

Advocacy Guidance: Securing Government Funding for Evidence-Based Family Engagement Programs



Introduction

Over 40 years of data shows the importance of collaboration between schools, education leaders, families and community members to create a supportive educational ecosystem, leading to improved academic outcomes and student well-being.

Nevertheless, many school districts still struggle to meaningfully connect with families in their community, and evidence-based family engagement programs can provide the technical assistance, training and support needed to meet challenges and strengthen family-school partnerships.

This toolkit provides guidance for parent leaders and other community members to advocate for deeper investments in family engagement nationally, across their state and in their community.

Family Engagement 101

What is family engagement?

- Family engagement is a shared and collaborative effort to advance programs, practices and policies that empower families in every facet of the education and development of children and youth from birth to adulthood.
- Family engagement takes many forms, including but not limited to parents' role as first educators and primary influences in the lives of their children, as decision-makers about the education of children and youth, health, and well-being, and as advocates for the success of children and youth.
- Transformative family engagement reimagines traditional family engagement with a focus on practices and policies that are more inclusive, individualized, integrated and impactful.

Why is family engagement important?

- Decades of research show that family engagement matters for student success. This research shows the essential role families play in fostering student success and school improvement.
- In particular, research has shown that family engagement advances the academic and developmental progress of our nation’s children, helping to drive increases in student achievement and also has a positive impact on school attendance and school climate.
- Students whose families are engaged are more likely to attend school, avoid discipline problems, achieve at higher levels and graduate high school.
- Research also suggests family engagement is equally as important as school leadership or a rigorous curriculum to predict school improvement.
- Parents and guardians provide important perspectives on decisions impacting children, families and schools and are key partners in the educational success and well-being of all children.
- Providing parents with the opportunity to work in partnership with educators and school leaders toward the improvement of teaching, learning and school leadership is an important part of building and sustaining excellent schools.
- Although there is consensus that family engagement matters, families and educators often struggle to figure out how to engage with one another in ways that reach all families and positively impact student success.

How can school leaders and policymakers strengthen family engagement?

- Over the last few years, there has been increased interest from policymakers in uplifting the parent and family voice and strengthening family engagement in our nation’s education system.
- Now more than ever, it is critical to advocate for, and champion, policies and funding that support all families and center the perspectives and needs of families.
- Policies and funding should emphasize inclusive and meaningful family engagement and promote safe, welcoming, supportive and inclusive schools for all students and families.
- It is important that school leaders and policymakers support approaches that are equitable and evidence based, like those featured on [Family Engagement Solutions](#), so that all families are treated as a valuable partner in their child’s education and have the information and tools to help each and every child realize their potential.
- School boards and districts can also institutionalize a commitment to family engagement by adopting policies that provide a framework for high-quality practices and programs. This sample uses the [National Standards for Family School Partnerships](#) to do so.
- Local, state and federal investments in family engagement programs are critical to their success and school leaders and policymakers must leverage government funding – at the local, state and federal level – to incentivize and support family engagement initiatives in schools and communities across the country and strengthen family school partnerships.

- Historically, family engagement has been nonpartisan and policymakers from both sides of the aisle have continuously affirmed their support for strengthening family engagement.

Template Advocacy Letter

Below you will find a letter you can copy, personalize and send to your elected officials encouraging funding for evidence-based family engagement programs. While this letter is specific to a national family engagement program run by the federal government, called the Statewide Family Engagement Centers Program, you can edit the letter to urge financial support for any evidence-based family engagement program in your community.

As you engage in this advocacy, you may also want to consider additional ways you can repurpose this letter (and the talking points above) to further this work in your community. For example, you could use these templates and resources as a basis for remarks that you give at your local school board meeting, or as a basis for written comments you submit to your state board of education about their ESSA plan, or as the basis of an op-ed you write for your local newspaper, or as testimony provided to your state legislature.

Dear [Policymaker],

On behalf of [list here the organization(s) sending this letter], we respectfully request at least [\$25 million] for the [Statewide Family Engagement Centers grant program].

[If you are sending this letter as an individual, you can adapt the first paragraph to “As a constituent and parent, I respectfully request...”]

Research shows that family engagement advances the academic and developmental progress of our nation’s children and drives increases in student achievement. Amid an alarming rise in chronic absenteeism, new research also shows that family engagement positively impacts attendance and school climate.

The [Statewide Family Engagement Centers grant program] provides much-needed technical assistance and partnership development to states and school districts to foster meaningful engagement with families. These centers work with all parents and schools throughout their state to create systemic improvements and simultaneously provide direct services to families to equip them with the tools to effectively work with schools to improve academic outcomes and overall well-being for their children. The success of these centers has been well documented, and they serve as a vital resource for families during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Investment in the [Statewide Family Engagement Centers grant program] is critical to ensuring that families are meaningfully supported and engaged in their child’s education, so they can support our nation’s students in becoming fully prepared for higher education and careers. Historically, family engagement has boasted strong bipartisan support, and now more than ever, continued bipartisan support for evidence-based family engagement programs is needed to strengthen family-school partnerships in our community and address current challenges for our students, families, and schools.

For these reasons, we respectfully request at least [\$25 million] for the [Statewide Family Engagement Centers grant program]. Thank you again for your consideration of our request, and we look forward to working with you to support this important program.

Sincerely,

[List organization(s) sending the letter]

[If you are sending this letter as an individual, you can write your full name and address]

Resources

Below are additional resources that can inform your work and enhance your efforts to secure funding for evidence-based family engagement programs and strengthen family-school partnerships in your community.

[Advocacy Toolkit](#)

A toolkit from National PTA designed to help advocates speak up for the health and wellbeing of all children and youth that includes guidance on writing legislators, building coalitions, conducting meetings, preparing testimony, working with the media and more.

[Family Engagement Solutions](#)

A free online tool from National PTA for administrators, educators and advocates to discover evidence-based programs that strengthen family-school partnerships across the country.

[Leveraging Federal Funding to Strengthen Family-School Partnerships](#)

An overview from National PTA of the major sources of federal funding that are available to schools, local education agencies (LEAs), state education agencies (SEAs) and nonprofit organizations to partner with a provider of an evidence-based family engagement program.

[Primer: Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#)

An overview from National PTA of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a monumental law passed in 2015 that provided state and local governments more control over their public education systems and included measures to strengthen family-school partnerships.

[Engaging Families through ESSA](#)

Resources from National PTA designed to help families and community members understand the parent and family engagement requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

[Statewide Family Engagement Centers Program](#)

An overview from the U.S. Department of Education of the national family engagement program run by the federal government, the Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC) Program.

[Parent and Family Engagement under Title I, Part A of ESEA](#)

Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education detailing the requirements for parent and family engagement under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act. The guidance also includes a list of key Title I, Part A parental notice requirements, a template that might be used for the development of a district-wide parent and family engagement policy, and a template for a school-parent compact.

[National Standards for Family-School Partnerships](#)

Recommendations from National PTA highlighting the key tenets of effective family engagement practices that support student success and well-being.

[Evidence for ESSA](#)

A free, web-based resource created by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at John Hopkins University that provides easy access to information on programs that meet the evidence standards defined in the Every Student Succeeds Act.

[Center for Family Engagement](#)

A National PTA initiative that aims to embed transformative family engagement practices, programs and policies across the educational system, through a focus on grassroots leadership development, so that every parent is treated as a valuable partner in their child's education.

[A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement](#)

A resource from the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools summarizing decades of research on the impact of family engagement.

Investigating the Relationship between Pre-Pandemic Family Engagement and Student and School Outcomes

A resource from Learning Heroes and TNTIP exploring how schools with strong family engagement prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were better equipped to withstand the academic impacts of school disruptions.

Why Family Engagement Matters for Student and School Success

An overview from National PTA of research findings on the impact of meaningful, inclusive, and evidence-based family engagement approaches.

Understanding the Department of Education's Evidence Definitions

A presentation from the U.S. Department of Education explaining how federal education law and the Department's regulations define different "tiers" of evidence for education activities, strategies, and interventions.

Position on Family Engagement in Education

Recommendations from National PTA on strengthening family engagement in education through public policy.

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