

Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Putting Research into Practice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supporting family and community collaboration (FCC) requires effectively bridging research and practice, yet a range of challenges can get in the way of success. The sheer volume of available research may prove overwhelming, the research may not seem clearly actionable, or educators may not receive training in how to translate research into practice. Even when school districts obtain evidence-based tools, educators rarely have the time, training, or support to use those resources effectively. Improving the connection between FCC research and practice is critical to ensuring sustainable approaches to building partnerships between districts and families and to supporting student growth.

Improving the implementation of FCC practices requires all groups — families, teachers, district administrators — to build their capacity for authentic FCC. This includes access to evidence-based training and district-wide commitments to allocating resources required to complete trainings. By working together, all key constituents can help reduce the disconnect between research and practice and make the field more effective in supporting family and district partnerships and student outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To make FCC research more actionable, we recommend educational leaders, pre-service education programs, and district staff:

- **Teach evidence-based FCC practices during pre-service teacher training.** Ensure all teachers enter the field with critical skills, including best practices in communicating and building trust with families.
- **Provide in-service professional development for teachers and district staff that focuses specifically on FCC.** Districts should financially support teacher participation in conferences and other development activities as well as support leaders' development in FCC.
- **Ensure educators have time to implement FCC activities in their daily practice.** Districts must provide teachers with necessary coverage and time to integrate FCC into their work.
- **Build caregivers' capacity to step into leadership roles and co-design evidence-based FCC initiatives.** In line with the spirit of FCC, districts should work directly with communities and caregivers to learn and decide how best to integrate research into district practices.

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

Existing research offers frameworks, strategies, and tools to guide districts' implementation of FCC. However, more coordination between researchers and school districts is needed to ensure these resources are circulated in ways that best meet the needs of educators.

The gap between research and practice is widened by shortages in funding, educator staff, and effective school governance — all topics explored in other research briefs developed through the [Connected & Engaged](#) initiative. School districts need training and resources to build their capacity to implement best practices in FCC. Without access to evidence-based strategies, districts often default to one-sided communication strategies and district-dominated decision-making. To break down these limitations in FCC infrastructure and implementation, policymakers and researchers must collaborate with districts to design and provide tools that match the needs of educators.

Current State of Research-Based Practice

The *Connected & Engaged* initiative identified more than 140 websites, publications, and other outlets that provide evidence-based resources to support FCC. Much of the available research describes core components of FCC, such as the need for shared decision-making and strong relationships.¹ However, providing the information alone has not been enough to integrate these findings into district practice and strengthen staff and families' ability to conduct FCC.

District staff and families need information and time for relationship building

Family surveys and student outcome data indicate that the implementation of best practices in FCC is poor throughout many school districts, with many caregivers and educators holding misconceptions about the importance of FCC and inaccurate understandings of students' needs. A 2020 survey by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) found that only 16 percent of parents indicated they "strongly agreed" that their local school leaders valued the role that families play in students' success.² Across multiple years of surveys, Learning Heroes has found that more than 90 percent of parents across all racial and income groups believe their children are at or above grade level in math and reading, when really only approximately 40 percent of students are at or above grade level.³ These disconnects demonstrate the need for better collaboration so everyone is properly informed about students' needs and goals for meeting those needs.

"Despite decades of research supporting family engagement's benefits on children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development, teachers are not always adequately prepared to consult and work with families."²⁵

— Smith & Sheridan

Educators are also pressed for time to meaningfully engage with families. Learning Heroes found that less than two thirds of teachers reported having time during the workday to connect with families and only 60 percent of principals reported having a central office leader in charge of engagement.⁴ Without the time and support to fully collaborate with families and community organizations, educators will not be able to work with crucial parties to collectively improve students' outcomes.

Together, these results indicate that there are outstanding gaps between research and practice that have not yet been solved by the proliferation of written resources, toolkits, and research reports.

Districts struggle to connect educators with training and best practices

Professional development opportunities, including in-service trainings, summer workshops, and conferences, are one major venue for educators to access research on best practices in FCC. Educators can also find resources online, as researchers disseminate recommendations and case studies in newsletters, magazines, and other education venues. However, many teachers cannot access resources online or at conferences for financial and logistical reasons.

When FCC is not a top priority for school districts, professional development funds are allocated toward other topics, leaving educators who seek training on FCC without financial support to pursue it. Financial cost is a major barrier for both teachers and principals who seek professional development outside of their districts' scheduled options.^{5, 6} Summer professional development opportunities are often state-wide, or national in scope, which requires educators to travel. It is not common practice for districts to provide each educator a yearly professional development budget to pay for conference registration fees and travel expenses. Given these resource constraints and teachers' typically low salaries, participation becomes unfeasible for many educators.⁷

Finding free resources also poses a barrier for many educators. Some resources live behind paywalls, making them challenging for educators to access — particularly staff at under-resourced schools who do not have funds for membership fees or article charges. Yet even resources that are freely accessible require time and capacity to vet, adapt, and implement in a district setting. While some districts provide in-service training that incorporates resources without a cost to educators, educators still desire better and more training to improve their practice.⁸ Districts who do not provide teachers with access to vetted information — or the capacity to use that information — contribute to the gap between research and practice.

“When it comes to family and community engagement, attention by policymakers — and the federal, state, and local funding that goes along with such attention — has been scarce for many years. The U.S. Department of Education, for example, has few staff members dedicated to the issue. Attention to policy is essential for building sustainable family and community engagement initiatives.”²⁶

– Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe

Policy and Program Solutions to Put Research into Practice

If research is clear about what districts should do to support FCC, how can policymakers support the implementation of these best practices? Professional development opportunities offer the most direct path for educators to engage with research, making professional development a critical point of collaboration between educators, researchers, and facilitators. Busy teachers and school administrators may not have time to sort through the latest research, but pre-service educators and professional development facilitators have opportunities to infuse research into the curriculum and instruction used in trainings and courses. Policymakers should enact legislation and dedicate funding to support context-specific professional development for both educators and families.

Teach evidence-based FCC practices during pre-service teacher training

Pre-service trainers can support districts in reaching their engagement goals by preparing the future workforce with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve systemic FCC. Current pre-service training is heavy on theory and predominantly tailored to white educators, with less of a focus on serving teachers of color and applying theory to practice.⁹ Courses may discuss the importance of working with families to improve student achievement but not provide culturally responsive strategies for collecting appropriate data, communicating with families, or planning for specific outreach. To improve pre-service training so that it better prepares all educators to engage with families, teacher education programs must provide a foundation of culturally responsive FCC strategies and instructional practices.

By integrating elements of FCC into all subjects, from pedagogy to subject matter instruction, pre-service instructors can help ensure all teachers begin their first year in the classroom with a solid foundation of FCC best practices. Strengthening pre-service training would provide student teachers with the ability to co-create with families and communities and enforce the mindset that working with families is an essential and energizing part of their regular duties.¹⁰

Provide in-service professional development for teachers and district staff that focuses specifically on FCC

Teachers and district staff who are at the front lines also need ongoing training on how to build and sustain relationships with caregivers and families. Teachers need professional development on best practices in FCC, particularly those that are asset-based,

Federal funding for FCC technical assistance

The U.S. Department of Education supports the research-to-practice pipeline through funding the Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC) program. Grants are awarded to technical assistance organizations that help state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) implement evidence-based FCC practices.²⁷ Grantees vary in focus, but common goals include training families and educators in best practices, hosting conferences for teachers and administrators, and building capacity of SEAs to continue training.

culturally responsive, and interactive.^{11, 12} Part of this training in FCC practices should address how teachers and principals can manage relationships when the overall political climate is turbulent or when schools are grappling with contentious.¹³ Integrating specific FCC topics within district-wide professional development can also support the use of best practices from the vast body of literature.

Teachers can also access FCC training at the multitude of educational conferences held each year. Research shows that attending conferences supports teachers' sense of professionalism and community, as well their identity as teachers.¹⁴ To make it possible for teachers to access these development opportunities, districts must redirect existing funding or identify new funding opportunities to cover teachers' expenses and time.

Ensure educators have time to implement FCC activities in their daily practice

Surveys indicate that teachers want more opportunities to co-create standards with researchers and opportunities for training in implementing standards, which require time and district support.¹⁵ The pervasive lack of substitute teachers and administrative support creates barriers for teachers — both to access professional development on FCC practices and to implement those practices in their daily work. Teacher and substitute shortages are most prevalent in low-income communities, meaning this challenge is more pressing for districts serving students with higher needs.¹⁶ Substitute shortages also mean full-time teachers must fill in for one another, leaving little time to implement or improve their FCC practices.

To ensure teachers engage in FCC, research points to the importance of administrative supports, such as being given time to devote to professional development or incentives from school and district leadership, as major factors in teachers' pursuit of professional development.¹⁷ Without time and support, teachers cannot access information on best practices, let alone have the capacity to integrate the professional development research into their classrooms. Teachers need time to implement the strategies as well as educator-focused FCC resources suitable for teachers' specific contexts, so teachers do not have to spend time searching for the right resources.

Build caregivers' capacity to step into leadership roles and co-design evidence-based FCC initiatives

Just as FCC research calls for families and communities to participate in decision-making to support student learning, districts should call for these same groups to participate in putting FCC research into practice. Districts have evidence-based options for

Professional associations offer support for systemic FCC

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) collaborated to create the State Consortium on Family Engagement. NAFSCE has provided technical assistance and evidence-based training to 18 SEAs.²⁸ Through this collaboration, a Family Engagement Opportunity Canvas was designed to help SEAs and their partners build their own state-level family engagement activities, policies, and programs.

Networks like these can step in to connect educators and policymakers with research to support best practices at the state and policy levels, as well as on the ground with educators and administrators.

bringing families into decision-making processes, including hiring family liaisons, carving out roles on task forces and leadership committees, and offering trainings and workshops.^{18, 19, 20}

Training families to understand and implement best practices can be a great starting point. For example, Tuscaloosa City Schools in Alabama uses a Parent Teacher Leadership Academy to build the capacity of families and staff and create ongoing opportunities for collaboration [see Box: Promising practice: Tuscaloosa City Schools' Parent Teacher Leadership Academy].²¹ Throughout these trainings, it is critical for trainers and district staff to embrace the expertise families bring to the table, in addition to offering information that is new for families.²² To achieve this, the Family Leadership Design Collaborative, a network focused on centering racial equity within FCC, recommends that districts prioritize the needs and perspectives of non-dominant families (e.g., people of color, multilingual families, low-income families) to create a strong foundation for collaboration and designing solutions.²³

The research process itself also offers opportunities to empower families to actively guide research priorities and questions, rather than only participate as subjects. Community organizations across the country already use a variety of creative and effective strategies to build the capacity of families to participate in education research. For example, Village of Wisdom, a community-based organization in Durham, NC, facilitates fellowships for Black parents to learn about and conduct participatory action research and work toward more culturally affirming learning environments in schools.²⁴ To be responsive to community needs, different localities will require different approaches to engage and elevate all voices. Expanding the variety of existing grass-roots efforts and embarking on new collaborations can help to build families' knowledge and capacity in FCC.

Conclusion

Families, teachers, and district administrators all need access to evidence-based professional development and sufficient resources to make FCC possible in every school. Many tools are available, but the challenge remains in ensuring educators have systems, supports, and financial resources to put them into practice. Families also need support from districts to learn about best practices and co-create district strategies for implementing them in every local context. Together, these efforts can support partnerships between districts and families to advance student outcomes.

Promising practice: *Tuscaloosa City Schools' Parent Teacher Leadership Academy*

Tuscaloosa City Schools' method for infusing research into FCC initiatives is through the Parent Teacher Leadership Academy (PTLA). Run by a local university partner (University of Alabama), the program is grounded in Dr. Karen Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework and brings best practices to school-based teams of caregivers and teachers. Over one school year, each school team designs a project to support an academic goal at their school. Monthly meetings introduce teachers and parents to best practices, as well as strategies for grant writing, measuring outcomes, and collaborating with community organizations.²⁹

The school district uses funding from the professional development budget to support teachers' and parents' participation in PTLA. Each cohort receives training and support to implement research into practice.

Suggested citation:

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