



Tabletop Session Summary

June 24, 2021

Creating Authentic Partnerships with Marginalized Families and Communities

Presenters: Alexandria Harvey, [National Center on Systemic Improvement](#); Natasha Capers, [NYC Coalition for Educational Justice \(CEJ\)](#)

This tabletop discussion offered strategies for partnering with historically marginalized stakeholders, both during the summer and into the next school year.

Session Highlights

- » Under the American Rescue Plan, state and local education agencies must have meaningful engagement with diverse groups as they plan for the use of relief funds.
- » In discussing engagement, broad definitions of “family” and “community” are needed. References to family can include related and unrelated individuals who collectively care for children. Similarly, references to community can include groups who share a racial or cultural identity or neighborhood.
- » Authentic engagement is important for welcoming and supporting stakeholders. It is not about the frequency of contact but about valuing student and family voice and agency in the decisions that affect school districts.
- » Traditional modes of engagement, however, often mirror management rather than genuine engagement.
- » Characteristics of traditional modes of engagement include, for example, a preference for the written word, quantity over quality, either/or thinking, perfectionism, and individualism.
- » These standards are typically not ones that were agreed upon by families and other stakeholders. They can be seen as authoritative and power-driven, whereas engagement with an equity lens may be viewed as more empathetic and as having shared responsibility and shared decision-making.
- » It is important for organizations to consider how they currently engage families and stakeholders and the extent to which they include underserved groups.

Shared Resources

- » [Creating Authentic Partnerships with Historically Marginalized Families and Other Stakeholders: Embracing an Equity Mindset](#)
- » [Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles](#)
- » [Family Engagement Toolkit](#)



Questions and Answers on Creating Authentic Partnerships with Marginalized Families and Communities

What are some technical and practical ways to engage with families considering barriers due to the summer and the pandemic?

Teachers can learn more about their students by reaching out to their previous teachers. However, what's even more important is creating a welcoming environment. Consider parent access to the building and how staff are positioned to welcome families. There are also several models, such as parent/teacher home visits, where you can meet families either in their homes or at a designated meeting place. Parents don't have the option to select teachers or the curriculum, so it can feel like a forced relationship to them. It's still important, however, to try to connect with them.

Avoid a one size fits all approach. Like IEPs for students, it could help to view family engagement as a specialized plan for each individual family. It's also important to consider family engagement across different cultural contexts. Zoom can continue to be used after COVID restrictions to communicate. It's important to be flexible and to take advantage of all modalities that are available.

What are some things to take into consideration when engaging with families from various cultures and who speak different languages?

Outreach must be multi-tiered. Emails can be effective, but there are families without internet access or the proper devices to connect online. Districts can purchase technology to provide families with access. However, it's important to provide options. For some families, it may be more helpful to meet in person. Schools should be prepared to engage in multiple languages. Larger districts with diverse student populations should consider having a family engagement role to ensure that all families are included in engagement efforts.

When in an engagement role, what does it look like to engage authentically with the parent/family?

Center the conversation on the family. It's not about you and what you need from them but rather what you can do to help the family. Educators should remember to engage in a way that is not off-putting to families. Authenticity can be expressed by being polite without being overbearing. Stay away from excessively probing questions that could make the parent/family member feel uncomfortable. Educators should also remember to speak in a way that they would like to be spoken to when engaging with families.

What does it look like for a state or district to hold themselves accountable for authentically engaging families? What role do parents play in holding their districts accountable for family engagement?

Let parents know that they have agency and a voice. Allow parents to participate in leading meetings. For example, they can contribute to the agenda, help decide if a meeting should be in person or held virtually and participate in other planning strategies. Follow-up with families to let them know you are considering or are incorporating their input.

Some school systems assign the role of community involvement/engagement specialist to staff as an additional role to their existing responsibilities. As a parent or grandparent, what can be done to advocate for these positions to be full-time positions?

Parents could organize a campaign for an increase in parent coordinator or similar positions to bring this need to their district's attention. Districts have money available to create positions like this with their funding, but it may not be on their agenda. Surveys could also be used to demonstrate this need.



What is a key takeaway from this session that someone could implement right away to engage families from historically marginalized backgrounds?

There are a few ideas that can be implemented. One of the first things that can be done is to collect data that captures the views of families, such as a survey gauging how they feel about the school or district's level of engagement. Use that feedback to improve the level of engagement.

Also, identify one marginalized group that doesn't appear to have a lot of representation and five parents from that group. Spend time just getting to know them. Let go of the agenda of wanting to improve things and start out by just getting to know people. The discussion doesn't have to start out centered around a parent's child, instead ask how the parent/family member feels about things being done in the district.

Finally, review the article shared in this session "Creating Authentic Partnerships with Historically Marginalized Families and Other Stakeholders: Embracing an Equity Mindset" to gauge where you are and to think about how you can improve.

