

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Coalition and the Workgroup included a statewide network representing the range of early childhood educators and providers – family childcare, center-based child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, early intervention, Family Support Network, and public schools. In addition, the Coalition and Workgroup included members with deep expertise in key areas of concern such as social and emotional development, quality learning environments, and cultural competence, as well as members representing the broader range of children, home visiting and library supports and services.

We would like to thank all of Maryland's early childhood educators, providers, and families for their insight and contributions which can be found throughout this document. This project was a collaboration of Maryland families and providers sharing their best tried and true effective practices. It is this sharing of knowledge and experiences that will allow educators and providers to support each other as they work to improve their family engagement practices.

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Imagine the following scenario, a common one in early childhood settings. A parent meeting is being held at your program. You have spent the past several days or even weeks coordinating the event. You have coordinated with teachers to provide childcare during the meeting. You have made sure pizza was being delivered for the children and families. You have created colorful fliers and sent them home in the children's backpacks once a week for the past three weeks. You have hung fliers on the doors so parents see the meeting announcement as they pick up and drop off their children. You have even posted them on the bus. You have asked teachers to remind their parents of the meeting and you have included it in the monthly newsletter. Parents have told you how excited they are for the meeting and that they will be attending. What is the result? It is 15 minutes after the start of the meeting and there are only two parents present, both looking like they would rather be anywhere else but at your meeting.

You are feeling frustrated. You have held the same meeting every year for the past several years and parents always attended before, but each year the number of parents attending gets fewer and fewer. You go ahead with the meeting, thinking, "Oh, well. I had to have a parent meeting and I did. It's not my fault if only two parents showed up."

Have you ever thought about what the parents that showed up were thinking? They could be wondering why they came when they have so many other things they could be doing. They may be thinking about how they could be spending time with their children instead of coming to your meeting. But they want to be involved and show the school they care about their children's education. They may be wondering why they keep coming to these meetings to please the school and get information they could have looked up or received some other way.



Have you ever thought about why parents don't show up? Maybe they couldn't come because they didn't have time. Maybe they didn't come because they don't feel welcome at the program or maybe they didn't come because they didn't feel the information was useful to them.

In fact, these are the very things that act as barriers to parents being more engaged in their children's education. According to the W.K.Kellogg Foundation, the most significant barriers to **family engagement** are lack of time, lack of understanding of the material and lack of communication between the schools and the family.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to understand these barriers so that we can look at our current family engagement practices and improve upon them. Family engagement is critical to promoting **school readiness**. Without it, children will not be fully prepared to enter school and will most likely always be working to catch up. The question then is: does your program contribute meaningfully to encourage parents to be more engaged?

As early childhood educators and providers, it is necessary that we not only understand the importance of family engagement, but that we continuously work with our families to ensure they understand how important their role is in their child's education. We need to move beyond telling parents they are their child's first teacher and move towards engaging parents to find and apply the skills to be their child's first and best teacher.

So, where do we begin? Begin by using this Toolkit to encourage parents to be more engaged.

## MARYLAND'S DEFINITION OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

*Family engagement is a shared responsibility of families, schools and communities for student learning and achievement; it is continuous from birth into the school-age years; and it occurs across the various early care and learning settings where children are. Family engagement means building relationships with families that support family well-being, strong parent-child relationships, and the ongoing learning and development of parents and children alike. It reflects **culturally competent** and universal design approaches, encompassing the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and activities of all families, as well as early care settings that support all children's positive development. Family engagement happens in the home, early childhood settings, school, and community. **Sustainable** family engagement operates with adequate resources, including public-private partnerships, to ensure meaningful and effective strategies that have the power to impact student learning and achievement.*

Sounds impressive, right?

**Let's break it down. The purpose of the Family Engagement Framework is to:**

- **Recognize the importance of family engagement as a core component of early care and education.**
- **Put forth a set of common goals for family engagement across the early childhood system and within individual early care and education providers.**
- **Offer family engagement strategies for early care and education providers and identify resources that support the implementation of those strategies.**

Pay attention to that last bullet. We put this toolkit together for direct service providers. This includes libraries, Head Starts, Judy Centers, family child care providers, and child care centers, as well as pediatricians and family physicians – all those caring, committed folks who work with families and –



who can engage families in thoughtful and creative ways to ensure children are well prepared for school.

Providers are early childhood educators, staff members, teachers, librarians, and professionals serving children and families. Families include parents, caregivers, and others that support children in the home environment. Early learning environments or settings can include classrooms, family provider settings, early learning programs, libraries or any program serving children and families.

The Toolkit is organized around the Family Engagement Framework. The Framework is the theory and the Toolkit puts the theory into practice. The complete document can be found on the MSDE Early Childhood website.

In the **first section** you will find information on how Family Involvement has **evolved** into Family Engagement and the distinct characteristics of the two.

The **second section** focuses on the goals of the Family Engagement Framework. We put the theory into practice in this section.

The **third section** contains information regarding Toxic Stress, Cultural Proficiency, and English Learners. We know these areas have an effect on children and families and impact our relationships with them.

In the **fourth section**, you will find Effective Practices. Like all good teachers, we borrow ideas. These activities have been collected from across the state and beyond, and they are proven effective in building relationships with families and staff and increasing family participation. The practices are a sampling of the many activities that can be utilized to foster family engagement.

The **last section** includes a self-assessment you can use to see how far you have come. This tool will help programs and staff determine where their strengths are and where to go next.

## ICON LEGEND



QUICK TIP, STRATEGY OR CONCEPT



REFLECTION



DEFINITIONS



## THE GOALS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Figure 1 outlines the seven goals of family engagement in Maryland.

While the first goal suggests ideas for promoting family well-being, the second goal suggests ways to promote positive parent-child relationships.

For the next two goals, we will share suggestions for promoting families as lifelong educators of their children as well as ideas to promote the educational aspirations of parents and families.

With the fifth and sixth goals, we will share tried and true ways of supporting families through **transitions** and connecting families to peers and community resources.

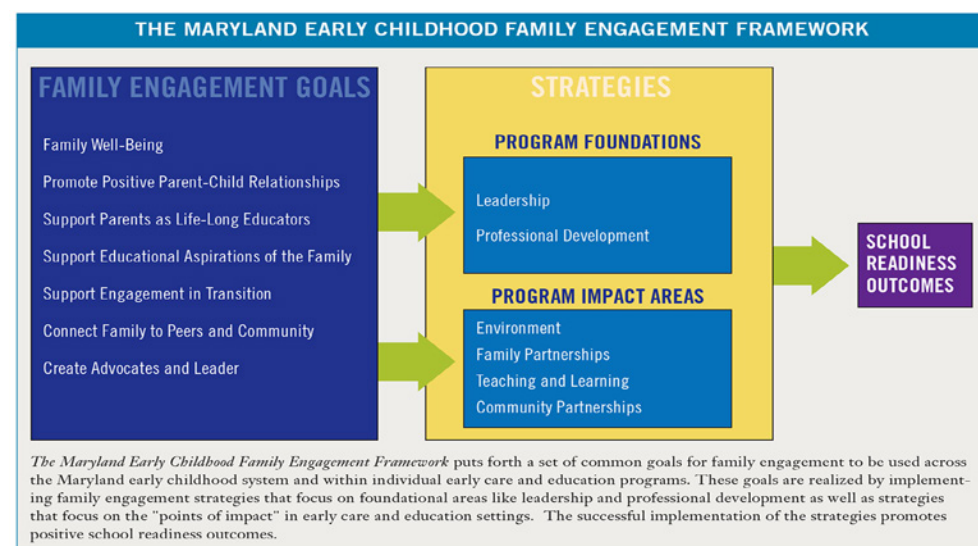
Lastly, the seventh goal will offer ideas of how programs can help families develop as leaders and child advocates.

All of the information in the Toolkit will be on cards (like this one) and on each card you will find the goal and its definition as well as strategies to reach this goal. There are several examples from families, educators and providers showing family engagement strategies that they have found successful. Also included are additional web links and resources in the resource section located in the back of the Toolkit so that you can easily find more information.

Use the cards the way that makes sense for your program - everyone will benefit, especially the children.

Now that we have outlined the Toolkit, let us get back to the family engagement theory that underpins all of the strategies. Here is a handy visual to help explain what we mean when we say family engagement.

Figure 1:



As with anything new in a program, a firm foundation of support from management and administration is crucial, and strong leadership is essential. Effective leadership includes professional development for all staff. This impacts all program areas and leads to supportive environments,

productive and reciprocal family partnerships, high quality teaching and learning and strong community partnerships. When the program foundations are in place, all program areas will be positively impacted, which will support programs in meeting their family engagement goals.

Family engagement is so important that we need to say this again. It is not something that only teachers do or something that is done monthly as a supplemental activity; it is an essential part and the core function of your program. It is our hope that programs will use the Framework and the Toolkit to increase their program's understanding of family engagement and to use this approach in their day-to-day practices.

## FROM FAMILY INVOLVEMENT TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The idea of partnering with families is not new. For years, early learning educators have sought ways to involve families in programs. Information is given to parents regarding their child's development at parent meetings and parent teacher conferences, scheduled annual events are held each year, and nearly all programs have an open door policy for families to come in and observe or participate in the classroom. These are all examples of *family involvement*.

Family Engagement is different. It is the next step - one that represents a more active partnership between home and school for the benefit of all involved. Family engagement is about early childhood educators and families working together in intentional and reciprocal ways to support quality learning experiences.

The above examples of family involvement are easily modified for family engagement. Conferences become a discussion between parents and teachers where information is shared regarding the child's development and everyone works together to create goals for the child. Annual events are held based on the parent's interests and needs. If parent participation for these events is low, programs can assess their families' needs to determine how to improve their parent engagement activities. Finally, programs can promote their open door policy to families and welcoming and involving them fully in the classroom when they volunteer or visit. Family engagement is achieved when programs purposefully plan with parents on improved participation, which in turn helps to develop a relationship *with* parents and also demonstrates to children that their parents care.

Now, think back to the teacher in the introduction who organized a parent meeting only to have two parents show up. The teacher simply gave up and checked it off her list as a completed task. What could she do next to truly engage her families? She could survey the parents to determine their interests or assess the program and their family engagement practices to determine what could be done better. She could also consider that low attendance is not a sign of failure, but rather as an opportunity to recognize the ever-changing needs of families and to make adjustments to meet these needs.

We know that moving from involvement to engagement takes time and practice. To help with this transition, here are several examples to get you started.

Parent Involvement Becomes Family Engagement	
PARENT INVOLVEMENT	FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
Program/school leadership develops a statement on home-school partnership.	Families and program/school leadership come together to develop a statement on family engagement, define goals for the year related to the statement, brainstorm activities/events that can be implemented to achieve the goals, create a work plan, and form a group of family members and school representatives to carry out the work, including additional families along the way. Together, families and program/school leadership reflect on what is working and what needs to be changed to further grow family engagement.
Parents participate in program/school events and activities offered by the program/school.	Families -- in partnership with early childhood educators and program leadership -- co-create opportunities for families to support their children's learning.
Parents attend parent-teacher conferences where they receive reports about their child's progress.	Early childhood educator's visit one-on-one with families to get to know the child and families, inquire about the goals the family has for the child, and develop a portfolio that travels between home and program at key intervals to update and record milestones. Families also participate in parent-teacher conferences, where they both receive and share information about their child and strategies for how any challenges will be addressed both by home and program.
A designated staff person is assigned as the parent-liaison and is responsible for outreach to parents.	All staff are trained in family engagement strategies and are provided with support and guidance so they can most effectively engage families in ways that benefit the child, family, and the program/school.
Programs and schools are primary consumers of data on children.	Families are regular consumers of data about their children and receive information for what they can do to support learning as a result of the data.

You will notice as you go through this Toolkit, that each of the strategies and activities are guided by the four key principals below. This ensures that programs are better able to focus on their partnerships and help families to recognize their role in preparing children for academic success.

### Four Key Principles to Family Engagement according to the Mid Atlantic Equity Consortium:

1. Welcome all children and families.
2. Allow for community building and networking.
3. Provide a "nugget of knowledge" and allow time for modeling and practice of new information.
4. Tie family engagement to school readiness goals to improve outcomes for children and families.