

What Actually Works in Family Engagement: Four Strategic Shifts for Schools

In the last decade, research on family engagement has clarified which forms of family engagement most influence child wellbeing and academic performance. The recommendations below are based on a comprehensive review of experimental and quasi-experimental studies published between 2015-2025, multiple meta-analytic studies, and an original analysis of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), the largest nationally representative dataset linking family engagement, school engagement, mental health, and academic outcomes.



#1: SHIFT THE LOCATION OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FROM SCHOOL TO HOME.

Family engagement matters a great deal, but where it happens matters more. For decades, family engagement has been an uphill battle to involve parents and caregivers in school-based activities. Yet the evidence consistently reveals school involvement has the lowest impact on child outcomes, when compared to home involvement. The strongest effects on attendance, academic performance, and child wellbeing come from what happens within the home. **Everyone benefits when schools shift their family engagement strategy to strengthening families' capacity to support child wellbeing and learning at home.**



#2: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IS THE INTERVENTION.

One of the most important findings to emerge from family engagement research over the past decade is the role of parenting style in shaping child outcomes. **Even after accounting for household income and demographic factors, the quality of the parent-child relationship consistently emerges as one of the strongest predictors of child wellbeing and academic success.** Parenting marked by warmth, clear structure, and autonomy-supportive guidance is strongly associated with improved mental health, school engagement and academic performance. It may seem challenging for schools to address parent-child relationships; however, **a joint partnership on a child's learning and wellbeing, through shared language and strategies, opens the doorway to support the parent-child relationship.**



#3: FROM "ONE-SIZE FITS ALL" ENGAGEMENT TO DIFFERENTIATED and TIERED SKILL-BUILDING SUPPORT.

Rather than uniform activities, the most effective forms of family engagement support are skill-based and developmentally-oriented. Importantly, these practices operate across income and demographic groups. Schools are more effective when family engagement responds to the **real questions and challenges families face, offering support that is accessible (multi-lingual and mobile), practical (addresses felt needs), and integrated with strategies that are being implemented in the school environment.**



#4: PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT ON MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH.

Mental health is not peripheral to school engagement or academic performance. It is a prerequisite for it. A student's ability to regulate emotions, build and sustain healthy relationships, focus and persist through challenges directly shapes attendance, classroom behavior, and academic performance. Mental health challenges are strongly associated with diminished academic outcomes. Proactive engagement means shifting from crisis response to early detection and attention to protective factors. **Two-way communication between educators and caregivers, tiered, developmentally responsive and culturally sensitive support, evidence-based family engagement strategies, and clearly defined early indicators of wellbeing risk factors collectively enable schools to shift mental health engagement upstream.**

Family Engagement, Academic Achievement, and Adolescent Mental Health References (APA 7th Edition)

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