



Reducing Barriers to Family Engagement

How Your District Can Understand and Address Common Barriers to Engagement with Families



The Importance of Family Engagement

“Three decades of research have shown that parental participation improves students' learning. This is true whether the child is in preschool or the upper grades, whether the family is rich or poor, whether the parents finished high school.”

US Department of Education

Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning

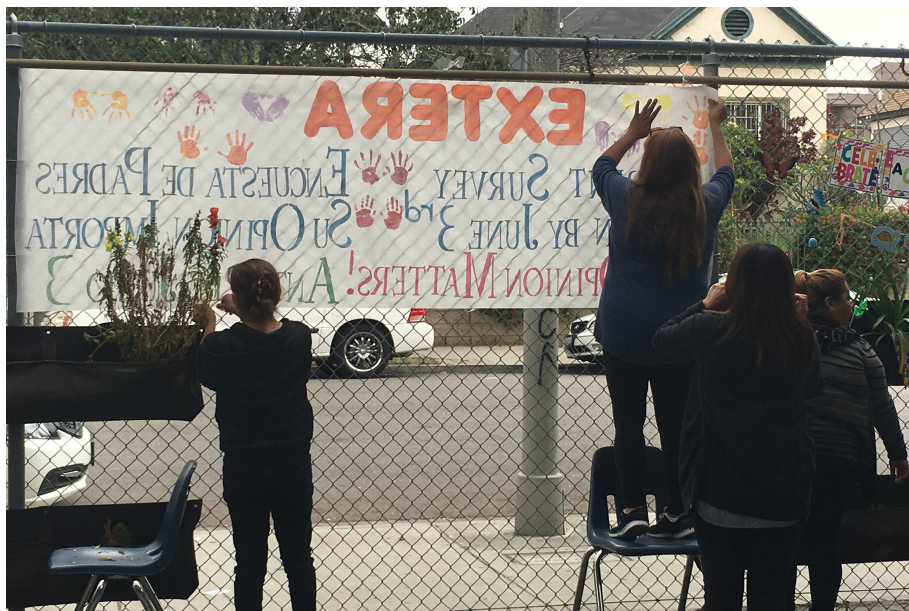
Since the US Department issued the 1994 report on *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, the body of evidence showing that family engagement impacts learning has continued to grow. Schools that engage families find that their students have higher grades, show faster rates of literacy acquisition, attend school more regularly, and are more likely to graduate. With researchers such as Dr. Karen Mapp further establishing the importance of family-school partnerships (2002; 2006), we know that engaging families is critical for student success in academics and for social and emotional development, as well as for the overall school climate.

School communities experience various barriers to productive engagement between families and school. Some common barriers, like families' busy schedules, reside more

under the locus of control of parents and guardians. But many barriers, such as families perceiving school as unwelcoming or feeling that they don't get enough information from school about how they can be involved, are areas that administrators and teachers can improve when they understand the underlying obstacle or challenge.

The first step to reducing barriers to family engagement is to understand the obstacles and challenges families in your districts experience. Too often, what school administrators and teachers perceive as barriers to engaging families doesn't line up with families' experiences. Administrators and teachers may draw conclusions from anecdotal experiences or listen to the voices of a subset of families, instead of relying on robust data on the barriers to family engagement.

One way to reliably understand the barriers experienced by families in your districts is conducting a family survey. Using survey data, rather than anecdotes, to understand the factors that most create challenges for your families to engage with school, family engagement coordinators and district teams can create goals and actionable plans to reduce barriers to engage more effectively with more families.



School leaders find it useful to collect survey data, rather than anecdotes, to understand the factors that most create challenges for your families to engage with school. Above, leaders in Extera Public Schools (Calif.) display banners sharing information about their family survey.



Understanding Family Engagement with Survey Data

By using survey questions to identify what family members perceive as obstacles to engaging with their child's school, schools can set goals and improve family-school partnerships in targeted, data-driven ways. The [Panorama Family-School Relationships Survey](#) was developed in a partnership with researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to provide schools with a clear picture of family attitudes about an array of topics. In total, the Family-School Relationships Survey includes measures of ten areas of family engagement, including Family Support, School Fit, School Climate, and Barriers to Engagement.

Schools and districts use the Family-School Relationships Survey to gather feedback for a variety of purposes. Many use the survey to determine strengths and areas for improvements as a needs assessment and examine results across different groups of parents to see how different groups view the school. Other schools measure change in families' attitudes over time to assess whether family engagement programs and initiatives are moving the needle in positive directions. By asking questions about

Family-School Relationships Survey

10 survey scales developed according to best practices of survey design:

- Barriers to Engagement
- Family Engagement
- School Fit
- Family Support
- Family Efficacy
- Learning Behaviors
- School Climate
- Grit
- Roles and Responsibility
- School Safety

“Barriers to Engagement” districts can diagnose obstacles to engagement and create targeted plans for reducing and removing them.

In addition, using Panorama’s platform to administer the survey and interact with survey results, administrators can use subgroup breakdowns to see how common barriers are experienced differently by different groups of parents. By exploring barriers to engagement broken out into groups of families (with children receiving special education services, free and reduced price lunch, grade level, and other groups), administrators are assured they hear and understand the perceptions and concerns of all families and can plan engagement strategies to reach all families.

“Engaging families is critical for student success in academics and for social and emotional development, as well as for the overall school climate.”

Barriers to Engagement

Factors that can create challenges for families to interact with or become involved with their child’s school.

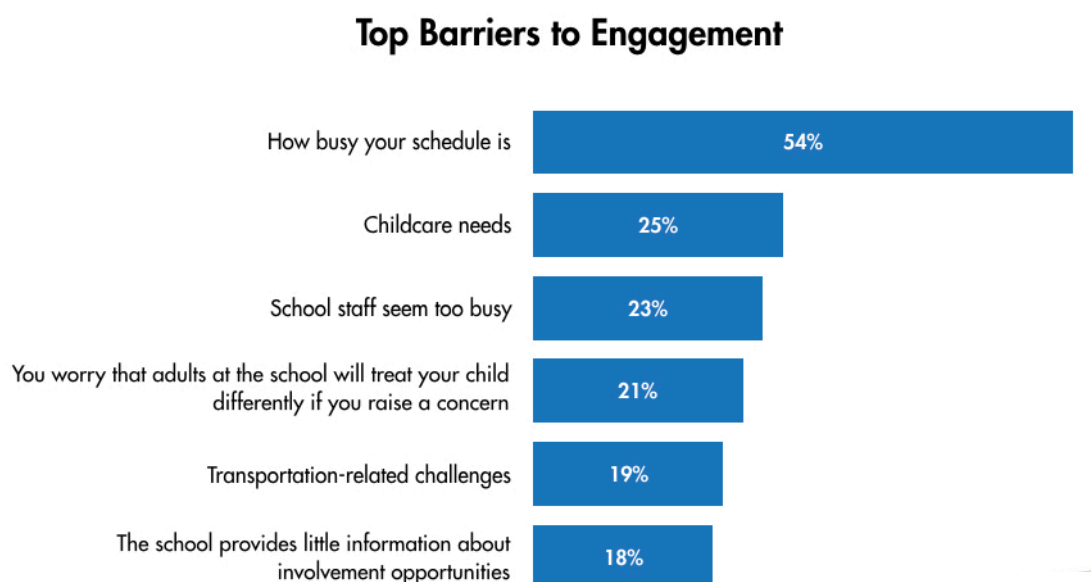
The “Barriers to Engagement” topic includes 13 questions designed to pinpoint the factors that create challenges for families to engage with their child’s school. The research team that developed the Panorama Family-School Relationships Survey identified top barriers to engagement through a rigorous survey design process that included an extensive literature review, focus groups, expert review, and cognitive pre-testing with survey participants.

Item	Responses				
How big of a problem are the following issues for becoming involved with your child's current school?					
Childcare needs	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
Transportation-related challenges	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
Concerns about getting to the school safely	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
How busy your schedule is	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
School staff seem too busy	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
You feel unsure about how to communicate with the school	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
The school provides little information about involvement opportunities	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
The school is not welcoming to parents	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
The school does not communicate well with people from your culture	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
You do not feel a sense of belonging with your child's school community	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
Negative memories of your own school experience	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
Your child does not want you to contact the school	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
You worry that adults at the school will treat your child differently if you raise a concern	Not a problem at all	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem

“Barriers to Engagement” questions on Panorama’s Family-School Relationship Survey. [Download the complete survey here.](#)

A Look at Nationwide Data on Barriers to Engagement

We looked at data from the Family-School Relationships Survey, which include responses from over 18,000 parents and guardians from diverse school communities across the country. Specifically, we asked family members to respond to the following question: How big of a problem are the following issues for becoming involved with your child's current school?



Responses from 18,000 family members on barriers to engaging with their child's school. Learn more at www.panoramaed.com



[Click to share this graph](#)

The most common barrier to engagement is lack of time, with 54% of parents and guardians reporting that their busy schedule is a medium to very large problem for becoming involved with their child's school. Other top barriers to engagement include childcare needs, a perception that school staff seem too busy, and that the school provides little information about involvement opportunities. About one-fifth of family members "worry that adults at the school will treat your child differently if you raise a concern." The two most common barriers to engagement reported by families are largely out of school leaders' control, but this feedback can guide school leaders to look for efficient and lightweight ways to involve families and make them feel welcome at school.



Using Feedback to Guide Strategies for Engagement

After gathering specific feedback from families about their perceptions about the factors that prevent them from involvement with school, districts can employ strategies to help reduce barriers and boost engagement. When schools identify, for example, that many parents and guardians feel that “the school provides little information about involvement opportunities” they can rally administrators, family engagement coordinators, and teachers around improved communication strategies.

Many schools and districts have found it powerful to start using some of these strategies to reduce barriers to family engagement:

- **Greet everyone who comes into school.** It’s a great practice for all staff to extend a verbal welcome when family members come into school. This can increase families’ sense that they are welcome and belong at school. It’s rare that staff are too busy for a quick “hello”!
- **Use multiple channels and approaches for communicating with families.** With busy schedules, it’s important to communicate with families using all of the channels at your disposal. Share information about opportunities for families to be involved with school through email, social media, school newsletters and letters back-packed home with students.

- **Show families you are listening.** Host a roundtable or focus group to hear what's on parents' and guardians' minds. After your school or district runs a family survey, share the results with families in a public forum and discuss action steps the school plans to take to improve. Consider sharing survey results and on your school website, in newsletters, and in the local newspaper.

Resources for Building Strong Family-School Engagement

- [The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) (Scholastic FACE)
- [Webinar: Hosting Effective Family Events](#) (Panorama Education and Scholastic FACE)
- [Family-School Relationships Survey - User Guide](#) (Panorama Education)
- [A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement](#), Karen Map, 2002 (National Center for Community and Family Connections with Schools)
- *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, Karen Mapp, et al, 2006, The New Press

Learn more!

Interested in learning how to use data to measure and understand the barriers to engagement with families in your school or district?

[Click here](#) to schedule a quick conversation with Panorama to see how our Family-School Relationships Survey can support your work with families.

About Panorama Education



Panorama Education partners with schools, districts, charter networks, and state departments of education to collect and analyze data about social-emotional learning, school climate, family engagement, and more. With research-backed surveys and a leading technology platform, Panorama helps educators act on data to improve student outcomes.

Panorama has supported more than 15 million students in 25,000 schools across all 50 states, including those in the New York City Department of Education, Dallas Independent School District, Seattle Public Schools, and San Francisco Unified School District. To learn more, visit www.panoramaed.com.