshop where children learned about African culture, and how to play drums.

Giving back isn't limited to caregivers with unique talents, though. A grandmother in the community offered to supervise a Lego club, held twice a week at the school. Although she herself was not a master architect, she was able to create a relaxed but organized environment where children could collaborate on projects and get to know others with similar interests.

Other ideas...

- ▶ Divide your literacy or STEM nights into grade-level cohorts where students and families get information relevant to them.
- ▶ Make sure your opportunities for engagement aren't one size fits all. Many families don't want to volunteer or fundraise.
- ▶ Find out areas of interest in your community and invite local experts to speak to families about those topics.
- ▶ Offer a variety of opportunities that can engage parents and caregivers regardless of their schedules and skills (e.g., cooking food for an event, making photocopies for teachers, reading with students in class, assisting with computers and technology at the school).
- ▶ Restructure meetings and events to meet families different needs.
- ▶ Send agendas ahead of time and communicate the purpose of the events so families know what to expect.

Responsive to Feedback

When PTAs are responsive to feedback, families know that their thoughts and suggestions are taken seriously, and they will be more inclined to engage. Feedback from families also provides great insight into what programming will be most successful.

Prior to hosting a Middle School Transition Informational Night, **Henry W. Longfellow Elementary PTA** in California polled its fourth and fifth grade parents and students to find out their top questions and concerns. They analyzed the results of the poll and used the most common questions to guide the evening's discussion.

Other ideas...

- ▶ Have a Q & A portion of your PTA meeting or host an open forum so families have the opportunity to have an open dialogue with administrators and raise the concerns or questions that are most important to them.
- ▶ Create and publicize a policy about the response time for board members to reply to concerns or questions from parents and caregivers (e.g., 48 hours to respond to an email). When volunteers know they'll have timely support on an issue, they are more likely to offer to chair an event or initiative.
- ▶ After you survey families, send an email back thanking them and sharing the highlights from what you discovered in the survey results.
- ▶ Ask your school or district administrators to always share a timely report-back from families' feedback.
- ▶ Make phone calls to families who do not attend your meetings and events and ask them what your PTA could do to make them more inclusive and responsive to their needs.

ACTIVITY IDEA

Host a community listening session to get a better sense of families' most common concerns and questions. Download National PTA's "[Facilitating Community Listening Sessions](#)" toolkit for a step-by-step guide.

week, regardless of how fun and effective the event was. Effective family engagement is not only about one-time events, but also the activities families can do at home and in the community with their child. There are many ways PTAs can engage families besides events, and to create a lasting impact, it is important that PTAs encourage these ongoing opportunities for families to engage in their child's learning.

At **Spring Lane Elementary PTA** in Utah, families collaborated with the school's reading coach to develop an ongoing literacy campaign that got the entire community excited. The literacy campaign encouraged families to download the school district's library app, Sora, and check out at least one book using the app. The PTA encouraged use of the app to check out books by giving out pins to students once they checked out their first book. Data showed that there was a significant increase in app usage from the prior year, and Spring Lane checked out more books than any elementary school

in the district. They through a reading party to celebrate their success and students' enthusiasm for the program was clear.

Other ideas...

- ▶ Provide virtual meeting opportunities using zoom or other technologies.
- ▶ Turn your most popular activity or outreach into a "series."
- ▶ Identify a theme (bonus if it is linked to learning!) that will tie all of your PTA activities and outreach together for the year.
- ▶ Tag-on "mini events" to existing opportunities.
- ▶ Ask your child's principal or teacher to include updates regarding what students are learning and how families can support them in the newsletters that go home.
- ▶ Include important school dates in your PTA calendar for the year so that families can see all the information in one place.

Integrated

When PTAs have an **integrated** approach to family engagement they connect and align their efforts with the broader educational system. Transformative family engagement **goes beyond a one-time event** and provides resources and opportunities that directly **link to learning** and instruction. Integrated approaches **put the "T" in PTA** by engaging teachers and educators in meaningful, authentic ways.

Going Beyond One Time Events

With all that families have going on, they may forget much of what they learned at a PTA event by the next

See it in action: Videos can help families navigate aspects of school life. View the [tutorial videos](#) that **Mount Morris PTSA** in New York created in English and in Spanish for inspiration!

Linking to Learning

PTA initiatives are most powerful when they help families understand what their children are learning. Many schools offer an overview of the curriculum at Back to School night, but there are more interactive ways to bring learning to life. **North Jackson Elementary PTA** in Mississippi hosts “Are You Smarter than a 3rd Grader” workshops, where families follow the schedules of their children and learn the same content their children are learning. The program enabled families to learn new terminology and techniques they can use to support their third graders’ learning at home.

Family fun nights can also be an effective way to connect families to classroom learning. Think about swapping out your movie night for something more engaging. At **Loftis Middle School** in Tennessee, the PTA hosted an “Escape Room” for families to participate in. They collaborated with teachers to create standards-aligned “puzzles” that parents and kids needed to complete to “escape” from their grade.

Other ideas...

- ▶ Provide time at PTA meetings for educators to share about the curriculum, grade level standards, testing and other academic topics.
- ▶ Plan educational event nights that are aligned with the curriculum and grade level standards. Incorporate opportunities for students to show their families what they’re learning.
- ▶ Include a shared learning component of family fun nights and carnivals.
- ▶ Share a newsletter with families where educators and administrators can include a couple of questions or recommendations for families to do at home with their child.

Putting the “T” in PTA

In order to create a strong connection between school and home life, teachers must be included in PTA activities in meaningful ways. Collaborating with teachers to around programming and advocacy efforts can make them even more transformative. The **Orange Avenue PTA** in Connecticut collaborated with teachers to create a summer “mystery reader” video series. Prior to the end of the school year, the PTA created a series

of 10 videos, which would be sent out weekly by the principal during the summer. Each video features a classroom teacher reading a favorite book to the camera and reminds families to keep reading throughout the summer. This fun strategy encourages literacy development and connects families to the school during the summer months. Putting the “T” in PTA is also about pushing for teachers to consistently and effectively reach out to their families. A recent survey found that 74% of teachers say that they need more help engaging families.⁹ Some district and state PTAs are responding to this need by partnering with their teachers’ unions or advocating for more professional development for teachers on family engagement.

Other ideas...

- ▶ Invite teachers (and their families) to be involved in the school events. Teachers are often utilized as volunteers for educational programs, but don’t forget to invite them as guests to your events, as well.
- ▶ Offer choice to teachers when it comes to their resources. Whether you’re ordering new books or magazines, furniture or tech devices, ask for input from the people who will be using the items.
- ▶ Ask for educators’ guidance in connecting educational events to the curriculum. Educators are a valuable resource when it comes to planning STEM nights, reading challenges or other events.
- ▶ Don’t be shy to ask teachers to be members of your PTA!
- ▶ Meet with your local teachers’ union representatives to identify areas where you have shared goals and could collaborate.
- ▶ Ask teachers how they want to engage families and what help they need to do so.

Impactful

To make every child’s potential a reality, PTAs must ensure that family engagement events, programs, and policies all come back to helping kids. Transformative family engagement gives families and educators **new knowledge and skills**, provides them **opportunities to practice and interact** so they can take put these things to use, and **measures success** beyond headcounts.

Building New Knowledge & Skills

PTA initiatives make a meaningful impact when they enable families to learn new strategies for engaging with their children. Families appreciate initiatives and activities that teach them useful strategies that they can use in their day-to-day lives.

Keeping this in mind, **APPLES PTA** in Connecticut hosted a story time which doubled as a parent training session to equip parents and caregivers with the strategies for helping their children become successful readers. The read aloud demonstrated to families how to read in engaging ways and articulated the importance of comprehension. The event made emphasized that three and four-year-olds can develop important reading skills, even before they can read, by listening to stories with their families.

Other ideas...

- ▶ As you plan your agenda, write down what your objectives are for people who attend. What will they walk away with because they spent their time with you?
- ▶ Incorporate a learning opportunity into every PTA meeting. This could be a guest speaker, Q & A with a teacher or principal, or even just a helpful fact about school life.
- ▶ Provide families with helpful tools that will help them build continue to build skills at home, like a take home STEM activity to do with their child, or a set of questions to ask their child about what they are learning.
- ▶ Create a resource and referral google doc where families can recommend resources to each other that have been helpful to them on certain topics.
- ▶ Incorporate intentional leadership development practices as you think about building PTA leaders beyond your current Board.

Providing Opportunities to Practice & Interact

In order to create lasting change in the community, families need opportunities to practice the new skills they've learned. Schools and PTAs can help by encouraging families to take information from PTA meetings and events and continue the conversation with their children. **Arrowhead Elementary School PTA** in Ohio trains volunteers and engages families in their Nature Zone Learning Center. Here, students, community and family volunteers, and staff work

together to model and lead hands-on lessons where everyone gets to interact in an outdoor learning space. The PTA helps lead biweekly lessons on the earth, healthy eating, and other topics. These volunteers collaborate with staff to connect to grade-level standards and make sure their activities are as interactive as possible.

Other ideas...

- ▶ Host a data night that shows parents how to access the parent portal—and have them practice on their phones.
- ▶ Use parent teacher conferences as an opportunity to model activities that parents and can do to support learning at home.
- ▶ Have families sit in on a Restorative Justice circle so they can see what it looks like in action, and practice similar skills at home.
- ▶ Look at your event and programs and ensure that 50% of your time is interactive.

Measuring Success

Finding a way to measure the impact of your initiatives may feel overwhelming, but it doesn't need to. There are many ways to assess the efficacy of your work, and one very simple method is asking families what they thought. Informal conversations can be a valuable source of information. **Hooksett PTA**, in New Hampshire, not only collected quantitative data so they could determine what percent of participants felt the event achieved its objective, but they also asked open ended questions. These written responses enabled the PTA to use feedback to tailor future discussions and activities to better meet families' needs.

Many PTAs measure success based on how many people show up or how much money an event or initiative raises. While these are good metrics to start with, measuring success goes a step further. Not all families are able to attend events, so success may mean finding different ways to engage with families. Events with low turnout may still be successful, if families found the programming beneficial, and especially if many of the families are showing up for the first time. PTAs can push their schools to see that judging success based on head counts and dollars raised can sometimes lead to a biased sense of how effective their family engagement practices are.

Other ideas...

- ▶ If you're tight for time, do a representative sample of follow up customer service calls, where you call five people who attended the event, what would they do differently, what did they think.
- ▶ Identify three questions that you'll ask at all your events, 1. Was it useful? 2. Would you recommend to another parent? 3. Are you interested in learning more and being a PTA member?
- ▶ Build 10 minutes into any family engagement program or event for a live debrief where you ask them what they liked and what they'd like to see differently next time.
- ▶ Distribute a post event survey where participants can rate different aspects of the event so you can receive quantitative data.
- ▶ Ask your school or local community venue if you can include a recommendations box for your PTA for feedback.



Take the next step to transform family engagement at your school by participating in the Schools of Excellence program.

If you're interested in learning more about Transformative Family Engagement visit us at PTA.org/FamilyEngagement.

Do you have a great example of how your PTA practices one of the 4 I's? Email us to share your best practices at FamilyEngagement@PTA.org for the chance to be included in a future publication!

¹ Henderson, A.T. & Mapp, K.L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement. Austin: SEDL. Hill, N. & Tyson, D. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3): pgs. 730-763. Fan, X. & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13: 1: pgs. 1-22. Jeynes, W. (2012). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students. *Urban Education*, 47, 706-742.

² Bryk, et al. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Learning Heroes. (2019). "The Case for An Accurate Picture: Parent Mindsets on Education Trends 2016-2019." Alexandria, VA. Retrieved from www.bealearninghero.org

⁴ Robinson, K. & Harris, A. (2014). *The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with Children's Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Teacher and Principal School Report: Equity in Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.scholastic.com/teacherprincipalreport/families-and-communities.htm>



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