

Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Improving Education Governance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A balance of power between educators, families, community members, and education policymakers is critical for respectful, authentic partnerships between school districts and families — partnerships that advance student outcomes. However, state legislatures and district administrators rarely provide families and communities opportunities to collaborate on important decisions that affect their children's learning.

Districts can use family and community collaboration (FCC) to balance the voices and perspectives of all groups. For FCC to be a universal priority in every school district, state and local education agencies must reform governance structures to share power and influence among the people who support student learning more directly: educators, families, and community groups.

Just as district administrators and educators must intentionally build partnerships and relationships with families, so too should all governing bodies. Through increasing representation and decision-making opportunities for all families, everyone at all levels can work together to improve student and societal outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Specifically, we recommend that state legislators, local governing bodies, and school districts:

- **Provide open access and accommodations for all families to participate in policymaking.** Collaborative decision-making is critical to FCC. Creating transparent governing bodies that are centered on diverse perspectives and reflect the identities and experiences of the people they represent supports FCC for the most marginalized families and communities.
- **Integrate FCC throughout state and local education policies.** This work includes embedding FCC in school district strategic goals and increasing transparency in legislative processes so families can participate more fully.
- **Increase voter participation in state and local governing systems.** Policymakers, district leaders, parent organizations, and community groups must work together to remove barriers to voting and better inform families about education issues. Increased participation in governing systems can elevate their perspectives and needs.
- **Conduct research to understand nuanced community opinions and avoid politicized jargon.** In an era of politicization in education, districts and policymakers can overcome political debates by working to understand families' actual experiences and needs. Goals for student outcomes do not fall along political party lines, and embracing the nuance is critical to overcoming political conflict.

This policy brief was developed as part of the FHI 360 *Connected & Engaged: Supporting Family and Community Partnerships with School Districts* initiative. This brief is one of a series that highlights policies, strategies, and programs that can be implemented at the local, state, or federal levels to promote successful FCC in all school districts — especially those serving students from marginalized groups and communities. To explore the other policy briefs in this series, visit the [Connected & Engaged](https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org) website.

INTRODUCTION

State policymakers and local school board members shape the landscape for family and community collaboration (FCC) through determining school district budgets, staffing capacity, and operation policies. Too often, these governance structures exclude families and teachers and leave minimal opportunities for them to advocate for their needs. As a result, state legislatures and local school boards create education budgets and policy priorities that do not reflect the needs of these crucial community groups.

When families have a real seat at the table alongside school district administrators, lawmakers, school board members, and educators, districts' partnerships, strategies, and solutions are more likely to support student outcomes. To achieve this, governing bodies need to be more representative of the communities they serve and must work with those community members to create policies that prioritize supporting students with the greatest needs.

How Current Challenges in School Governance Discourage Family and Community Collaboration

The governing bodies that oversee education systems, including state agencies, local agencies, and district school boards, do not typically include families and teachers in decision-making. As a result, few families or teachers have the means to advocate for what they think is most important for better outcomes.

The exclusion of family and teacher participation in legislative and policy decision-making stems from a combination of systemic barriers to voting participation, structural racism, and more recent political trends. Reforming education governance systems to better represent and engage families and communities requires understanding and addressing each of these areas.

State legislatures do not represent family and community identities

The state legislatures that make critical decisions impacting student learning rarely represent the constituencies they serve, particularly more racially diverse or low-income communities. Aside from electing state representatives, families and communities are often kept out of crucial decisions that lead to education budget appropriations and legislation that impacts teaching and learning. This trend limits the possibility of authentic FCC in every school district, as family needs are less likely to be understood or represented in the state agencies that make important decisions about school operations, programming, and budget allocations.

A note on language:

In this series of policy briefs — as we do in our work — we use the term “*caregiver*” rather than “*parent*” to accommodate a wider variety of family situations.

However, in this brief, we use “*parent-teacher organizations*” (PTOs) as the umbrella term for caregiver organizations. This is the term recommended by the National Parent Teacher Association. The term “*parent teacher association*” (PTA) refers to specific school-based organizations.

There is not a single state in the country in which state legislatures reflect the racial and economic identities of all of their constituents¹ [see box: How gerrymandering prevents legislatures from being representative]. As a result, the people tasked with making critical education funding and policy decisions do not share the same experiences, perspectives, and expertise as the educators and families in their states. State legislatures have been growing more diverse in recent decades but remain predominantly white, affluent, and male.² While more progress has been made on a national level, particularly in the U.S. House of Representatives, most national and state governing bodies are still not reflective of their constituents.³ Without a fully representative state legislature, state and school district education policy is unlikely to reflect the perspectives of students and their families, thereby limiting authentic FCC at the local level.

State control of school districts creates barriers for communities of color

State education agencies (SEAs) determine many aspects of education systems, including funding for infrastructure and teacher compensation. Though state and local agencies both hold power over educational systems, SEAs often play a greater role in determining funding allocations and policies related to staffing, programming, and teaching and learning. Through these decisions, SEAs influence districts' capacity for FCC and students' experiences in classrooms.

Each state takes a different approach to delegating power between SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs), but most states retain the option to intervene in the funding and management of school districts. Some SEAs exert greater control over local school districts, making it more challenging for families and communities to be included in decision-making. In extreme cases of low school district performance, states can take over entirely. In a state takeover, states often appoint a new superintendent and may replace some or all of a school board. Research is mixed on the effectiveness of state takeovers, with some studies suggesting benefits and others suggesting negative impacts on student learning. Altogether, research generally suggests that takeovers have small or negligible impacts on student academic performance.⁴ Further, state takeovers delegate power to third-party organizations or administrators, taking from local communities and families what little power they have.⁵ State-appointed administrators are unlikely to have the time, incentives, or capacity to engage families or community members in their decision-making.

States are disproportionately likely to take over districts that serve low-income communities and more Black students.⁶ In fact, the share of Black students in a school district is a stronger predictor of

How gerrymandering prevents legislatures from being representative

The demographics of state legislatures rarely match those of the communities they represent. Some of this mismatch can be attributed to political gerrymandering, or the purposeful outlining of political districts to benefit specific groups. While both Republicans and Democrats have made attempts at gerrymandering in recent years, most redrawn district maps favor Republican-dominated legislatures beyond what would be predicted by a popular vote. At the same time, gerrymandering has harmed communities of color the most — dividing communities between districts and continuing the trend of underrepresented racial minorities in state legislatures.⁴⁰

What that means for FCC

As long as districts remained gerrymandered, more diverse candidates have little hope of gaining the political support they need to overcome legacies of marginalization and racism. Authentic FCC relies on all groups — especially those from marginalized communities — to hold positions of power and directly participate in policymaking at the highest levels.

state takeover than students' academic performance.⁷ Together, these findings suggest that state governments disproportionately disempower school districts serving more students of color and further impede FCC with marginalized families.

Local school boards fall short of fair representation

School boards, or boards of education, also make decisions that impact student learning and are unlikely to reflect the identities of people in their communities. School boards are important components of education governance. Though they operate within the policy landscape established at the state level, school boards still make many critical decisions that impact student learning, including decisions about how funding is allocated, strategic goals, and hiring decisions. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, this power has become even more noticeable as districts received infusions of federal funding that fell under the discretion of school boards.⁸ When school boards are accessible to all members of the community, they can provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration and partnership with families, educators, district administrators, and students. However, they fall short of true FCC when board membership does not represent the identities or needs of families and communities.

About 90 percent of school districts across the country are governed by locally elected school boards.⁹ School boards, like state legislatures, are rarely representative of their local communities. White and affluent individuals are overrepresented, while people of color and multilingual families are underrepresented.¹⁰ School board members typically receive little to no financial compensation for their work, which limits participation by community members with low incomes. People who work long hours or multiple jobs have less time and ability to take on unpaid school board work, making it more likely that people with higher incomes run for school board positions. When school boards do not hold the same perspectives and identities as the communities they serve, they are less likely to understand the needs and perspectives of marginalized families.

Not only do school boards not represent their communities, but neither do the citizens who vote them into office. In 2020, participation in school board elections averaged around 5-10 percent of eligible voters,¹¹ compared to 15 percent in municipal elections and 67 percent in the presidential election.¹² Those who do show up to vote tend to be older and whiter than their communities and typically do not have children of their own, especially in elections when school board members are elected in cycles out of sync with major elections.¹³ It is less likely that board members will share the same beliefs and priorities as the entire community when the people who vote are not representative. This

National School Boards Association 2018 Survey

Only 17% of school board members are people of color⁴¹

Only 32% of school board members have children in school⁴²

is a problem, as elected officials (including board members) are incentivized to prioritize funding and attention for schools in communities with the highest voter participation.¹⁴

These representation gaps are largest in school districts where students of color are the majority and in districts with the largest achievement gaps between students of different racial groups.¹⁵ School employees and educators constitute a small share of voters, even though school board elections impact their jobs and well-being more than most community members.¹⁶

Together, these factors indicate that school board elections do not encourage widespread participation, especially for marginalized populations. This lack of involvement in the election processes can have downstream effects for FCC at district and school levels, as it becomes more possible for elected school board members to hold priorities and views that are not in line with their communities.

Parent organizations are common but rarely used to their full potential

Parent engagement takes many forms, from supporting students with learning at home, to attending school events, to engaging in advocacy for the school. Parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) are one common organized mechanism for families to voice their perspectives and participate in school district decision-making. Participation in PTOs and other parent organizations often requires time, flexibility of scheduling, and other resources (e.g., an Internet connection, transportation), creating barriers for parents working one or more jobs.

While PTOs provide critical avenues for FCC in schools, they can play unintended roles related to school funding. For example, schools with limited funding might rely on PTOs to raise money for basic needs, like school supplies and events, rather than support PTOs to invest in training, organizing, and communication. PTOs can fundraise to support their own projects and operations, but this effectively benefits school districts in more affluent communities. These PTOs are often more able to raise more supplemental funding for schools than PTOs in lower-resourced communities, which exacerbates the resource gap between high- and low-income school communities.¹⁷

Nationally, participation in PTOs has declined in recent years, indicating that fewer parents are taking advantage of this clear-cut path for engagement. Though more than 3 million parents participate in local PTOs, this participation is down roughly 75 percent since the 1970s.¹⁸ However, the quality of engagement (more than the quantity of parents participating) can have more outsized impacts on student outcomes.¹⁹

“Whether students have laptops, functional classroom furniture, access to high-speed internet, and attend a safe and secure school — resources that facilitate high-quality schools and academic achievement — is conditional on whether they live in an electorally pivotal neighborhood.”⁴³

— Brian T. Hamel,
political scientist

As the demographics of school districts evolve, so too must PTOs. In 2022, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) reported that 57 percent of students served by local PTA affiliates were students of color and 46 percent qualified for free and reduced lunch (a proxy for low-income status).²⁰ It is critical for parent organizations to be representative of the school communities they serve and maintain strong relationships with community groups.

“Parent rights” have become politicized, making it hard for districts to make policy that reflects parents’ true perspectives

With the recent political turmoil in the U.S. and contentious discussions that have polarized the country, many organizations and districts have lost sight of the definition and goals of FCC. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many PTOs and other parent groups have adopted more political stances on topics such as curricula, gun safety, school choice, instruction on race, sexuality, and gender identity.²¹ This politicization has taken a toll on school administrators and strained families’ relationships with school districts, thereby threatening the level of trust and transparency needed for FCC.

The intersection of parent organizations, education, and politics is not inherently problematic. For example, when parent organizations and advocates intervene because school systems are not providing legally required services, there can be great benefits to student learning. Parents also advocate for safety in schools, teacher pay, and equitable disciplinary practices. Conflict between different groups is necessary for education systems change; however, some recent political trends have created non-productive political conflicts and pulled parents to extreme sides of issues, rather than help them embrace nuanced and diverse perspectives.

In response, national organizations, federal agencies, and membership groups are attempting to empower parents in different ways. The National PTA has adopted progressive platforms that focus on addressing topics that have become highly politicized such as understanding and eradicating institutional racism, supporting students’ expressions of their gender identity, and condemning censorship and limited book selection.²² On the other end of the political spectrum, parent groups such as Parents Defending Education and Moms for Liberty advocate for parents to gain greater control over curricular decisions, discourage discussions of race and gender identity in classrooms, and encourage the removal of certain texts from libraries.²³ These political debates risk discouraging districts from collaborating with families for fear of stoking political controversy, even when the decisions have significant impact on student learning and well-being.

Surveys find that these debates have made teachers’ and school leaders’ jobs more challenging, which also reduces educators’

capacity for FCC. One 2022 survey found that 48 percent of principals and 40 percent of teachers reported political issues relating to their professions as job-related stressors.²⁴ Another 2022 survey of principals found that 69 percent reported experiencing “substantial political conflict” regarding topics including instruction about racism and race, book selection, social-emotional learning (SEL), and policies about LGBTQIA+ student rights.²⁵ Parents also share these concerns. A 2021 survey found that the top concern among parents surveyed was “having politicians who are not educators making decisions about what students learn in the classroom,” with 40 percent of parents indicating that they worry a lot about this issue and an additional 28 percent worrying some.²⁶ Together, these trends discourage true collaboration between families and schools, as both parties are pulled to extremes or fear having these important discussions at all.

Policy and Program Solutions to Improve School Governance

Strong FCC with school leaders and administrators can help maintain balance in decision-making and ensure school governance remains focused on student outcomes. State and local education agencies and policymakers can help create conditions conducive for these strong partnerships.

Provide open access and accommodations for all families to participate in policymaking

Families and community groups from all backgrounds, languages, abilities, and socioeconomic standings need to be heard in education governance for authentic collaboration to be possible. To achieve this goal, states and school districts must actively welcome and recruit participants from all identity groups and backgrounds. It is critical all perspectives of educators and families are heard and valued — not just the loudest or those with more time and resources.

Beginning at the state level, a more diverse legislature can support advocacy for the priorities held by communities of color, including FCC in schools. Research in this area is nuanced, given the many factors that contribute to the racial and economic characteristics of elected representatives and leaders, but in general representatives of color are more likely to advocate for priorities held by constituents of color, leading to increased adoption of related policies.²⁷ Voters of color also tend to become more mobilized to participate in politics when candidates of color are running and elected.²⁸ All jurisdictions should strive to create governing bodies that reflect constituents’ identities and experiences.

Increasing equity in PTO funding through district-wide collaboration

PTA Equity Project (PEP) is an organization created in 2016 to address disparities in PTA fundraising in Illinois District 65 (Evanston and Skokie).⁴⁴ PEP does this by pooling PTA fundraising dollars and equitably distributing them to all schools in the district based on a formula that considers school need and size. PEP meetings are open to the entire community and recordings are posted online, granting access to families who cannot attend.

This collaborative approach to fundraising ensures that all PTAs in the community have the resources they need to achieve their goals.

PTOs offer another entry point for families, and thus require transparency, resources, and accommodations for many types of participants. Knowing that some families face barriers to attending PTO meetings and events, PTOs should strive to welcome and support all types of engagement. PTOs can also address funding inequities in their communities through collaborating and sharing resources [see box: Increasing equity in PTO funding through district-wide collaboration (see page 7)].

Similar ideas apply to school board governance. For school boards to make decisions that meet the needs of families and communities — especially marginalized groups — they need to reflect and welcome local communities and maintain strong relationships with local participants. For families and community members who want to play a larger role in their local education system, school board meetings often serve as one of the easiest first points of access.

Districts electing school board members who better reflect the diversity of their districts see improvements in student achievement.²⁹ One study documented improvements in student academic outcomes because of increased minority representation on school boards, attributing the improvements to hiring more principals of color and increasing expenditures on school facilities.³⁰ Another study found that school districts with more racially and ethnically diverse school boards reduced the likelihood of disciplinary action (e.g., suspensions) for all students and reduced the disparity in disciplinary action between white students and students of color.³¹

Policymakers and school districts can work toward creating school boards that reflect the diversity of school communities they serve by increasing voter turnout and funding trainings for parents to gain the skills they need to run for the school board [see boxes on effective school board characteristics and capacity building on pages 9 and 10, respectively]. The U.S. Department of Education’s Statewide Engagement Centers Program awards funding to states to provide technical assistance to SEAs and LEAs, which can support these goals.³²

Integrate FCC throughout state and local education policies

School boards have significant governing power but often do not support or facilitate FCC as much as they could. State-level policy can be a strong mechanism to address district-level practices, so long as states provide the necessary resources and guidance to support districts. For example, California created the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) process in 2014 to require and support districts to create strategic plans that include family and community engagement [see box: How California’s LCAP process supports FCC at the highest level].

How California’s LCAP process supports FCC at the highest level

California’s Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) offer multiple lessons for how states, districts, and caregivers can collaborate to embed FCC in district planning and budgets.

Every district in California is required to develop and annually update an LCAP to outline a plan for district priorities, goals for student learning, and parent engagement. California’s Board of Education supports this mandate by providing specific requirements for LCAP planning, such as parental involvement, measuring school climate, and developing specific plans for marginalized students (e.g., youth in foster care, multilingual students).⁴⁵

As part of LCAP, districts are required to consult with families and students and hold at least one public hearing to solicit comments. The process is not perfect, as the dense district planning and budgeting jargon can be hard for families to understand.⁴⁶

Other states could advance FCC in their own states by adopting mandates similar to LCAP. By giving all school districts guidance (e.g., templates, instructions) and transparency requirements, SEAs can support school districts in building FCC into strategic plans and decision-making. PTAs also have opportunities to build families’ capacity to engage with these planning processes, and both state and local boards of education have a role to play, as well.

District-level policies also present opportunities for enshrining FCC initiatives into practice. State and local policymakers should review and revise the language of district bylaws and other governing documents to define equity goals, promote diverse school boards, and ensure families have opportunities to participate in policymaking. Similarly, local governing bodies can support FCC by requiring transparency in school board meetings and processes.

FCC can also be integrated throughout policies in parent organizations. For example, local PTAs can adopt the National PTA's National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and use existing resources that support participation from all key groups.³³ The standards offer guidance for collaborative decision-making and participation in school governance but allow the necessary flexibility for PTOs to reflect the needs and perspectives of their communities.

Increase voter participation in state and local governing systems

For state legislatures and school governing bodies to create education systems that nurture FCC with school districts, all community members need the capacity, time, and information they need to vote in elections. Voting is a critical tool that families and community members have to advocate for students, even if it feels disconnected from school districts' day-to-day operations.

People with higher incomes vote at higher rates than people with low incomes, and people who favor conservative, non-distributive economic policies are overrepresented among people who do vote.³⁴ Increasing voter turnout — especially among low-income and marginalized communities — be a major step toward enacting education policies that better reflect all students' needs.

Increasing voter turnout requires mobilization by community-based organizations (CBOs) as well as political campaigns. CBOs and governing bodies can implement proven strategies to increase turnout, including Election Day registration, personalized written materials, and personal interactions (e.g., canvassing, phone calls).³⁵ More broadly, research has found that policies that facilitate voter registration (e.g., automatic voter registration) and offer more options to vote (e.g., early voting, mail-in ballots) are effective in increasing turnout.³⁶

In local elections, which have even lower turnout rates than state elections and fewer voters who reflect local communities, equitably increasing turnout is critical. While no single strategy can drastically improve turnout alone, a mix of strategies can have important effects. For example, aligning local election days with major election cycles has been shown to increase voting.³⁷ Other effective strategies include reducing barriers to voting (e.g., identification requirements) and increasing convenience (e.g., more polling locations, extended hours).

Characteristics of effective school boards

The Center for Public Education's "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards" draws on a meta-analysis and case studies to identify practices that have positive impacts on student outcomes. Best practices include:⁴⁷

- **High expectations and clear vision:** School boards establish well-defined goals for student achievement.
- **Shared values:** Members share beliefs about the potential of school systems to support all students in reaching their goals.
- **Accountability:** Boards focus more on student-centered policies than operational issues.
- **Collaboration with families and teachers:** Boards foster collaborative relationships that inform goal-setting and decision-making.
- **Data-driven continuous improvement:** Boards use data to measure progress and identify challenges.
- **Supporting professional development:** Members allocate necessary funding for training and other activities that align with district goals.
- **Strong relationships with superintendent:** Boards maintain mutual trust with superintendent and collaborate.
- **Internal trainings:** Members use professional development to build their knowledge, shared values, and commitment.

Together, these changes can reduce the costs associated with voting that disproportionately discourage parents with low incomes from participating in elections that impact local schools.

Effective FCC with districts also requires informing community members about the impact of the elections. School districts, school boards, and CBOs can play a critical role in informing local voters about ballot measures and budget decisions that impact students. Mobilizing CBOs and local meeting places, such as faith organizations and libraries, can offer meaningful opportunities to prioritize outreach to the families who are least represented among typical voters, including families with low incomes, families of color, and families who do not speak English at home.³⁸

Conduct research to understand nuanced community opinions and avoid politicized jargon

Focusing on key concepts and avoiding political hot topics can help districts and states stay focused on student learning, regardless of political climate. Rather than feel the need to weigh in on politicized topics, school districts and parent organizations should collaborate to research and understand the perspectives of their communities. By digging into the nuance of families' opinions, beyond the confines of political affiliation, districts can better design policies that meet students' needs.

For example, multiple states have addressed concerns around SEL by surveying families on the goals they have for students in school — free of the jargon. One 2021 survey revealed parents across political parties mostly supported students learning the core competencies of SEL (e.g., relationship skills, self-management) but had strong reactions to the term itself (some positive, some negative).³⁹ Primarily conservative states such as Indiana and Alabama have shifted how they describe SEL and increased focus on describing the important skills that educators know matter for student outcomes.

Conclusion

Reforming education governance systems to support FCC in all school districts will require a coordinated effort at state, local, and district levels. Lawmakers and school board members must embrace the need for family and community expertise and engagement in making decisions that affect student learning. To create meaningful and equitable opportunities for all families to participate, governing bodies must accurately reflect the identities and experiences of each district community. Community members not only need access to information about how to vote but also opportunities and support to directly participate in governing. Together, these policy and legislative reforms can support authentic partnerships between families and school districts that advance student outcomes.

How can school boards build the capacity of their own members?

Research suggests that training for school board members improves the performance of those boards, with the benefits in performance outweighing the costs in travel, time, and attendance. Capacity-building activities can include annual trainings for all members and mentorship programs for new board members.⁴⁸

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