



W.K.
KELLOGG
FOUNDATION®

Cultivating a Community of Champions for Children

Through Transformative
Family Engagement



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Through Transformative Family Engagement

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La June Montgomery Tabron

PREFACE

In a time when institutions can seem remote, schools stand in the midst of community and within reach of parents and families. At parent-teacher conferences, basketball games, talent shows and fundraisers, schools can be a magnet for families and a focal point for community activity. But if they are respectfully invited in, parents, grandparents and neighbors can do so much more than sit in the audience. They can bring their insights, experiences and culture into school decision making and have a voice in shaping the policies and practices that affect their children.

At the W.K. Kellogg Foundation we refer to this process as Family Engagement. Decades of research support that children do best in learning environments where teachers, families and community members share the responsibility for student success. But while we know that Family Engagement in education is pivotal for children, especially very young children from birth to age 8, it does not happen without schools actively partnering with families in their communities.

Children are at the heart of everything we do at the Kellogg Foundation; but for children to thrive, their communities need to be equitable places of opportunities. In many African American, Asian American, Native American and Hispanic communities, racism has left a lasting imprint in educational, economic and judicial systems. For young children, the effect on academic achievement, health, safety and economic stability can be devastating.

Racial equity is a driving force behind the Kellogg Foundation's Family Engagement work. By making families active partners in education, Family Engagement can begin to address the distrust between communities of color and their children's schools and form the bonds that can transform learning. The immediate effect is on young students. But the potential for society as a whole can be just as transformative. As the country continues to become more diverse, schools that fully engage families and communities will help all children to thrive.

With that desirable outcome in mind, the Family Engagement initiative was conceived. Over three years (2014-2017), 30 funded projects in 17 states and the District of Columbia explored ways to operationalize Family Engagement. In the following pages, we provide highlights and insights from their efforts. As you will see, their experiences offer insight into successful approaches.

The goal is to inspire others and to guide the efforts of funding organizations, school administrators and teachers, civic leaders and policy makers. Family Engagement practices belong in many more schools and systems if all children are to grow and achieve their full potential.

***By making families active partners in education,
Family Engagement can begin to address the distrust
between communities of color and their children's schools
and form the bonds that can transform learning.***

Our founder, Will Keith Kellogg, seeded the approach to community engagement that remains central to Kellogg Foundation programming today. He recognized the creativity and resolve that everyday people bring to bear on challenges – especially when their children were the focus. He knew that parents, neighbors and local people had tremendous leadership capacity when engaged on behalf of their communities.

Racial equity, community engagement and leadership are three essential elements in all of the Kellogg Foundation's work. They have roots in our founder's vision for children and are woven into every aspect of our programming as a result. The Family Engagement lessons in the following pages support Mr. Kellogg's convictions, and his confidence in people. When intentionally and respectfully drawn into their children's education, families and communities can reinvigorate student learning and help transform schools into places of opportunity and equity.



La June Montgomery Tabron
President and CEO



INTRODUCTION

In August 2013, we expected a positive response to the request for proposals (RFP) to launch a three-year Family Engagement initiative. In the Request for Proposals, we wrote:

“Across the United States, early childhood education is emerging as a powerful strategy to improve the long-term academic, physical and emotional outcomes for all children. Until recently, though, this intervention often neglected one of the most critical elements for success – family engagement. We at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation have heard the call for increased family engagement on the national level. To promote local efforts in family engagement, WKKF is taking a new approach. We are challenging communities to see families, regardless of race, ethnicity or income level, as powerful assets for their children’s education.”

With that direction, we prepared for a steady flow of proposals – a few hundred at most. What we didn’t expect was a tidal wave in response. By the deadline in late September, more than 1,100 organizations had applied. From these, 30 were chosen to form the Family Engagement cohort. We were heartened and humbled by the torrent of interest and did our best to help those not selected to find other funders for their promising ideas. What we learned from the outset was that there was a hunger for exploring ways to draw families into their children’s education. The desire and creativity our RFP tapped into is part of the larger story our Family Engagement.



Carla Thompson Payton

In this publication, you will read what parents, grandparents, teachers and administrators say it takes to restore trust and deepen ties between schools and communities. In the places where structural racism and historic oppression had actively disengaged families, healing and growth have often been the most powerful.

We are proud of our grantees' success and the outpouring of energy and goodwill that Family Engagement has unleashed in schools and communities. But we are not surprised by its ability to drive change, especially at low-performing schools in low-income communities. For 50 years research has borne that out. Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers and have significant impact on learning and development. Family Engagement works best when it focuses on student learning, is built on foundations of trust and healthy relationships and families and teachers see each other as equal partners.

As researchers affirm, "The question is no longer whether schools should actively engage with families, but rather, how schools should carry this out to greatest effect for students, families and the community at large." The insights and experiences from the Family Engagement cohort are all about "how" and the approaches are as distinct as the communities that engendered them. At its most basic level, Family Engagement calls us to create schools where parents and families are welcomed to give their best on behalf of children. Sometimes, that starts with a small contribution that grows into a larger commitment.

In the places where structural racism and historic oppression had actively disengaged families, healing and growth have often been the most powerful.

One school served by the Generations United project in Washington, D.C., held a regular grandparents meeting, since many students had grandparents as primary caregivers. In the group was a quiet man, not one who led meetings or spoke out. Then one day someone forgot to buy ice to serve with the refreshments. He ran home and got ice from his own freezer. After that, he brought ice for the drinks to every meeting. A small thing, but it gave him a distinct role and solidified his steady involvement in the meetings. He became part of a core group of three who anchored the meetings and consistently attended.

Across the cohort of 30 Family Engagement projects, small shifts like this represent the beginning of authentic relationships between people in communities and learning environments for children. As such, family engagement is a potent force for transforming student learning and achievement.



Carla Thompson Payton
Vice President for Program Strategy



ABOUT THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation was established as an independent, private philanthropy in 1930 by cereal innovator and entrepreneur Will Keith Kellogg. His direction for trustees continues to be the basis for our priorities. Thriving Children. Working Families. Equitable Communities.

OUR VISION

We envision a nation that marshals its resources to assure that all children have an equitable and promising future – a nation in which all children thrive.

OUR MISSION

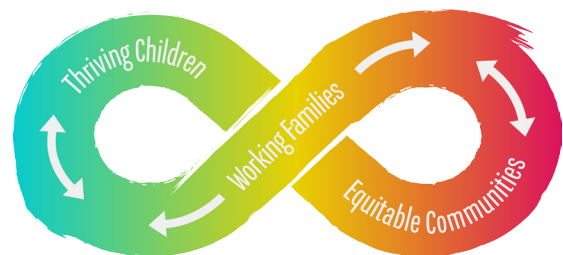
The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) supports children, families and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society.

“Use the money as you please so long as it promotes the health, happiness and well-being of children.”

–W.K. Kellogg

OUR PRIORITIES

Children are at the heart of everything we do at the Kellogg Foundation. Our goal is lasting change for children. But children live in families, and families live in communities. So our broad areas of focused work reflect the dynamic connection between the three. Achieving strong outcomes for children happens by connecting what children, families and communities need – at home, at early childcare settings, at school, at work and in their communities. As a result, our programs work in tandem across a wide range of venues to make measurable improvements in children’s lives.



Embedded within all that we do is our commitment to racial equity, to developing leaders and to engaging communities in solving their own problems.

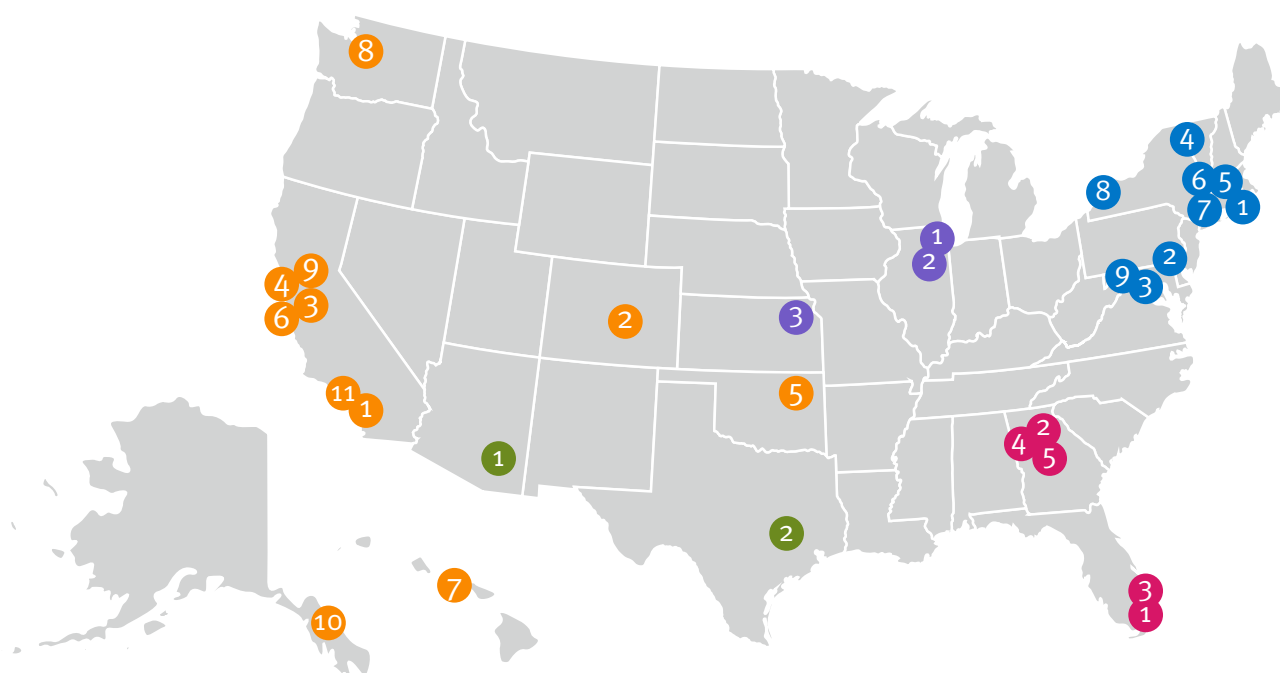
The Kellogg Foundation has a long-standing commitment to racial equity. We leverage cutting-edge research on topics like implicit and unconscious bias; support a national network of civil rights organizations in working together on behalf of children; and help change narratives in entertainment, the media, school curriculums and other places that shape people’s perceptions and behaviors toward one another.

WHERE WE WORK

The Kellogg Foundation is based in Battle Creek, Michigan, and works throughout the United States and internationally, as well as with sovereign tribes. Special emphasis is paid to our priority places — Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico and New Orleans — where there are high concentrations of poverty and where children face significant barriers to success.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation Family Engagement Cohort

From 2014-2017, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded 30 programs in 17 states and tribal nations, as well as the District of Columbia, to explore transformative and effective ways to operationalize Family Engagement, and to strengthen and enrich partnerships between families and schools in nearly every region of the country.



WEST

1. **Advancement Project:** Los Angeles, CA
2. **American Indian College Fund:** Denver, CO
3. **Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network:** Oakland, CA
4. **Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth:** San Francisco, CA
5. **Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa:** Tulsa, OK
6. **Institute for Sustainable Economic, Educational, and Environmental Design (ISEED):** Oakland, CA
7. **Keiki O Ka Aina Preschool Inc.:** Honolulu, HI
8. **OneAmerica:** Seattle, WA
9. **San Mateo County Office of Education:** Redwood City, CA
10. **Sitka Tribe of Alaska:** Sitka, AK
11. **UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education:** Los Angeles, CA

SOUTHWEST

1. **Amistades Inc.:** Tucson, AZ
2. **Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA):** San Antonio, TX

MIDWEST

1. **Chicago Pre-College Science and Engineering Program:** Chicago, IL
2. **Community Organizing and Family Issues:** Chicago, IL
3. **Kansas Families and Schools Together Inc.:** Topeka, KN

NORTHEAST

1. **Center for Southeast Asians:** Providence, RI
2. **Fusion Partnerships Inc.:** Baltimore, MD
3. **Generations United Inc.:** Washington, DC
4. **Greater Burlington YMCA:** Burlington, VT
5. **Harvard Family Research Project:** Cambridge, MA
6. **Lawrence Community Works Inc.:** Lawrence, MA
7. **National Parent Leadership Institute:** Hartford, CT
8. **Public Policy and Education Fund:** Buffalo, NY
9. **Teaching for Change:** Washington, DC

SOUTHEAST

1. **Bass Museum of Art:** Miami Beach, FL
2. **CDF: A Collective Action Initiative (CDF Action):** Clarkston, GA
3. **Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science:** Miami, FL
4. **Southern Partners Fund Inc.:** Atlanta, GA
5. **United Way of Greater Atlanta Inc.:** Atlanta, GA



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: MANY HANDS CARVE A HOPEFUL FUTURE

For over a year, carvers had hewn a 27-foot Tlingit dugout canoe from an old growth, western red cedar trunk. For weeks they stood ankle deep in cedar chips and used the ancient techniques of fire and steam to shape the boat and make it seaworthy. When complete, the canoe was a floating tribute to the watercraft their Tlingit ancestors had used to fish and hunt for centuries. It was at once a physical, cultural and spiritual achievement.

“A canoe is not just a vessel that goes over water,” said David Katzeek, a Tlingit leader who sang and drummed as the men worked. “It represents a people’s journey in life – the journey that we started thousands upon thousands of years ago, and we’re still here on that journey. We are not gone. We are not lost.”

As a finishing touch, the community sought to connect the Tlingit’s past with its future. Sitka elders named the canoe Dachxanx’ ee Yan (Yaagu) or “Grandchildren’s Canoe.” On the hull, along with red and black paintings of an eagle and raven, the elders asked that the design include something youthful: child-sized handprints from students at the Woon.teen Preschool and Baronof Elementary School, both in Sitka, Alaska (pop. 8,800).

The children happily obliged, and by the time the canoe was dedicated in October 2017, more than 500 students had visited the carving site. The Sitka National Historical Park developed lesson units about dugout canoes to further infuse Tlingit culture into classroom studies.

INDIVIDUALITY WITHIN A COMMON FRAMEWORK

This Family Engagement activity is culturally unique to the Sitka Tribe and may not be culturally appropriate to replicate in other cohort cities. But the Family Engagement principles the [Sitka Tribe of Alaska](#) followed at Woon.teen Preschool can apply in locales a world away.

A strategic Transformative Family Engagement Framework provided the cohort projects with working principles culled from research and the voices of those leading the field in practice. But there was no blueprint. [Project champions had the latitude to design approaches that suited their community’s

TRANSFORMATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Strategy 1: Building Institutional and System Capacity

Approaches

- **Actively Recruit** Marginalized Communities and Address Power Dynamics
- **Recognize Families** as Assets, Valued Partners and Experts About Their Children
- **Identify Goals and Resources** in Partnership With Families
- **Integrate Family and Community Culture** Into the Early Learning System
- **Develop Continuous Two-Way** Communication
- **Commit to Co-Governance** and Shared Leadership
- **Institutionalize Structures and Processes** That Strengthen Families and Organizations

Strategy 2: Developing Family Leadership

Approaches

- **Build Strong Networks** Among Families and Communities
- **Mobilize Family Skills and Knowledge** to Increase Their Control Over Resources
- **Support Families** to Develop and Assert Their Role as Leaders and Agents of Change
- **Coordinate Family Engagement Efforts** Within and Across Different Systems

distinct culture, history and resources.] Over time, the flexibility and variety of Family Engagement cohort projects emerged as an important strength.

It was the opposite of a standardized approach since many schools in Family Engagement cohort communities had suffered from too much standardization. To a stifling degree, school curricula reflected the dominant culture, with little room for the language, values, wisdom and local knowledge of African American, Native American and Hispanic families. On Sitka Island, for instance, K-3 students might have read books about cows (a creature fairly foreign to their forested island home) but none about her- ring, an ocean fish central to Tlingit diet and culture.

To a stifling degree, school curricula reflected the dominant culture, with little room for the language, values, wisdom and local knowledge of African American, Native American and Hispanic families

The tenets of Family Engagement work are to enrich, but not replace, subjects such as math, science and history with knowledge not found in textbooks. To that end, family members – parents, grandparents, guardians, aunt and uncles – can be culture bearers. Their presence can help schools restore broken trust and become welcoming places that families see as an extension of their homes.

Along the way, parents, family members and children alike can grow in knowledge, confidence and capability. This includes adults who were themselves wounded by bad school experiences. Access to new learning and mentors can also prepare adults for higher-paying jobs in schools and elsewhere. Consequently, some “two-generation” Family Engagement projects focus on workforce preparation and child care. As research indicates, all children are more likely to thrive at school when their parents thrive at work and home.

BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL AND SYSTEM CAPACITY

This Family Engagement strategy requires schools to look closely at what they have or haven't done to engage families – and imagine what it would take for engagement to flourish. This often starts with acknowledging the status quo, difficult as that may be. For as one parent with [OneAmerica's Immigrant Voices for Change in Education](#) said, "People of color have been engaged in the wrong way for so long that we don't see families approaching schools anymore." Clearly, the central goal of Family Engagement is to encourage, validate and cooperate with families that do approach schools. From the outset, this strategy requires that schools actively recruit families for participation, and face up front any "elephants in the room" such as:

- ◆ **Address the innate power dynamics:** Parents want to stand on equal footing with school officials and not appear as lesser supplicants asking for "permission" to make changes. As one parent explained it, "When you get a teacher, aide, principal or superintendent who understands and buys into Family Engagement, it changes the whole picture. Because they're not threatened by families."
- ◆ **Value parents as the true experts when it comes to their children:** Along with parental expertise, schools should value families' intangible assets such as cultural wisdom and knowledge of the community. Absent that, schools can seem aloof and detached from their students' everyday existence. At [Teaching for Change](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#), parents lead teachers on a community walking tour as part of their professional development. The teachers – most of whom do not live locally – learn about local institutions and see first-hand the routes that children walk to school.
- ◆ **Find ways to integrate family and community and culture into learning to make it more relevant:** How can local culture and experience be infused into studies to complement learning? For instance, most kids love to study volcanoes and make baking soda eruptions in the classroom.



In [Hawaii](#), during the Kilauea eruption, teachers at the [Keiki O Ka 'Aina Learning Centers](#) asked parents to watch and discuss the TV coverage with their kids. Sharing this knowledge with family members helps student make a deeper connection to what they've learned in school. "Relevance," said one teacher, "means whatever you're doing, whatever you're going through, is connected to what their daily lives are about."

- ◆ **Examine school communication and make it more two-way:** Jargon-laden and authoritarian communication, whether written, spoken or online, can leave families confused or make them feel alienated. At one Family Engagement project, parents received a letter from the school that asked them to purchase \$40 in school supplies, no small sum for low-income parents. The letter proved inaccurate; the supplies were actually unnecessary and many parents were upset. However, the regular chats that parents held with the principal gave them a face-to-face means to address the matter. With their feedback, the principal worked with teachers to correct the problem.

DEVELOPING FAMILY LEADERSHIP

Just as communications between schools and families must be two-way, leadership for Family Engagement should be reciprocal as well. For that to occur, parents and family must grow into their roles as advocates. Opportunities to do so include the following:

- ◆ **Building strong networks among families and communities:** As families become more engaged with schools, they also become more connected to other participating families. In that sense, engagement isn't just family to school, but family to family and community. In many schools, grandparents have been a bedrock group that serves schools and recruits parents and local residents. The **Grand-family Matters** program in **Washington, D.C.**, created a grandparent PTA to capitalize on their role.
- ◆ **Mobilizing skills to increase knowledge and control over resources:** Giving families the know-how to navigate school bureaucracies and access information about vital records is essential to shared decision-making. In **San Francisco, CA**, the **Parents Making a Change** program offers workshops on school discipline to inform parents about their rights and student's rights. Organizers say this has "transformed" what's required of school staff with regard to suspensions, expulsions and zero-tolerance policies for infractions.
- ◆ **Help families develop and assert leadership:** In some cases, parent and family leaders informally emerge as they take initiative to organize meetings and activities. Other projects offer formal programs such as the 25-week **National Parent Leadership Institute**, ran by the **Connecticut Commission**. Parents study demographics, the media, city and school budgets – all with an eye toward becoming better advocates for schools and children. "We aim to really engage parents as part of the civic platform," said one organizer. "Not just invite them to attend but give them a meaningful seat at the boardroom table."





KEY LESSONS FROM THE FRONTLINES OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Leaders at a Washington, D.C. school had proposed that some 1st and 2nd grade teachers no longer spend the whole day with one class in a homeroom. Instead, they would teach one subject, such as math, science or English, to a different class of kids each period. In school administrator lingo, they would “departmentalize.”

Because the school had a Family Engagement program, the principal decided to first run the idea by parents during a “principal chat.” Suffice to say that this prompted a lively conversation.

“The principal started saying how they wanted to ‘departmentalize’ the school,” recalled a parent who was there. “And I said ‘Wait – you’re not going to use that word ‘departmentalize.’ You just can’t. I don’t even know if there’s a Spanish translation for that! So, in plain language, can you tell us what the teachers want to do?’”

“The principal said, ‘Well, some teachers believe they’re stronger in one subject, so they would like to focus on that and let the kids rotate (between classes).’”

At this point, several parents explained why that was problematic. Some of their children, they said, have trouble forming relationships with adults. And especially for first graders, to have two or more teachers and shuttle between rooms could be stressful. For the principal, it was an ‘ah-ha’ moment. For the parents, it was an affirming example of how their input could lead to better school decisions, whether the topic was teachers, classroom reading or school security

“One coaching point for the principal was that seeking informed consent from parents is good,” said the parent. “But just because you’ve told them something, doesn’t mean they’re informed. I mean, I grew up in this country. I’ve even taught, and sometimes I sit in school meetings and have no idea what they’re saying. It’s really about helping the school figure out how to better communicate with parents – and meeting them where they are.”

The best schools see families as crucial assets, leaders and experts when it comes to their children's educational needs. When schools committed time and energy to build trust and sharing knowledge, all parties – families, teachers and communities – were able to weather the ups and downs of a partnership constructed around the well-being and learning of children.

That was one shared conviction evaluators found across the Family Engagement cohort. This insight and others emerged from an evaluation conducted by ICF, a global consulting services company. ICF used phone interviews, online surveys and document reviews to gather data from all 30 grantees.

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Key themes were gleaned from that research, illustrated by examples drawn from the evaluation, case studies and other grantee sources. The phrases that appear in bold italics identify some of the 11 approaches that guided the Family Engagement projects.

In the following pages we see how these partnerships progressed and overcame obstacles along the way.

LESSONS FROM FAMILIES

The Family Engagement projects were by nature developmental. Everyone involved – teachers, school staff, parents and family members – was expected to grow personally and professionally in ways that promoted Family Engagement. And to varying degrees, families became more confident as they gained new skills and knowledge.

In some cases, the confidence building began before students even started the school year. In **Tulsa, OK**, The Power of Families runs a four-day, pre-K and kindergarten summer camp that serves as a live rehearsal for the real thing. The camp exposes children to the people and expectations they'll face during the school year. They learn to walk with a full tray in the cafeteria, open milk cartons and ketchup packets, and find their way to the restroom – all the big-kid stuff. They also visit their classrooms and navigate long hallways that can feel endless and confusing to a 5-year-old. Teachers and parents can observe children in a class setting and spot developmental delays that might require referrals. Overall, parent surveys report that camp-going families feel more connected to their school and teachers. The camp also reduces the separation anxiety that kids and parents can feel so acutely on that momentous first day.



Reclaiming Culture and Memory with a School Garden

While Family Engagement projects focus on school, some of the strongest relationships are between parents and other families. It is here that the spirit of unity and strength-in-numbers advocacy can put down the deepest roots. That happened literally for the **Children's Defense Fund (CDF)** in **Clarkston, GA**, a site for refugee settlement since the 1990s. At least 60 languages are spoken there and one-third of area residents are foreign born.

It is here that the spirit of unity and strength-in-numbers advocacy can put down the deepest roots.

The languages at CDF functions include Arabic, Amharic, Bhutanese, Burmese, Dinka, Nepalese, Karen, Karenni, Somali – and English. The gatherings are bright with talk, laughter and homemade food from five continents. Parents and family meet under the auspices of the CDF Community Trust, a shared decision-making forum that encouraged Clarkston residents to decide how grant funds would be spent to improve early learning.

From the trust came one of CDF's most tangible projects: the **Indian Creek Community School Garden**. While school gardens are not the novelty they once were, this one was more than the sum of its sunflowers, jalapenos and tomatillos. It grew from what the trust calls a "strength-based perspective," where families share some of their most valuable gifts and deepest yearnings. Since many Clarkston newcomers lived in cramped apartments, they longed for the gardens they'd tended in their home countries. As much as the fresh produce, they wanted to share this legacy with their children. "They'd grown their own food and knew how to do it ... that's how they lived," said one trust parent said. "Why not invite them to use their skills and empower them by acknowledging that skill?"

Parents joined the workdays, eager to till the ground for planting. Notably, the work drew not just mothers, but fathers as well. "There were dads who spoke no English, but you saw how hard-working they

were," a teacher said. "They pounded the wooden frame beds together and shoveled in the dirt." The garden ties-in with a curriculum grounded in math, technology and science.

Non-meetings, "un-PTOs" and the Path to Community Engagement

Some cohort grantees adopted a slow-growth approach to developing Family Engagement with the potential to empower families to be leaders who could work for systems and policy change. At **Amistades, Inc.**, in southern **Arizona**, the developmental process begins with home visits before progressing into a hands-on primer on civic engagement.

"First we have a lot of one-on-ones to talk about the framework and approach," said an Amistades staff member. "And we have group meetings that we call platricos (Spanish for meetings) because we don't like to use the word meetings or focus groups. We'll say 'let's have a cup of ceto, and let's do a platrico.'"

The nontraditional meetings are followed by another Amistades twist on family engagement: the "un-PTO" (parent teacher organization). At traditional school-based PTOs, the Spanish-speaking parents felt left out. They'd languish in back with a translator, while up front, parents who were mainly white led the meetings in English. For its cohort project, Amistades developed community PTOs, a model used in south Texas. "The parents don't go into the school for a community PTO meeting," said the Amistades staff member. "We have it at a community center. We talk about issues that are effecting them and their children before they go and do efficacy work in schools."

The off-site location became a bridge between community and school. The community PTO hosted Q&A sessions with a superintendent and a bilingual vice principal. This arrangement allowed parents to plan their questions beforehand (a good advocacy skill). Meanwhile, the superintendent valued their input, because the school had struggled to reach Spanish-speaking parents.

From there, Amistades staff invited parents to local school board meetings. One of their first observations was that no Latinos had been elected by the board, which was led by a white superintendent. “We would tell the parents to call and find out when the board would meet and get a copy of the agenda before the meeting. Doing the groundwork helped them feel a sense of empowerment for how the process works.”

At traditional PTOs, the Spanish-speaking parents would languish in back with a translator, while up front, mainly parents who were white led meetings in English.

Yet when it comes to civic involvement, Family Engagement activities need not limit themselves to schools. In **San Antonio, TX**, the **Intercultural Development Research Association** formed a Concilio Comunitario (Community Council) that included the United Way, businesses and several local school districts. To spark citywide discussion, the council hosted a cross-sector roundtable on the economics of early childcare, and the opportunities – or gaps – in San Antonio’s preschool through high school pipeline.

Unleashing the Power of “Anywhere, Anytime” Learning

Family Engagement also can take place at the kitchen table, or while a parent unwinds on the sofa with phone or laptop in hand. In **Topeka, KS**, the **Parent Power** program enables parents to connect online to the Pine Ridge Prep Preschool. Pine Ridge Prep isn’t your average preschool. It’s located in a public housing complex, where it offers Head Start and early education to children who might not otherwise have access to either. With Parent Power, families log into Google Docs to record how they’ve connected with their kids. They can keep a reading log, watch instructional videos and post pictures in Facebook fashion of what they’ve done with their family.

Parent Power offers an easy way to document new activities and recognize the favorite things that families have done all along. Families earn points and are honored with a Parent Power party at the semester’s end. For such an inexpensive program, the return on investment has been impressive. Pine Ridge Prep teachers report increases in student attendance, parent-teacher conference participation and parent volunteerism – all indicators of stronger relationships between home and school.



Powerful Rites of Passage Create a League or Family Engagement Superheroes

While many Family Engagement grantees prefer low-key advocacy, at least one has taken a more theatrical route and inspired parents to wear self-styled superhero costumes to school meetings, and even don them for a commercial film.

One such parent is Latefa Dorsey (aka the Incredible Woman) who appears in the “Nom Lava Love” short-form documentary. Both the superhero idea and film came from the fertile minds at **Youth Resilience Institute** in **Baltimore, MD**, led by director and co-founder Fanon Hill and part of the **Fusion Partnership**. The film’s promotional materials describe it best:

Centered on the work of great-grandmother and artist Shirley Foulks and directed by Fanon Hill, “Lom Nava Love” tells the unflinching story of Black families living in public housing in Baltimore, Maryland, who harness their strengths to challenge the systems and institutions that would dictate their realities.

Lom Nava Love comes from the Ewe language spoken in West Africa and communicates the understanding that “if you love me then you will come to me.” At the core of Foulks’ approach to organizing lies the conviction that Black families are their own best answers to the challenges they face in their communities. Art is not here a means of improving families, but a way to remind those families of the power they innately possess and which can be harnessed to affect a new vision for communities.

The film was produced as part of the Institute’s **The Journey Project**. Among its goals, the project developed an African-centered rites of passage program, and art workshops where low-income Black families create their own photos, stories and videos of Family Engagement.

Across the WKKF cohort, there’s nothing else quite like the League of Family Engagement Superheroes, which Latefa Dorsey joined through the rites of passage program. As a leadership exercise, Dorsey and others reflected on their strengths and family history to create a superhero, complete with an African-themed costume.

Dorsey credits her Incredible Woman persona as “a major protective factor” that helped her prevail in a conflict with school officials who had mishandled her son’s transfer request. For her son, and the community, she says it was a fight worth pursuing. “Black women,” said an Institute official, “often are bullied into situations where individuals and institutions speak for them as opposed to creating spaces where they can speak on their own terms.”

Empowering Working Parents to Advocate for Children, and Train Peers

In Los Angeles, the **Parent Worker Project**, run by the **UCLA Labor Center** and the **Service Employees International Union**, has connected with another set of hardworking heroes: mostly low-income and im-



migrant parents who work as janitors throughout the city. Parent Worker Project members double as early childhood advocates, and spend their 20-minute work breaks teaching other janitors and custodians how to advocate for their children at school.

“The best way for urban schools in low-income communities to improve is for parents to get involved,” said Janna Shadduck-Hernandez, UCLA Labor Center director, in a UCLA news story. “And what better parents than janitors, who are already active in their workplace?”

Marcia Gomez, for instance, begins work early in the evening, gets home at 3 a.m., then sees her kids off to school at 7 a.m. It’s an exhausting schedule. Yet during her evening break in downtown Los Angeles, she hustles from one office tower to another, urging janitors to use the assistance that’s free for the taking. She says most don’t realize that their children qualify for Head Start or for free pre-school funded by the state. To help parents and kids see the where education can take them, Parent Worker also hosts free family outings to places such as the California Science Center and UCLA campus.

“We have many co-workers who don’t know that education begins early, or that spending time with our littles ones is part of their education,” said Gomez, who raised three children as a single mother (two already in college). “I tell them what I’ve learned, because I’m a janitor just like them.”

Developing Parents through Learning Journeys

In other cases, parents shored up their financial, academic, and professional resources before stepping into service. The **LIFE Path** program of the **United Way of Greater Atlanta, Inc.**, gives them the tools and mentoring to make that possible.

“For many of us, Family Engagement has been isolated within the educational system,” said a LIFE Path director. “With LIFE Path, we looked at not only education support, but economic support to families and educational attainment – all through a racial equity lens.”

Sheltering Arms, a childcare center that serves 16 metro Atlanta locations, has partnered with LIFE Path on the effort. [Their teams of Family Engage-



ment coaches work with parents in areas such as health, finance and career development.] “Every month, the coaches check in with families around a particular goal, whether it’s to buy a house, open a bank account, go to school or just be a better parent. It’s like your own personal cure team. It’s a two-generation approach, so while the child is moving forward, the parent adheres to his or her own personal growth. Because as a parent, you often put aside what you want once you have children.”

Teams of Family Engagement coaches work with parents in areas such as health, finance, and career development.

One LIFE Path participant, Sharon Anderson, changed her family’s future when she was hired by her local school system as a paraprofessional – a big promotion from her old job in private child care. Another participant, Tara Slater, saved diligently for months through an Individual Development Account to reach her goal. “I’m excited to share that I’m pre-approved and put a contract on a home yesterday,” she told her LIFE Path coach, “I’ve been saving since October and my goal is to be completed by March with \$1,000 as a down payment!”

LESSONS FROM CHILDREN

Parents and community might have been the primary target of Family Engagement projects, but the long-term focus was children's success in school and their long-term learning and development. From that perspective, the improvements in each child's school readiness, knowledge and academic competency are as significant as the changes within families, schools and the wider community.

Autistic and English language learner students, often the targets of bias, flipped the script and became stronger self-advocates.

In some cases, children began to advocate for themselves in the classroom. A family member with Fusion Partnerships described an incident involving a teacher asking his daughter to change her seat – because a student was copying her homework. In other cases, autistic and English Language Learner students, often the targets of bias, flipped the script and became stronger self-advocates. This included an autistic student who asked the teacher to plan an event for Autism Awareness month, so that other students could better understand autism.

In a similar vein, a parent from OneAmerica said, “My daughter was able to speak in front of 60 adults to defend her own rights. And tell how she, as an ELL student, needs different support. That surprised me about my daughter, because she’s a very quiet girl.”

Students ‘Sit a little Straighter’ with Parents in the Room

In **East Oakland, CA** the **Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN)** revealed the powerful influence and impact of parent involvement, even at a school challenged by persistently low reading levels. At Madison Park Academy, the school had tried a gamut of reading techniques: one-on-one coaching, small group instruction, tutoring, incentives, technology upgrades and so on. But none of them had made a significant difference. Most of the school's students, from kindergarten to fifth grade, were more than two grade levels behind.

Then, while conducting the annual Family Engagement survey, the vice principal made an interesting observation. “When parents show up, students stand a little taller, sit a little straighter and focus a little more.” To capitalize on the positive presence of parents, the school



launched its Reading is Fundamental Campaign with this three-pronged strategy:

- ◆ **Increase the number of on-site workshops to help parent volunteers improve their understanding of early literacy:** The more parents knew about early grade literacy, the more they could help children in the classroom and help their own child read at home (parents being the child's first teacher).
- ◆ **Build community-wide support to help children read at grade level:** To build awareness, parents organized a community meeting where the principal shared data on the school's lack of grade-level reading progress. Meanwhile, professional development sessions helped teachers learn to create a more welcoming environment for families (including an asset checklist of how families might share their talents and experiences). Teachers also developed a pilot program that trained parents to serve as classroom literacy volunteers.
- ◆ **Train parent leaders to provide better budget oversight and advocate for school improvements:** A workshop on school budgeting gave parents the knowledge necessary to take part in shared decision-making. (Something cohort grantees rank as the hardest Family Engagement practice to implement.) Parents

also rallied community support to ensure that Madison Park Academy – an affiliated high school – offered college-accredited courses to its students. They did so even though many parent volunteers had no children at the high school.

It was a complex recipe for success. But when it comes to Family Engagement, quality ingredients matter: by the school year's end, of the 22 Madison Park students whose parents completed all the workshops, 21 had moved three letters forward on the Fountas and Pinnell assessment. Thirty-six percent of students started the school year at grade level or above – and 50 percent of students were reading at or above their grade level. This, in a community where many viewed schools as “broken institutions, endlessly churning out students into the school-to-prison pipeline without any opportunity to succeed.”

When schools such as Madison Park pull together and attain unprecedented success, **children's social well-being increases. They take new pride in their school, and improved relationships with students and parents result.** This realization, that learning – even when challenging – can be fun and rewarding opens new vistas of possibility.

Engineering, Algebra, College – and Kindergarten

In **Chicago, IL**, the **ChiS&E** program made parents the partners in STEM education.

The program is designed for low-income African American and Latino students in the early grades. It requires students to follow a daunting, year-round schedule of Saturday classes in STEM concepts – even in the summer. A rigorous K-3 curriculum begins with kindergarten-level algebra. By third grade, ChiS&E students have been introduced to the basics of chemical, electrical and mechanical engineering.

For adults, the time commitment to ChiS&E is no less demanding. A parent or family member must actively participate with their student, to include the three-hour Saturday sessions.

The benefits of ChiS&E extend in all directions. For teachers, parent involvement enables larger class sizes, since parents can help out in the classroom

with hands-on activities. For parents, serving as a teacher's aide means that they, too, master the content. “I just had to wrap my brain around it, because I needed to get it,” a parent said. “Initially, you're like ‘Okay, am I going to be able to help my kid? But the way it's set up, it's not insulting ... it's not intimidating.’”

In the classroom, teachers strengthen student confidence by encouraging them to speak up, even if they give a wrong answer. Being wrong, they explain, is all part of learning. Teachers use words such as “confidence” and “grit” to describe the resilience that students show in finding the right answer. The parents also are expected to encourage grit and resilience as they help their children with homework assignments. Teachers urge parents to let children work their own way through homework, rather than point out errors or give them the right answer too quickly.

Now I feel like, ‘I got this.’ I have patience. I can sit with her until she understands.

Finally, ChiS&E facilitated regular access to a university campus, creating potentially transformative exposures for low-income parents and children. Classes are held at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and teachers often remind children “that college is a place where they belong.” Parents, too, say this experience has helped allay their own anxieties about college.

As in Chicago, parents involved with the **Early Childhood Hands-On Science program (ECHOS)** in **Miami, FL**, say the experience has made them more resilient, confident – and patient. ECHOS, managed by the **Frost Museum of Science**, teaches basic science concepts to children in Head Start programs across Miami-Dade County, where half the population is foreign-born. Through ECHOS, parents say they've learned to listen and ask questions differently.

One parent said she'd felt exasperated by those endless “But, why Mommy?” questions that can jangle any parent's nerves. The ECHOS classes taught her to whet that curiosity in constructive ways. “Now I feel like, ‘I got this.’ I have patience. I can sit with her until she understands.”

LESSONS FROM TEACHERS, SCHOOLS AND GRANTEE STAFF

Family Engagement, by nature, makes connections and teachable moments possible for school and grantee staff. One project manager said her bilingual skills “shot up 100-fold” and that she now communicates effectively in English and Spanish. A staff member from the **Public Policy and Education Fund** said, “I would’ve never known that parents were using their kids as translators until I talked to parents. It was an ‘ah-ha’ moment and I’ve been doing this for years.” Semester by semester, in ways large and small, partners and staff increased their understanding of the lives, cultures and languages of the families they serve.

It’s sort of an island... It’s only accessible by two bridges and there’s limited public transportation.

Consider how one school approached National Hispanic Heritage Month. It runs from mid-September to mid-October, right in the rush of a new school year, as opposed to American Indian Heritage month (November) or African American History month (February). But at a Teaching for Change school in Washington, D.C., the problematic timing didn’t stop Hispanic parents from stating the obvious: “This school is like 78 percent Latino, and we had no Hispanic heritage celebration last year? Why was that?”

“We used to do a lot around Hispanic heritage,” school officials replied. “But there are so many kids in the school that we can’t do it anymore. We’ve added 200 to 300 kids and they can’t all fit into the cafeteria.”

For the parents, that was unacceptable. “You have to figure it out and we’ll help,” they said. “We’ll cook. We’ll make decorations. We’ll bring food from our gardens, because this is too important. Our kids need to see themselves in this school.”

As only engaged families can, the parents, principal and staff did figure it out. The parents handled the decorations and the teachers led programming for what became a three-part, three-hour assembly. Afterward, the parents were so happy that they hosted a breakfast to thank the teachers. And the principal and teachers were so thankful that they held a second

breakfast to thank the parents. Suddenly, Hispanic Heritage month wasn’t such an inconvenience after all.

Books, then Picasso, as a Pathway to Art

At the **Bass Museum** in **Miami Beach, FL**, Family Engagement began by acknowledging a hard reality: the museum felt out of reach – physically and culturally – for many low-income African American and Hispanic residents. “It’s sort of an island,” said a museum staff member. “It’s only accessible by two bridges and there’s limited public transportation. If you don’t have a car or money for an Uber, it’s hard to get here.”



Beyond its location, a contemporary art museum can feel elitist to newcomers. To help breach these barriers of class and culture, the Bass Museum took a new tack with its **Creativity in the Community Family Engagement** project. Instead of bringing people to the museum, it brought the museum to people through a six-week outreach program in underserved areas such as Little Haiti, Little Havana, Overtown and North Miami Beach. The Bass did so with guidance from an advisory committee of local residents. Along the way, they learned two important lessons about cultural outreach.

The first was that beginning with literacy, rather than the abstractions of modern art, made a better entry point. “We decided to use literacy,” said one Bass staff member, “because every parent knows you need to read to your kids.” Bass chose children’s books such as a biography of Tito Puente, the Latin music giant and a Creole version of “Augustus and His Smile” (a tiger in search of his lost smile).

At weekly sessions, adults and children would read for 30 minutes then spend 60 minutes on a painting, collage or sculpture related to the book. They learned, too, about contemporary artists, and eventually made free trips to Miami museums where they saw contemporary art first hand. Gradually, what began as a literacy and art program morphed into an art and literacy program.

The other big lesson involved language choice. “At first,” said a Bass staff member, “we thought this would be a great time to teach the parents English. Finally, we realized that we can’t do it all. We’re an art and literacy program not an English-language program. So, we stopped pushing English and taught the classes fully in Spanish or Creole. It ended up being just a really good time for quality moments as a family. With no cell phones allowed!”

Books also were an essential bridge between generations for the **Families Advancing Racial Equity (FARE)** program of the **Center for Southeast Asians** based in **Providence, Rhode Island**.

FARE holds eight-week Family Engagement workshops that explain how the U.S. school systems function — and differs from schools in Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam. Attendees learn how to navigate social

services and the rights and responsibilities of parents, as they relate to their child’s progress. In extended family fashion, the workshops are open to grandparents, aunts, uncles — even non-Southeast Asians who care for children of Southeast Asian descent.

In extended family fashion, the workshops are open to grandparents, aunts, uncles — even non-Southeast Asians who care for children of Southeast Asian descent.

But the books, with their stories of war and loss, of beloved languages and landscapes, bring the past to bear on learning and community as nothing else can. Titles have included “Mali Under the Night Sky: A Lao Story of Home,” or “Cambodian Dancer: Sophany’s Gift of Hope.” A parent may read in Khmer while a young person reads in English. Or sometimes the opposite. The elders are there, grandparents who lived the history and can speak to it richly. And whether the reading occurs at a summer youth program or during Family Night, the revelations are the same. Children see that the perils faced by Southeast Asian refugees four decades ago are much like those endured by the refugees of today. Swept up in the warmth and power of stories, family literacy becomes more cultural journey than academic obligation.

The power of stories and sharing experiences emerged among the Family Engagement staff who lead such outreach efforts in schools and communities. Building connections was the motivation behind the Friday Café, launched by the **Early Childhood Language Development Institute** and the **San Mateo County Office of Education**.

At Friday Café, family leaders and school Family Engagement staff can talk shop about their struggles and successes. These peer-to-peer networks are more important than ever, given the deportation threats many of their immigrant clients face. Overall, attendees say the gatherings have been a breath of fresh air and then some. “The experience in Friday Café,” said one participant, “is like putting on an oxygen mask.”

Measurement and Learning

In the Family Engagement cohort, project leaders found they needed to dig deeper to understand why some parents were reticent to connect with schools,

and to recalibrate what they measured. As a result, partners and staff increased their knowledge and skills, they felt more empowered to work with families.

Closer connections with families helped explain why some Hispanic parents might have been reluctant to discuss their child's academic performance with teachers. "In a lot of cultures, there's a very deep vein of respect for teachers and the work they do," said a staff member with **Lawrence Community Work, Inc.**, in **Lawrence, Massachusetts**. "This has led to a more hands-off approach, as in, 'Well, I don't question what the teacher does. I am sending my child there to be educated. I'm in charge at home. The teachers are in charge at school.' But that got interpreted by some teachers and staff as, 'Parents don't care.' They weren't seeing it (the hands-off approach) for the sign of respect that it was. They were seeing it for apathy."

"In some cultures, there's a very deep vein of respect for teachers. This may lead a hands-off approach, which can be read as apathy."

Insights like these are behind administrative tools and processes in development at the National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI), a project of the Connecticut Commission. NPLI staff are working to

create a feedback-driven evaluation tool that can provide more personal specifics than numbers alone can.

"In communities, for way too long we tracked participation outcomes," one staff member said. "How many families came through a center? How many children were catalogued as part of a system? How many vouchers were handed out? But tracking outcomes in terms of quantity won't get us to the qualitative outcomes that are the real measure of sustainability."

NPLI wants their evaluation to serve as a feedback loop that directly informs how local agencies provide services. They're working with the Department of Social Services and Office of Early Childhood to develop and pilot a feedback driven system that can do so.

"If you're working on jobs skills with a local community college or company, we want to know what kind of instruction helped you gain certification? Was there co-located child care? How did that help you attain your goal? Traditionally, the way we've received this information from families is, 'Now that you're here, would you mind going online to answer a few questions so we can record what we know about 'X.'? But a survey that exists in a vacuum is not family engagement. We want to know, 'what is your experience in accessing specific services that keep you from falling off the cliff'?"

What is measured and how it is interpreted contributes to learning on many levels; it shapes the story from one experience to the next. That was the case when the Keiki O Ka 'Aina project in Hawaii underwent a meticulous evaluation of their Native Hawaiian language and culture early education program. The hope was that the program could be a model for others. They even brought in a team of renowned indigenous scholars who visited for three days to assess the program for accreditation (which it later received). After the closing ceremony, a school official reported, "As the event ended, the rain came and a full rainbow arched over us – one of the most revered signs of Hawaiian blessing."

Family Engagement? There's an App for That!

"As humans," said a staff member with the **Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa**, "we're prepared to answer questions before we hear them.



We launched a pilot project with three of the highest need schools in Oakland, Calif., serving primarily low-income, racially diverse students. Traditionally, few people see poor children or children of color and their families as being capable of engaging in meaningful feedback loops with teachers, but this pilot proved that simply is not true.

Using questions from the Urban Teacher Quality Index, we surveyed 10,000 parents and students using mobile devices. While “vulnerable populations” don’t always have regular access to the Internet or email, they do have access to technology platforms on their phones. We received a notable 85 percent family response rate by setting up our platform to work on mobile devices.

The survey’s impact on parents was profound. They said things like, “This was the first time anyone’s asked me what I want for my child’s school.” We quickly realized the potential of TEN’s impact on education more broadly, especially in early childhood. It was an accessible and meaningful way for parents to offer input to schools about their child’s education and it empowered schools and teachers to be more responsive. We can only imagine the potential if parents were provided this opportunity for all 13 years of their child’s educational experience.

But to put yourself in the other person’s shoes first, to understand what their need or worry is? That’s a technique we need to work with every day.”

The ability to listen and communicate well is a foundational skill – some would say the foundational skill – of successful Family Engagement. Understandably, for partners and staff to increase and improve communications with families remains one of the most useful goals that schools and agencies can pursue.

The ability to listen and communicate well is a foundational skill – some would say the foundational skill – of successful Family Engagement.

In Oakland, CA, Jeff Duncan-Andrade wanted to create a new kind of professional development program for teachers. Duncan-Andrade directs the [Institute for Sustainable Economic, Educational and Environmental Design \(I-SEED\)](#). To build what he had in mind, he’d need a direct way to solicit input from students and families. (Similar to the feedback-driven evaluation process proposed by PTLI in Connecticut.) As Duncan-Andrade explained, “The only thing we had was student outcome data, which tells you what students aren’t learning from you, but not why.”

The product of I-SEED’s quest was the [Teaching Excellence Network \(TEN\)](#). In a 2013 article, Duncan-Andrade described TEN as follows:

Apart from parents, students also were big fans of the Index. They could finally give teacher’s input on their performance, instead of the other way around. For their part, teachers valued “the real useful feedback” from students, who generally give the most accurate evaluations of all. Teachers also liked the instant feedback that an electronic tool provides. As Duncan-Andrade wrote, “There was no more waiting for end-of-year test scores that offer limited data on students who have already left your classroom.”

That said, effective two-way communication does not require a smart-phone app. Sometimes the right message printed on an old-school paper form can do the same thing. At the [Generations United](#) project in [Washington, D.C.](#), grandparents made this clear during a meeting with teachers and the school principal.

“The permission slip that’s used to drop off or pick up a child from school only had room for one contact name,” said a Generations United staff member. “That’s pretty standard for official forms. But what if it’s either the grandmother, the grandfather or an aunt or uncle? The schools realized they had to change the form to fit the concept of an extended family.”

LESSONS ABOUT SYSTEMS AND POLICY CHANGE

As important as changing one classroom and one school at a time may be, it's change at the systems level that offers the best way to maximize the power of Family Engagement. Here, parents and families have shown themselves willing to engage not just schools, but boards within education systems, community councils, libraries and state agencies. Importantly, the confidence and knowledge they gain through Family Engagement training enables them to comment and contribute.

In **Los Angeles, CA**, the **Advancement Project** trains parents with children age birth to 8 to be that kind of leader. And their thorough preparation has made other leaders take notice.

"They (school and other leaders) say they love working with our parents our parents are informed, they know what to ask and how to ask it. Better yet, they come in prepared and wanting a partnership. We've seen other conversations where it's easy to blame the district: they're not doing their job; they're not doing enough. With our parents, officials can build authentic relationships. They're not feeling attacked. They're feeling like it's a collaboration."

As school systems become more attuned to diverse families, they see the nuanced adjustments required at a number of levels – between the schools and specific racial or ethnic groups, as well as between the groups themselves.

In **San Francisco, CA**, the **Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth** offers a range of skill-building workshops such as **Youth Making a Change** and **Parents Making a Change**. Most attendees are low-income immigrants, mainly mothers, and also African American mothers, fathers and grandparents.

Since 2016, Coleman Advocates has focused more closely on helping immigrant parents cope with the anxiety of possible deportation. While San Francisco has long been a sanctuary city, in 2016 it revised ordinances so that no city employee may "assist or cooperate with any Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) investigation, detentions or arrest relating to alleged violations of the civil provisions of federal immigration law."

"There's been solidarity, but also some parents upset by how the sanctuary city issue has been framed,"



said a Coleman Advocate staff member. “The concern being that Black students, in particular, have always faced bias and threat from police in the schools. They’ve never felt safe in their interactions with police or the justice system. Now, as we create sanctuary schools, we want to also consider the experience of Black students and families. We want to expand the conversation from ICE police to all kinds of police involvement in schools.”

Latinx Heritage: Not One and the Same

With **Amistades, Inc.**, in **Tucson**, staff had to revisit their cultural assumptions about the language used during parent training sessions. “Many of our families are from Mexico and Central America. They’re first generation and they’re very traditional. We have to do most of our training in Spanish,” said an Amistades staff member.

But training in Spanish across the board created a subtle barrier to engagement.

“We found out there was a disconnect around language between the Mexican families and second- or third-generation Mexican-American families,” and Amistades staff member said. “The Mexican-American families prefer training in English because they struggle with Spanish. The Mexican families prefer Spanish because they struggle with English. We had our work cut out for us, but we did it (the training) using two different approaches.”

Sacred Ways and Words Restored

For Native Americans, helping systems become more responsive to families’ language and culture can be life saving. For example, without preservation efforts, some ancient languages may disappear unless children (and their parents) can learn and use it soon. It was partly to prevent such cultural obliteration that the **American Indian College Fund** created its **Ke’ Early Childhood Initiative**. The Ke’ Initiative works with tribal colleges and universities to embed Family Engagement in early education programs.

One such program is the Lakota Immersion Nest, housed in the Kids Kampus at Sitting Bull Community College in Fort Yates, North Dakota. Tribal elders and Lakota speakers serve as lead teachers and support younger teachers as they operate the hybrid

day care and language immersion project. Children spend eight hours per day, four days a week, learning exclusively in the Lakota language. The 3-5-year-old children play, pray, learn and eat together in a room where cotton-ball art projects bear the Lakota words for rain and lightning. Parents pay \$88 weekly for tuition, but no one will be turned away for lack of funds.

Similar to the ChiS&E program in Chicago, this is no “drop-your-kids-at-the-door” program. Parents sign a pledge to attend language classes and reinforce their child’s learning. They hold a parade and carnival to raise funds, fill in as substitute teachers when needed and even served as program director until a new leader could be hired.

For Native Americans, helping systems become more responsive to families’ language and culture can be life saving.

Yet elders such as Tom Red Bird emphasize that learning Lakota is about more than words. The language embodies an entire Lakota worldview, a way of knowing and being that keeps creation and the community close at hand. If more people still spoke Lakota, Red Bird told the Bismarck Tribune, “They would be more respectful. The language is more sacred with core values. There are no curse words. It all revolves around the family.”

All this creates an environment that Immersion Nest parents will make sacrifices to support.

“I really think this is the way we need to educate our own children,” a parent said. “I’d rather my kid have a (Lakota) identity and know their self-worth than worry about how they’re competing with the rest of the state and nation on their test scores in math and reading. That will all come in time... it’s that core piece you need first.”

Rallying a City

A sound strategy for Family Engagement in a school or school system counts as a local success. But a change in policy that supports Family Engagement across dozens of places and thousands of children? That's an illustration of the power of Family Engagement to drive policy change. Nonprofits such as Harvard Family Research Council have made great strides to inform policymakers on Family Engagement (more on that below). But when it comes to heart and credibility, it's hard to match the power of parents as policy advocates.

Consider the pavement-pounding impact of the Public Policy and Education Fund (PPEF) in Buffalo, New York. For their Present Students, Future Leaders program, PPEF organizers contacted 11,700 residents, two-thirds of whom were people of color. Of these – most were reached by knocking on doors and gathering signatures at events – they identified 2,000 “hot leads” worthy of follow-up. From that number, 100 became regularly engaged in PPEF's work. Of these, 25 became active, consistent leaders in the movement.

While that may sound like a low-return payoff, the outcomes suggest otherwise. A top priority for PPEF was to “create an atmosphere in Buffalo where policymakers became strong champions of community schools.” Community schools are places that serve

as hubs for activities and services that can integrate academics with family support, health and social services. They're open before school, after school and on weekends. Research shows that community schools dramatically raise attendance rates and significantly improve academics.

PPEF believes that its widespread outreach campaign primed the pump for what came next.

When it comes to heart and credibility, it's hard to match the power of parents as policy advocates.

In a sweeping policy victory, Buffalo received \$12.5 million from the state to convert 12 public schools, including eight elementary, to community schools. Then, a state legislator that led the charge in Buffalo secured a \$175 million commitment for community schools statewide.

Meanwhile, in **New York City, NY**, the WKKF-supported **NYC Coalition for Educational Justice** helped secure \$23 million in anti-bias training funds for city teachers. The outcry for training stemmed from a February 2018 New York Daily News story about a white Bronx teacher who stepped on a Black student during a lesson on slavery; a Bronx principal who barred Black history lessons and a Park Slope PTA group that used blackface imagery in gala invites. The NYC Coalition organized rallies where thousands of parents demanded a stronger commitment to racial justice in the classroom.

Yet sometimes, the evidence of policy change in Family Engagement can be encapsulated in a single sentence. For the **Harvard Family Research Project** that could be this joint statement from the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services: “Children learn in a variety of settings starting at home and in their early learning programs, but extending it across the community in libraries, museums, community centers and after school programs.” In this case, the statement advances the Family Engagement principle of “anywhere, anytime learning.”

These few words also speak volumes about the Harvard Family Research Project's ability, as a leader in national policy, to elevate the principles of Family Engagement. It often does so in meetings with enti-



ties such as state universities, the Federal Reserve, White House initiatives and presidential councils. The council's comments on the joint statement above were strongly endorsed by Libby Doggett, deputy assistant secretary for policy and early learning at the U.S. Department of Education. "These are great suggestions," she wrote. "Thanks for submitting so many good ideas and supporting this concept!"

Racial Equity

Even if not explicitly stated, racial equity is at the core of all our Family Engagement work. America's schools – especially those that serve low-income children of color – are too scarred by the lingering depredations of slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining, police profiling and other wrongs for it to be otherwise. In that sense, all the Family Engagement strategies pursued by the cohort sought to promote racial equity.

Overwhelmingly, grantees **were willing to have difficult conversations about race and racism**. The director of OneAmerica urged staff to bring up race, "Even when it's uncomfortable and when it feels like the elephant in the room. That's how we lead and

that's our role as advocates." In modeling this behavior, they show how talking respectfully about race can diffuse tensions and lead to more trustworthy and results-oriented partnerships.

"When you see parents have a deeper conversation about school issues, you know you're having an influence," said one grantee. "Most kids from the families we're concerned about are not seen as college material. So, when families talk about what their kids needs in middle school and high school to be prepared for college, that's new and important. And their example creates a wave of consciousness that's perceived by their neighbors and other families."

Knowledge and Data Equip Families for Change

But even as families build the skills and confidence to talk openly about race, they need evidence to make a case for change. When grantees use data to identify racial inequities, it gives them equal standing with those who once withheld or concealed that data for their own ends. That's why the **Southern Partners Fund, Inc.**, views the ability to access and analyze data as central to its mission. "This is necessary,"



they wrote in a WKKF report, “because communities cannot organize against policies they do not thoroughly understand. They need the skills to collect and analyze data to prove the unfair academic and disciplinary practices.”

Many parents and students of color get behind in elementary school and never catch up.

Southern Partners serves Alabama, Georgia and North Carolina. They partner with nonprofits that organize parent groups, which in turn teach other parents how to request and de-mystify school data. This includes school disciplinary practices, hiring practices, student performance and placement – and, how to file an Office for Civil Rights complaint, should it come to that. For hosts of parents, this essential knowledge about their own children was a long time coming.

“Many parents and students of color get behind in elementary school and never catch up,” wrote one Southern Fund staff member. “Most parents never knew their child was behind, or how much they were behind, because they weren’t clearly told and didn’t know they needed to ask.”

Now, thanks to the inauspicious-sounding Student Profile Sheets they can know. To fill in the blanks, the sheets provide parents with questions to ask about their child’s academic and disciplinary status. In Elbert County, Georgia, parents put more teeth into the profiles by convincing schools to develop a Truth in Learning Policy. The policy states that “the elementary school will inform parents, in writing, of the grade level at which their child is performing in reading and math.” One local official said the elementary school principal “would’ve never agreed to this policy” – which affects 1,500 students – had it not been for WKKF’s involvement with the Southern Fund.

The project also produced a county and school profile booklet for each participant group. These made for useful, if difficult reading. For they reflect not only the progress made, but also the hard work in racial equity that’s yet to be done. “In many counties throughout the South,” write Southern Fund staff, “the environment and desire for (racial) separation has not faded away. It has simply receded into the

background and is being accomplished through more subtle means. The profiles proved that the adults in these counties who are under-represented politically, and on the bottom economically and educationally, are raising children who are on the bottom in these school systems. The challenge is to motivate and educate parents to insert themselves in these systems and become strong advocates for their children.”

Excising the Everyday Injustices of Racial Inequity

As Southern Fund staff make clear, racial inequities insinuate themselves deep into the social fabric of daily life. They may be bold-faced injustices or subtler offenses that offend personal dignity and deny opportunity. Either way, racial inequities rarely fall of their own accord: they must be analyzed, called out and rooted out through public awareness and civic action.

In Illinois, **Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)** equipped 209 parents for that mission through its Family Focused Leadership Training. Most were low-income parents, with children aged 0-8, who live in largely urban Illinois communities. As parents of school-age kids, they know well which flawed policies and practices stymie early education access and success.

In Aurora, the Padres Lideres Activos rallied support from Spanish-speaking families to win funds for new buses that transported 3,000 students in their mainly Latino school district. In East Louis, Parents United for Change convinced the schools to relocate bus stops and add new crossing guards for safety. At the state level, COFI parent leaders joined a campaign to prevent and reduce “preschool expulsions” (a term hard for many to even comprehend). Their advocacy resulted in bi-partisan legislation that was signed by a conservative governor.

“Perhaps most importantly,” wrote a COFI staff member, “by telling their stories and sharing their experiences with media, parent leaders are striving to change the perceptions of low-income parents of color from ‘problem’ to ‘effective agents for positive change.’”



Common Conclusions

The Kellogg Foundation initiated the Family Engagement initiative with intentionality, vision, clarity about goals for our investment of \$13.7 million, spread across 30 grantees. The Foundation had researched and reviewed the best practices for effective Family Engagement. But through our partnership with this cohort, the foundation learned how deeply project directors, school staff, teachers and families had internalized the letter and spirit of Family Engagement. As this report shows, each of the 30 projects have their own distinct story to tell. Nevertheless, some dynamics, challenges and triumphs were shared, and fell across these major themes:

Flexibility is More Important than Rigid Adherence to “the Plan”

In nearly all cases, grantee programs turned out differently than first planned. Given the variables – parents, family, teachers, school leaders, the intrusion of state and federal politics – it’s hard to imagine how any cohort project could’ve progressed in a straight line. In fact, the ability to improvise and change course based on new feedback or changing conditions proved to be more of a virtue than a hindrance. Maybe the training sessions needed to be shortened. Maybe grantees needed to spend more on transportation and child care so that parents could attend meetings. Perhaps the timelines for reaching this or that objective was too ambitious. No matter: with Family Engagement, no grantee could expect a machine-like process where adding X amount of inputs produced X amounts of outcomes.

The Sitka Tribe of Alaska recognized this from the start. They decided to evaluate their progress based on the Tlingit phrase *A xandei yantoo.át* – moving toward it. “We believe that over the course of the project’s three years we have been successful, but

also recognize there is still a long way to go to improve the educational and life outcomes of our tribal citizens and address the institutionalized racism that’s existed in Sitka for generations.” That assessment could also apply to many other projects in the Family Engagement cohort.

Quality Relationships – Not Quantity – Makes the Difference

Grantees and funders like to track “process indicators,” such as number of meetings held, number of attendees, number of families who took field trips, etc. Generally, this data reflects their progress toward stated goals: a turnout of 10 parents usually being better than one or two. But after agonizing over low meeting turnout, many grantees began to discover something else. That filling a room with bodies didn’t have nearly the impact that building deep connections with a small number of committed families did. In Family Engagement, quantity does always not trump quality. A few families on fire for child advocacy, who rally other parents to the cause, meant more than a string of faceless numbers on a spreadsheet.

Local Context Keeps Program Realistic and Responsive

There are 1.6 million nonprofits in the United States, which in part reflects the human tendency to start something new rather than reform or collaborate with existing entities. But with Family Engagement, grantees report that organizations should resist the urge to hive off and form something new. Rather, it's more successful to work within existing organizations and structures, and to win over school administrators or local officials who have the authority to make reforms. Indeed, sustainable change may only come about if these local key players are on board.

In a similar vein, it's critical to understand the lived experience of local immigrants, tribes and other local groups. Given that, Family Engagement might look different from school to school, neighborhood to neighborhood. The tension here is between designing model projects – whose components can be properly adapted to other places – and imposing off-the-shelf programs that are blind to local circumstances. For instance, an evolving neighborhood may be grappling with gentrification that introduces a new

dimension of instability. At the same time, older residents may want change, yet harbor mistrust toward local officials because of past oppression. The history of specific communities and groups provides crucial context for authentic engagement.

Family Engagement: A Path to Personal and Professional Growth

People come to Family Engagement from different perspectives. For families, it may be a commitment to help schools serve their children's education better than they themselves were served. For teachers and school officials, it may be the promise of Family Engagement to markedly improve academic performance for low-income, children of color. Yet for all parties involved, this much seems true: The honesty and empathy required for successful Family Engagement demands personal growth and a willingness to change one's beliefs and assumptions.

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The redeeming motivation – even for the parents and staff and teachers and administrators who were overworked before Family Engagement came along – is that children live fuller, happier, healthier, more productive lives because of it. And for the parents who once felt powerless in their children's education, the results of Family Engagement can be revolutionary.

"I've lost all fear," a parent with OneAmerica said. "I'm not afraid to fight for my own rights, for my children's rights, my family and for those of my community. I know my way of thinking and understanding things helps other parents find solutions to their difficulties. I have a really big possibility to become a good leader and that gives me confidence in myself to help others."



APPENDIX

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation Family Engagement Cohort

| Grantee/Location | Program Title |
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| Advancement Project Los Angeles, CA advancementproject.org | Leveraging California's New Local Control Funding Formula to Strengthen Parent Engagement and Improve Outcomes for Children Birth to 8 |
| American Indian College Fund Denver, CO collegefund.org | Ké' Early Childhood Initiative: Strengthening Systems of Shared Responsibility Among Native Families, Schools, and Communities |
| Amistades Inc. Tucson, AZ amistadesinc.org | Razalogia Approach: Transforming Communities by Engaging Latino and Pascua Yaqui Families in Holistic Learning |
| Bass Museum of Art Miami Beach, FL thebass.org | IDEA@thebass Educational Program |
| Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network Oakland, CA parentactionnet.org | Oakland Families LEAD: Leadership for Equity, Achievement, and Democracy in Oakland Schools |
| CDF: A Collective Action Initiative (CDF Action) Clarkston, GA cdfaction.org | Clarkston Families Decide: An Early Learning Social Cooperative |
| Center for Southeast Asians Providence, RI cseari.org | FARE (Families Advancing Racial Equity) |
| Chicago Pre-College Science and Engineering Program Chicago, IL chiprep.org | STEM-Engaged Children, Educators, and Families |
| Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth San Francisco, CA colemanadvocates.org | Parents Making a Change |

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| Community Organizing and Family Issues Chicago, IL cofonline.org | Engaging Low-Income Families of Color in Early Learning Systems and Policy Change |
| Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa Tulsa, OK csctulsa.org | The Power of Families Project |
| Fusion Partnerships Inc. Baltimore, MD fusiongroup.org | The Journey Project |
| Generations United Inc. Washington, D.C. www.gu.org | Grand Partners in Education |
| Greater Burlington YMCA Burlington, VT gbyanca.org | Y Early Learning Readiness Program |
| Harvard Family Research Project Cambridge, MA globalfrp.org/Archive | Revitalizing Family Engagement During the Transition to Kindergarten: Partnering With Families Across Time and Learning Contexts |
| Institute for Sustainable Economic, Educational, and Environmental Design (ISEEED) Oakland, CA iseeed.org | TEN: Teaching Excellence Network |
| Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) San Antonio, TX idra.org | Seeding Equity in Education through Dialogue (SEED) |
| Kansas Families and Schools Together Inc. Topeka, KN kfast.net | Kansas Coalition for Effective Family Engagement |
| Keiki O Ka Aina Preschool Inc. Honolulu, HI koka.org | Ho'ohiki Pilina – To Grow Relationships |
| Lawrence Community Works Inc. Lawrence, MA lawrencecommunityworks.org/site | Community Education Circles |

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| National Parent Leadership Institute Hartford, CT nationalpli.org | The National Parent Leadership Institute |
| OneAmerica Seattle, WA oneamerica.com | Immigrant Voices for Change in Early Learning: Comprehensive Strategies for Parent Engagement, Skills Development & Organizing in South King County |
| Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science Miami, FL frostsscience.org | Early Childhood Hands-On Science Family Engagement |
| Public Policy and Education Fund Buffalo, NY ppefny.org | Present Student Future Leader |
| San Mateo County Office of Education Redwood City, CA smcoe.org | Early Childhood Language Development Institute |
| Sitka Tribe of Alaska Sitka, AK sitkatribes.org | Wooch.een Yei Jigaxtoonei: Working Together to Increase Family Engagement |
| Southern Partners Fund Inc. Atlanta, GA new.spfund.org | Tri-state Parent & Youth Engagement Project |
| Teaching for Change Washington, DC teachingforchange.org | Tellin' Stories Parent Empowerment Project |
| UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education Los Angeles, CA labor.ucla.edu | Parent Worker Engagement and Organizing: Building to Building, Janitor to Janitor, School to School |
| United Way of Greater Atlanta Inc. Atlanta, GA unitedwayatlanta.org | Leading Innovations in Family Engagement – LIFE Path |



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