

Families as Partners in Learning: Family Engagement

September 2023



Overview

The research is clear. Family engagement matters.

Family engagement has long been recognized as crucial to a child's overall academic achievement (Hattie, 2009). The National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) recognizes that evolving from traditional parental involvement to effective partnerships between families and family-facing practitioners improves learning outcomes for students as a critical practice that requires deepened commitment (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Epstein, 1995). What defines successful family engagement is less about prescriptive, one-size-fits-all strategies and more about learning outcomes: successful family engagement strategies honor parents and caregivers as a child's first teacher. This partnership links learning and development, creates leadership opportunities for families, and opens or expands channels of parental advocacy and support for learning within and beyond the school walls.

Throughout its history, NCFL has maintained a commitment to equity through its multigenerational programming for families furthest from opportunity. Our bold vision for 2023 and beyond builds upon this legacy work, and sees family engagement as one of three core elements of a Family Learning System, alongside family literacy and family leadership. This brief provides an in-depth description of NCFL's approach to family engagement, the models that put that approach into practice, and the work still to be done to ensure that family engagement practices that service all children are embedded in schools and communities across the country.

Defining Family Engagement

NCFL defines family engagement as **the partnership between families and practitioners aimed at providing children and families with voice and agency throughout educational systems and within communities for the benefit of improving learning outcomes.** The benefits

of these partnerships are reciprocal: children experience higher graduation and attendance rates and families build social capital, enhance parental resilience, access concrete support services, and develop an expansive perception of their role in their child's education. At the same time, practitioners build trust and partnership with families, experience positive changes in mindset, and improve their cultural and community awareness (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). A comprehensive approach such as this has the ability to create amplified impact for children and families.

NCFL's Family Literacy model, launched more than 30 years ago, established a strong example of deep family engagement working alongside educators and parenting adults to build reading and literacy practices. Building on this success, our family engagement efforts have expanded, applied current research, and created new opportunities for working in schools and communities. Leading research has long focused on school turnaround efforts and has identified parent and family engagement as an essential component for schoolwide transformation (Bryk, 2010).

NCFL's Family Engagement efforts build on the momentum of P-12 school-wide transformation by being responsive to families who desire increased opportunities for engagement and instilling school leaders and educators with an understanding of the ways increased family engagement can help achieve school goals. By providing targeted support to school districts and families, NCFL ensures that the essential conditions for effective partnerships are designed to be systemic, integrated, and sustained (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

To facilitate this work, NCFL relies on a set of foundational equity design principles that ensure the organization joins communities and partnerships ready to listen to the experiences and goals of the people most impacted by our work—families and practitioners. These

principles help NCFL to counteract the implicit biases inherent in many systems by (1) fostering community leadership and building capacity, (2) addressing issues of education inequities, (3) working towards systems change, (4) sharing power in decision making, (5) prioritizing relationships, and (6) practicing inclusivity (McKercher, 2021; Hill, Molitor & Ortiz, 2016).

To increase the capacity for practitioners to effectively partner with families, NCFL has created a myriad of professional learning opportunities that engage family-facing professionals in ongoing reflection concerning their mindsets and practices. Participants build their knowledge of effective strategies for deep engagement with families, transcending activities which oftentimes do not result in the impact desired. Practitioners and system leaders also work to establish goals for individual, school, and district-wide improvement.

When considering the location of family engagement programming, schools and early childhood education (ECE) centers are undoubtedly important hubs for learning, but the limited amount of time children and families spend in these spaces demands a more expansive view of program setting. Community contexts such as libraries, out-of-school programs, science centers, and museums already play a significant role as the backdrop for where powerful learning opportunities can occur (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018). Formalizing learning in these contexts create greater opportunity for equity, reach, and impact.

NCFL's Approach to Family Engagement

Intentional effort is required to transform the idea of family engagement from ad hoc communication and parental involvement to authentic, relevant, and substantive partnerships between families and practitioners. NCFL's three family engagement models provide a framework to support family engagement across the learning continuum—birth to adulthood. These models are supported by a robust variety of resources and tools—including the award-winning inquiry-based learning platform, Wonderopolis® and Learning Outside of School—that families can use directly or that can be plugged into an educator's existing family engagement practices.

NCFL Models for Family Engagement include:

- **Play with Purpose (birth-age 5):** NCFL's family engagement programming offers dual capacity-building for practitioners and for family members spanning birth to adulthood, beginning with our early childhood Play with Purpose programming. Play with Purpose is a facilitated playgroup that supports family relationship-building and child development through play-based learning. Young children (ages 0-3) and preschoolers (ages 3-5) learn alongside other families during weekly in-person sessions, and are provided with books, supplemental materials (toys, tools, etc.), and additional Play Cards for at-home Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time® between sessions. NCFL's Family Engagement professionals provide ongoing coaching for playgroup facilitators throughout the program along with technical assistance as needed.
- **P-12 District Family Engagement Model:** As children enter into preschool, NCFL's focus turns to district and school-based programmatic support. NCFL's P-12 District Model contributes a roadmap to the field for how educators can create tangible, systemic strategies to drive equity-centered engagement with families. The P-12 District Model utilizes a multi-year partnership that provides a pre-assessment to set goals and uncover district needs for family engagement implementation efforts. This pre-work is followed by four phases of support: (1) *building district-level leadership capacity* to ensure staff have developed the competencies and skills to embed family engagement goals as priorities for student success; (2) *building school wide leadership capacity* to guide school leaders through the process of establishing family engagement teams and fostering school-family relationship-building; (3) *school-wide implementation* to put family engagement efforts into practice, examine the resulting data, and reflect on the impact these efforts have on student success; and (4) *planning for addressing sustainability* to develop strategies for scaling family engagement programming to all schools district-wide.

- **Out-of-School Time (OST) Practices:** NCFL acknowledges that schools—while continuing to be an important engagement partner—must not be the only setting in which family engagement work occurs. Meaningful and relevant family engagement efforts are also necessary outside of the traditional school settings. Libraries have historically been a hub for families to gain access to critical resources and support, and they can provide an effective space for family engagement to thrive. NCFL leverages this space through our [Let's Learn Together Outside](#) and Library Workshops to Go programs.
- **Statewide:** Since 2018, the U.S. Department of Education has administered Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC) through a competitive grant process. The goal of the SFEC is to provide training and technical assistance to state and local education agencies to support the implementation of systematic programs and policies in support of family-school partnerships (USDE, 2019). Each SFEC receives \$5M over the course of five years to establish strong family engagement practices statewide. In 2019, NCFL and its partners were awarded SFEC grants in Arizona and Nebraska. In 2022, NCFL led the launch of a Colorado SFEC with key partners from across the state. In 2023, NCFL was awarded an SFEC grant in North Carolina and was chosen to continue its leadership of the Nebraska SFEC for a second five-year term. NCFL has also served as a partner on several other SFECs, including in Kentucky and Maryland.

Family Engagement in Practice

For more than three decades, NCFL has been deeply involved in strategic efforts to advance family engagement practices at the national, state, and district levels. With an effort to highlight promising practices in the field, the following examples include a focus on improved outcomes for children and families:

- **District-wide:** NCFL leads family engagement coaching and support for Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) in Louisville, Kentucky. JCPS is the largest school system in Kentucky and the 30th largest school system in the United States, with nearly 96,000 students. Together, NCFL and JCPS have realized compelling and sustained impact. Schools across the district are including family members on their engagement teams and working to co-create engagement practices like caregiver surveys and schoolwide events. Schools are also using intentional strategies to communicate with multilingual families, from hosting parent resource sessions to purchasing simultaneous interpretation systems. JCPS educators have been impacted, too. As a result of professional learning opportunities, educators are using engagement practices to learn about and elevate the unique skills and knowledge families possess and connect around academic goals. As a direct result of this work, two JCPS schools were named “Family-Friendly Schools” by the Kentucky Collaborative for Families and Schools in 2022.
- **National:** In 2023, NCFL and the Public Library Association launched *Developing Practices for Authentic Engagement of Spanish-Speaking Families*. This transformative three-year program will engage state libraries across the nation build their capacity to (1) meaningfully engage Spanish-speaking families through the principles of co-design, (2) gain an in-depth understanding of the differentiated needs of Spanish-speaking families within their communities, (3) create tangible tools and resources to be shared within state library channels, and (4) create and deepen partnerships to support more inclusive library services.

The Work Ahead

A strength of our democracy is the engagement and advocacy of others in key processes which shape our future. Family engagement practices are fundamental in shaping schooling and learning experiences. Partnership between families and practitioners foster relational trust and lead to improved student learning which is urgent work for this generation. Resolving the systemic inequities across the country in systems requires a different approach—one with proven

research and evidence-based practices. As the nation navigates challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, academic learning loss, and the social emotional well-being of children, it's important to recognize that the diversity in opportunities to engage families in innovative ways has dramatically increased. NCFL is committed to co-designing transformative solutions with families and practitioners that are grounded in current research and best practices in the field.

NCFL has an ambitious vision for the next decade that builds upon the organization's legacy work and charts a new course deepening effective practices in family engagement. NCFL's 60x30 Vision aims to establish coordinated and aligned Family Learning Systems in 60 communities

by 2030 that will include family literacy, family engagement, and family leadership as key components. Each Family Learning System will not only support the multigenerational learning that has long been a crucial part of our work, they will also ensure that learning is happening beyond school walls and will create greater access and opportunity for families to engage.

NCFL invites you to keep abreast of our ongoing family engagement efforts across the country and to follow along with the organization's 60X30 Vision. Updates are available on the [NCFL blog](#) and through the Family Learning Insider [newsletter](#). Partners, organizations, or educators interested in learning more about NCFL's available family engagement training and other resources can contact info@familieslearning.org for further assistance.

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