A Multifaceted Approach to Family Engagement:

Technology, Marketing, and Engagement in Schools

Think K-12

Family engagement in education is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond traditional notions of parent involvement. Defining and understanding the dimensions of family engagement is crucial to fostering effective collaboration between schools and families. This research report provides a comprehensive understanding of family engagement, highlighting key definitions and addressing challenges associated with traditional forms of involvement, how technology has been shown to positively affect family engagement, and the impact of ThinK-12 as a tool for leveraging technology to increase engagement and facilitate enrollment and retention of families.

Parent Involvement vs. Family Engagement

Parent involvement is often narrowly defined as focusing on parents being present in the schools. This limited perspective primarily involves invitations from schools for activities such as open house attendance, monetary or material donations, PTA/O participation, or parent-teacher conference attendance. Traditional forms of parent involvement pose challenges when families do not engage as directed by the school. This often leads educators to make problematic assumptions about the reasons for limited participation, adopting deficit-based perspectives. In such cases, parents' perspectives, needs, challenges, and abilities are not adequately considered (Hong, 2011; Angrist et al., 2020).

On the other hand, family engagement takes a more comprehensive approach, encompassing intentional efforts by schools to recognize and respond to parents' voices. It involves helping school staff understand and address barriers identified by parents (Baker et al., 2016). Effective family engagement requires a unique and individualized approach that focuses on both families and the community. This approach acknowledges the diversity among families and emphasizes tailoring engagement strategies to meet their specific needs (Ishimaru, 2020).

Understanding family engagement as a dynamic and multifaceted concept is essential for fostering a positive and inclusive educational environment. Traditional approaches need to be reconsidered to avoid making assumptions about parental involvement. Schools that adopt strategies that recognize and address families' diverse needs and challenges experience higher levels of family engagement and reap the benefits of those increases.

Benefits of Family Engagement

Family engagement in education is recognized as a pivotal factor contributing to positive outcomes for teachers and students.

Benefits for Teachers. Positive parent-teacher interactions significantly influence teacher retention. The interpersonal relationships and communication skills of both parents and teachers shape the quality of these interactions. Additionally, the school's communication practices and opportunities for family engagement play a significant role in fostering a positive environment for teachers (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009). Teachers who believe their family engagement efforts are encouraged and supported are more likely to pursue these efforts.

Benefits for Students. Some families mistakenly assume that family engagement is important in the early grades but should fade as children mature. On the contrary, family engagement is critical for all grade levels, even as the forms of engagement change throughout the grades. Trust between home and school positively correlates with student performance, emphasizing the importance of a supportive environment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) throughout a child's school career.

Parents engaged in preschools that promote family engagement significantly contribute to lower grade retentions, higher graduation rates, lower arrest rates, and decreased special education needs. Children of engaged parents exhibit increased motivation, cognition, social skills, and achievement. In fact, Reynolds and Clements (2005) found that each year of parental engagement increases a child's chances of graduation by 16%. Sustained family engagement results in increased attendance, improved English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics performance, and decreased absences (Sheldon & Jung, 2018; Voorhis et al., 2013). Active engagement of families of students in all grades contributes to reading and math gains in students (Bryk et al., 2010).

The positive relationship between family engagement and student achievement extends through high school, with the belief of parents being welcomed into the school being a key factor (Jenson & Minke, 2017). In fact, family engagement during high school is closely associated with higher graduation rates, increased enrollment in challenging classes, and greater post-secondary attendance (Ascher & Maguire, 2007).

Family engagement emerges as a critical component in the educational ecosystem, benefiting both teachers and students. The findings underscore the importance of fostering positive interactions between parents, teachers, and schools to create an environment conducive to academic success and teacher satisfaction. As educators and policymakers consider strategies to enhance the education system, prioritizing and promoting family engagement should be a central focus.

Family-Centered Engagement (aka Strategic Family Engagement)

Family-centered engagement, also known as Strategic Family Engagement, involves considering families as experts, decision-makers, partners, advocates, and active members of educational teams (Ladwig, 2013). Schools are advised to make parents aware of the various roles available to them, respecting their preferences to limit involvement initially until they become more comfortable. Implementation strategies include organizing schools and websites to assist families in advocacy, promoting flexibility in engagement opportunities, establishing effective communication through various channels, tailoring engagement opportunities to individual needs, recognizing the uniqueness of each family with dignity, emphasizing family choice and decision-making, and employing responsive practices.

Strategic family engagement can help schools overcome communication challenges to effect positive change. Research highlights a common disconnect between parents' and teachers' perspectives on students' academic proficiency, which can be addressed through high-quality communication and collaboration (Learning Heroes, 2018). Providing families with resources to support their children's goals and aspirations is identified as a valuable approach to bridging this gap and fostering a more cohesive relationship between parents and teachers in the educational process. The findings underscore the significance of strategic family engagement strategies in creating a collaborative and supportive educational environment.

Critical Times of Transition

At several points during a child's educational career, transitions from one school to another take center stage. Families' experiences, student adjustment, communication across schools and with families, and alignment of school cultures have lasting effects.

Parent engagement in early childhood settings, focusing on family-centeredness, is crucial in predicting a family's satisfaction with the transition process. Notably, a negative transition experience can have enduring effects on future family engagement, persisting even after children transition to a new school (Ladwig, 2001). The root cause lies in the erosion of trust between the home and school during this transition phase, necessitating the new school staff to actively rebuild this trust (Hong, 2019). Failure to do so results in a sustained lack of trust and effective collaboration. Trust-building extends beyond superficial interactions and requires a concerted effort with the school's leadership to establish partnerships that reflect the needs and experiences of students' families and communities.

A family-centered approach, as Ladwig (2013) advocates, positions families as experts, decision-makers, partners, advocates, and active members of educational teams. This approach emphasizes the importance of making parents aware of new roles available to them while respecting their autonomy in determining their level of involvement. Research indicates that parent involvement in early childhood significantly influences achievement and student motivation up to the 6th grade (Hayakawa, et al., 2013). Transition challenges often arise when students face academic struggles and parents lack information on guiding their children's learning. Conversely, informed parents, aware of the importance of a smooth transition and understanding the expectations placed on their child, are better equipped to support and guide their children through the high school years (MacIver et al., 2015). Therefore, it is essential for districts and schools to take responsibility for enhancing families' capacity to partner with schools, especially during times of transition, ultimately benefiting students in their educational journey (Ladwig, 2001; 2013).

Technology as a Family Engagement Tool

Examining the role of technology in promoting family engagement in schools reveals several impactful strategies. The intentional and regular use of text messages and phone calls, specifically concerning instructional support, correlates positively with increased math skills and heightened family engagement (Angrist, et al., 2020). Daily communication between home and school for secondary students through texting, incorporating positive, neutral, or negative information with an affirming statement, has demonstrated immediate positive effects on homework completion, behavior, and classroom participation (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Furthermore, regular text messages to parents with tips and activities result in additional student growth, particularly pronounced for English Learners, with stronger outcomes when families actively respond to teachers' texts (Welch, 2018).

In addition to texting, electronic communication weekly during high school, encompassing phone calls, emails, and text exchanges, has proven effective in decreasing the rates of students failing a course by 41% (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). This highlights the potential of systems supporting efficient and effective communication at scale, showcasing impact and cost-effectiveness. Social media emerges as a valuable tool, enabling parents to better engage with their children's learning experiences as student work is highlighted through videos and images, reframing learning as a collaborative effort across home, school, and community (Baxter & Toe, 2021).

Communication platforms have demonstrated their instrumental role in fostering positive outcomes for students. This is especially true when two-way messaging systems are available in multiple languages (TalkingPoints, 2021). Frequent communication helps bridge gaps between teachers and families, providing insights into a child's experiences at home and school. This connectivity, facilitated by technology, showcases the feasibility of building and strengthening school-family relationships remotely, contributing to more effective schooling.

Shifting Paradigms

School websites play a crucial role in shaping parents' perceptions about a school, with the absence of information on these sites identified as the primary factor influencing these perceptions (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009). Achieving effective family engagement necessitates various components, including providing opportunities for involvement, establishing easy-to-access communication channels between home and school, devising unique ways to welcome families into a participatory relationship, considering time constraints and conflicts, and intentionally developing innovative methods to transition from involvement to engagement (Baker et al., 2016). Technology emerges as a facilitator in meeting these requirements.

Hong (2011) introduced the "ecology of parent engagement" framework, which technology can assist in implementing. This framework involves developing activities and resources to educate parents about the school, its practices, and how to support learning, highlighting connections between engagement activities, linking parents with each other and school staff, and actively involving parents in decision-making. The framework's elements are not linear but instead overlap in an interactive, connected, and developmental process.

Traditionally, schools have not been viewed as sources for family connections; however, fostering environments that encourage parents to know and trust each other leads to natural relationship development, countering barriers like language, time constraints, economic factors, and social barriers (Rangel, Shoji, & Gamoran, 2020).

District leadership in family-centered education communicates value to families, schools, and the community, resulting in positive outcomes (Sanders, 2014). To support a child's learning, collaborate with schools, and address achievement gaps, schools and districts must intentionally engage all families (Voorhis et al., 2013). Traditional forms of family engagement encounter barriers, including time, schedules, accessibility, a lack of trust, different cultural norms, and more. Technology helps to overcome those barriers by making family engagement opportunities available to all families when, where, and how they need it.

Acknowledging that technology adoption may take time, with only 28% of Americans identified as "strong" early adopters, research suggests that newly launched technology will require time for widespread adoption throughout a school (25). However, parents are more likely to adopt strategies from schools when they witness them in action and have the opportunity to practice them (Barbour et al., 2018). Therefore, schools that embrace this paradigm shift and its associated technological advances will naturally provide opportunities for families to witness and participate in the school culture collaboratively.

Collectively, emerging technology enables schools to use their web presence in inherently different ways. This paradigm shift, from traditional forms of parent involvement at school to on-demand family engagement opportunities, overcomes barriers. It contributes to a holistic understanding of the dynamics surrounding family engagement in the educational process.
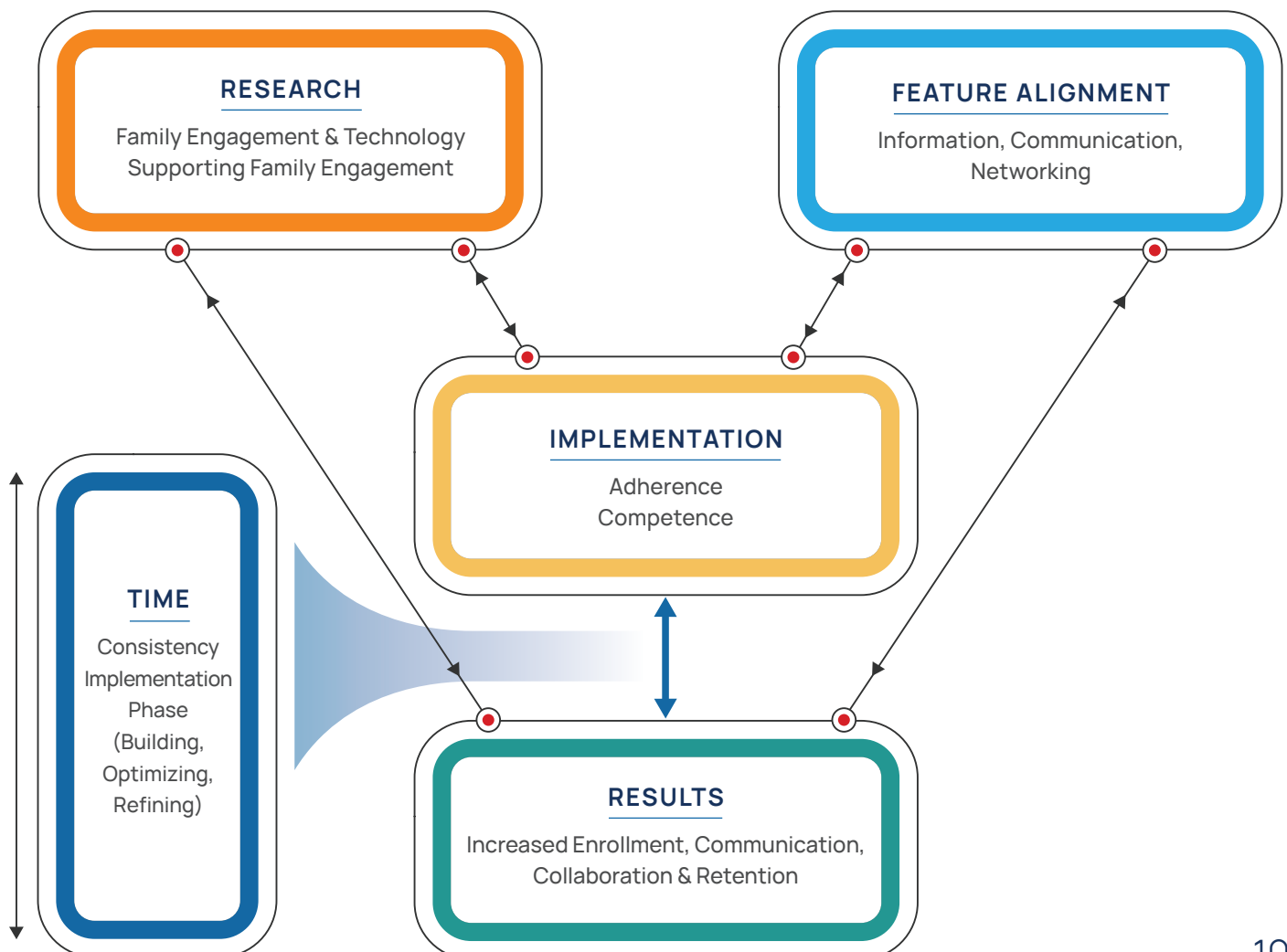
A Comprehensive Approach

Rather than focusing on using only one form of technology (e.g., texting), as some research and commercial programs have done, ThinK-12 takes a comprehensive approach. This allows schools, families, and students to reap the benefits of each technological feature discussed above and the exponential benefit of the interaction of family engagement opportunities for prospective and current families. All technological features are available to families in more than 100 languages at all times and meet ADA requirements to ensure that all families have easy access to information from, by, and about the school.

THEORY OF CHANGE
Utilizing Technology as Your Family Engagement Tool

RESEARCH

Family Engagement & Technology Supporting Family Engagement

FEATURE ALIGNMENT

Information, Communication, Networking

IMPLEMENTATION

Adherence
Competence

TIME

Consistency
Implementation
Phase
(Building,
Optimizing,
Refining)

RESULTS

Increased Enrollment, Communication, Collaboration & Retention

Family Service Center. An intuitive AI chatbot, the Family Service Center makes it easy for families to access information. A parent types in a question in one of more than 100 languages and receives an immediate response day or night. Parents don't have to search for information; they are simply provided with or directed to the information they requested.

ThinKTank. ThinKTank positions the school as the primary source of information for families as they learn about the school, how they can support their child's development and learning, and how to work collaboratively with the school. Intentionally short articles (approximately 500 words) are available to parents on demand in their primary language.

Q&A Videos. Q&A Videos provide authentic, short stories parents can view to learn more about the school, its leadership, and the school culture. With Q&A Videos, parents virtually experience the school and begin to imagine their child and family as part of that school family. (ADD LATER: Like ThinKTank, Q&A Videos also include information for families. Short tutorials, informational vignettes, and tips for families provide support for families looking to better support their child's learning and development.)

Outcomes. Outcomes is a dedicated space on your school website to showcase the achievements of your students, faculty, and staff and to highlight innovative programs and activities at your school. Parents of currently enrolled students share these pages as their children, their children's teachers, and the school are celebrated. Prospective parents view the Outcomes and imagine their child experiencing similar success.

Family Network. The Family Network is intentionally designed to foster family connections. Individual families create a family page (as desired) where they can share information about their family, including interests, hobbies, photos, and clubs or groups they are following. Families can message one another directly (one-on-one only) to help them connect surrounding shared activities and children's interests. Networking in this way eliminates the traditional class lists while providing an easy way for families to meet and connect with one another, including families who may not otherwise meet families in traditional ways (e.g., school pick up or drop off). A message feature within the Family Network, with limitations determined by the school or district, allows families to connect without sharing their personal emails or phone numbers with others.

Staff Directory. In many ways, the Staff Directory mirrors the Family Network. All school staff members are invited to create a staff page where they share the same types of information as families do. However, they may also include a teaching philosophy or similar information. Staff pages have a humanizing effect, helping parents to connect with their children's teachers. Parents can message teachers and staff with one click. These two-way communications facilitate quick and easy communication while helping to organize messages so parents can find information from school quickly and easily. This is especially beneficial for families with multiple children and families with children involved in extracurricular activities.

Hub. Hub pages replace static club lists and can include groups for students (clubs and sports teams), teachers (class pages), families (e.g., PTA or book club), the local community (including those sponsoring the school or offering services to students and their families), and other groups determined by schools. Hubs may include photos, information about the group (e.g., when, where, and how they meet), how to join, schedule, links to leader profiles, and more. Interested families can follow a particular Hub page to be notified when information is updated. Prospective parents view Hub pages and learn about programs at the school offered to students, parents, and families. Parents of currently enrolled students actively use the Hub pages for information and networking.

When used together, these technological tools provide prospective and current families with on-demand information and access to clubs, staff, and other families in the time and manner they choose (e.g., print, video, chatbot, messaging, etc.).

SUMMARY

Strategic family engagement has the potential to positively influence schools at all levels: students, families, teachers, schools, and communities. Technology, when intentionally used for the purpose of increasing family engagement, is an effective and efficient tool that schools can use to engage families. The various family engagement tools included in ThinK-12 support families and schools by aligning research, technology, and best practices in family engagement to increase engagement, recruitment, and retention while taking much of the burden off individual school leaders.

References

Allensworth, E., Ponisciak, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2009). The schools teachers leave: Teacher mobility in Chicago public schools. *Consortium on Chicago School Research.*

Angrist, N., Bergman, P., Brewster, C., & Matsheng, M. (2020). Stemming learning loss during the pandemic: A rapid randomized trial of a low-tech intervention in Botswana. *AEA Randomized Controlled Trials.*

Ascher, C., & Maguire, C. (2007). Beating the odds: *How thirteen NYC schools bring low-performing ninth graders to timely graduation and college enrollment.* Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Baker, T., Wise, J., Kelley, G., & Skiba, R.J. (2016). Identifying barriers: Creating solutions to improve family engagement. *School Community Journal,* 26(2), 161-184.

Barbour, L., Eisenstadt, N., Goodall, J., Jelley, F., & Sylva, K. (2018). *Parental engagement fund study.* The Sutton Trust.

Baxter, G., & Toe, D. (2021). Teachers use of social media for family engagement. *Educational Action Research.*

Bryk, A.S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* Russell Sage Foundation.

Hayakawa, M., Englund, M.M., Warner-Richter, M.N., & Reynolds, A.J. (2013). The longitudinal process of early parent involvement on student achievement: A path analysis. *NHSA Dialog,* 16(1), 103-126.

Hong, S. (2011). *A cord of three strands: A new approach to parent engagement in schools.* Harvard Education Press.

Hong, S. (2019). *Natural allies: Hope and possibility in teacher-family partnerships.* Harvard Education Press.

Jensen, K.L., & Minke, K.M. (2017). Engaging families at the secondary level: An underused resource for student success. *School Community Journal,* 27(2), 167-191.

Kraft, M.A., & Dougherty, S.M. (2013). The effect of teacher-family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness,* 6(3), 199-222.

Kraft, M.A., & Rogers, T. (2015). The underutilized potential of teacher-to-parent communication: Evidence from a field experiment. *Economics of Education Review*, 47, 46-63.

Ladwig, C. (2013). Family-Centered Parent Involvement and Shared Decision-making in Special Education Classrooms. In E.S. Amatea (ed.). *Building culturally responsive family-school relationships (2nd ed.).* Allyn and Bacon, MA.

Ladwig, C.N. (2003). *Transition from early intervention to preschool: Family needs, concerns, and priorities.* University of South Florida.

Learning Heroes, Edge Research (2018, December). *Parents 2018: Going beyond good grades.* Learning Heroes.

MacIver, M.A., Epstein, J.L., Sheldon, S.B., & Fonseca, E. (2015). Engaging families to support students' transition to high school: Evidence from the field. *The High School Journal,* 99(1), 27-45.

Rangel, D., Shoji, M.N., & Gamoran, A. (2020). The development and sustainability of school-based parent networks in low-income Latinx communities: A mixed methods investigation. *AERA Journal,* 57(6), 2451-2484.

Reynolds, A.J., & Clements, M. (2005). Parental involvement and children's school success. In E. Patrikakou & R.P. Weissberg (Eds.). *School-family partnerships for children's success.* Teachers College Press.

Sanders, M.G. (2014). Principal leadership for school, family, and community partnerships: The role of a systems approach to reform implementation. *American Journal of Education,* 120(2), 233-255.

Sheldon, S.B., & Jung, S.B. (2018). *Student outcomes and parent-teacher home visits.* Parent Teacher Home Visits and Johns Hopkins University.

TalkingPoints (2021). *Family engagement and its impact during distance-learning: Follow-up report.* Talking Points.

Van Voorhis, F.L., Maier, M.F., Epstein, J.L., & Lloyd, C.M (2013). *The impact of family involvement on the education of children ages 3 to 8: A focus on literacy and math achievement outcomes and social-emotional skills.* MDRC.

Welch, K. (2018). Evaluation of the FASTalk program in Oakland Unified School District. *Family Engagement Lab.*