

## A Study of Family Engagement in Redwood City Community Schools

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Since 2007, the Redwood City School District (RCSD) and Redwood City 2020 (RWC 2020) have partnered with the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) at Stanford University to examine how participation in community school programs shapes students' outcomes. The Gardner Center's prior research highlighted a consistent relationship between family engagement and student achievement. This pattern was especially noteworthy among English Learners, who were more likely to improve their English language development scores if their parents participated in family engagement opportunities over multiple years, particularly during the elementary grades.

These findings supported RCSD's view of family engagement as an important strategy for improving student outcomes. At the same time, the findings raised new questions about what factors may be promoting or inhibiting family engagement at the community schools. In 2011, the Gardner Center launched a complementary study to investigate these more nuanced questions and better understand the family engagement practices implemented in community schools from the perspective of multiple stakeholders including school staff, parents, and students.

In this brief, we summarize the research literature, describe the 2011–2012 family engagement study, and report results, highlighting five main findings:

1. All study participants agreed that the goal of family engagement is to improve students' academic success and emotional well-being. Many school staff identified additional benefits to families and schools.

2. Community school staff and families envisioned three main approaches to family engagement: (1) family participation in school activities and events, (2) strong school-family communication and positive relationships, and (3) mutually beneficial partnerships between schools and families with shared responsibility for student and school outcomes.
3. Schools implemented a wide range of family engagement activities that were rarely aligned with a school-wide shared vision or specific goals.
4. Parents and students most often described family engagement as support for children's schoolwork and general well-being at home. School staff most often described family engagement in the context of the school setting.
5. Staff and parents identified obstacles to family engagement that included perceived cultural barriers and parents' lack of confidence in their capacity to support student learning and contribute to the school community.

### **Summary of Prior Research**

Family engagement is an integral component of community schools, with parents fitting squarely within the school and community ecosystem that supports students' academic and social-emotional success (Children's Aid Society, 2003). Defined broadly, family engagement refers to meaningful connections between schools and their students' families. Joyce Epstein and her colleagues (1990) identified distinct ways families may be engaged with their children's schooling, including providing for basic needs and supporting learning at home as well as maintaining communication with school, supporting the school, and contributing to decision-making at school. In both research and practice, family engagement is positioned as a strategy for improving student achievement as well as supporting families and schools (Christenson and Reschly, 2010; Grolnik and Slowiaczek, 1994; Lee and Bowen, 2006).

Researchers have also identified key conditions necessary to engage families, including building trusting and collaborative relationships, recognizing family needs and culture, and embracing a philosophy of partnership and shared responsibility for students' learning (See Henderson and Mapp, 2002 for a review). In addition, successful family engagement efforts work to build parents' sense of confidence to interact with school personnel, welcome and invite families in, and act responsively to family-life variables (Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2005). Recently, researchers have also highlighted the importance of believing that all families, regardless of income level, immigrant status, or other social factors, dream of success for their children and all families have the capacity to support learning. Such positive attitudes toward students and families in low-income and marginalized communities are essential to successful family engagement (Mapp and Hong, 2010).

## The Study

Redwood City School District is a diverse elementary school district with 16 schools serving approximately 9,200 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Approximately 70% of the district's student population is of Latino background, 50% are English Learners, and 65% receive Free and Reduced Price Lunch. The district currently supports six full-service community schools that enroll just over 4,000 students. This study was focused on five<sup>1</sup> of the district's community schools—Fair Oaks (K-5), Garfield (K-8), Hoover (K-8), Kennedy (6-8), and Taft (K-5). In these community schools, approximately 90% of the student population is of Latino background, 70% are English learners, and 90% receive Free and Reduced Price Lunch.

In order to capture a range of perspectives and experiences, Gardner Center researchers conducted a total of 50 interviews and focus groups with school staff, families, and students in the five study schools. At each school, interviews included the principal, community school coordinator, three teachers, the after school coordinator, and where the position existed, a family engagement specialist.<sup>2</sup> We conducted two parent focus groups at each school as well as one student focus group (two student focus groups in the K-8 schools). We also interviewed the district-level director of school-community partnerships.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted using structured protocols and were recorded and transcribed. The ten parent focus groups were conducted in Spanish and translated into English during the transcription process. The findings in this brief focus on analyses of responses from principals, staff, parents, and students to questions about their perceptions of family engagement in general and at their schools in particular. Bringing together this range of perspectives and experiences informs local practice and has the potential to inform the broader family engagement literature as well.

## Findings

### Perceived Goals and Benefits of Family Engagement

When asked about the goals of family engagement, every person interviewed discussed the potential for family engagement to benefit students academically. Additionally, most agreed that family engagement promoted students' emotional well-being. Some study participants also discussed family engagement as a means to support families and schools. Descriptions of the ways that study participants described family engagement's benefits for students, families, and schools are outlined in Exhibit 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Hawes Elementary School was a newly emerging community school and was not included in the study.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the five schools employed a family engagement specialist.

**Exhibit 1: Primary Goals of Family Engagement Discussed Across Role Groups**

Student Benefits	Family Benefits	School Benefits
<p><b>Achievement gains</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work harder</li> <li>• Perform better</li> <li>• Engage in school</li> </ul>	<p><b>Better informed about:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child’s school life</li> <li>• School system</li> <li>• Social services</li> </ul>	<p><b>Classroom support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ease teacher workload</li> <li>• Reduce discipline issues</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emotional well-being</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivated</li> <li>• Feel proud</li> <li>• Sense support</li> </ul>	<p><b>Build capacity for:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English proficiency</li> <li>• Math strategies</li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> </ul>	<p><b>School-wide support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve school unity</li> <li>• Boost morale</li> <li>• Improve program quality</li> </ul>

*Across all schools, the majority of participants identified benefits to students.*

Approximately 80% of study participants, including parents and students in all focus groups, identified student achievement as a primary goal of family engagement. They believed that students work harder, earn higher grades, or engage more in learning when their parents are engaged. Students confirmed that they felt more motivated to achieve when their parents were engaged.

About 70% of study participants across all role groups believed that students’ social and emotional well-being increased when their families were engaged. Student well-being was primarily described as students’ motivation, pride, happiness, and sense of support. Parents in particular talked about showing their children they cared about them by helping them with their homework, attending school events, communicating with teachers, or helping out in the classroom. Students agreed that parent engagement at school and support at home made them feel good. As one student summarized, “It makes you feel happy that your parents are helping you; that they care for you.”

*Many study participants believed that family engagement could benefit families.*

Parents in 70% of focus groups, 80% of principals, more than 40% of students, and more than 50% of teachers discussed the importance of parents gaining insight into their child’s school experiences. This included knowing who their children socialize with at school, understanding how teachers interact with students in the classroom, and increasing their understanding of the school system. In addition, parents reported that being engaged made them more likely to know about support services and programs available to their families through school and in the community.

Also, 80% of community school coordinators and parents in 70% of focus groups focused on the knowledge and skills parents gain through their participation in school-based programs. Most often, these two role groups discussed the value of learning English or parenting strategies. In

two schools, parents also emphasized the importance of learning new ways to help their children with math homework as well as engaging more meaningfully with teachers during parent-teacher conferences.

***Some study participants identified the ways family engagement can benefit the school.***

Nearly 50% of study participants across all role groups believed that family engagement supported classrooms. Parents who volunteered in the classroom were described as helping teachers manage their workload. Study participants also focused on the ways parents can support teachers by engaging with their children at home; in half of the focus groups, parents discussed helping teachers by holding children accountable for their work and their behavior.

Staff at all schools discussed the ways family engagement can contribute to better school morale and sense of community. At two schools, staff and after school providers also described ways in which family input can strengthen program quality.

### **Approaches to Family Engagement**

The research team asked all staff and families in Redwood City community schools about their approaches to family engagement in a school setting. Nearly all individuals described more than one approach to family engagement, making it clear that they are not mutually exclusive and have the potential to complement one another. Responses fell into three main categories:

1. family *participation* in school activities and events,
2. strong school-family *communication* and positive *relationships*, and
3. *mutually beneficial partnerships* between schools and families and shared responsibility for student and school outcomes.

***A little over half of staff and families across all of the community schools described family engagement as active family participation in school programs and events.***

Those who described family engagement in terms of participation focused on parents taking advantage of opportunities to access adult education and enrichment activities at the school site, coming to social and other events, and attending school meetings like back-to-school night and teacher conferences. In interviews, study participants suggested that parents' attendance at school activities was the target outcome: the more participation, the better. This type of family engagement was perceived as one-directional, with families receiving and schools providing.

***Nearly all adult study participants described family engagement as parents having strong communication with the school.***

All principals, community school coordinators, after school coordinators, parents in every focus group, and 80% of teachers described family engagement as parents having strong relationships with the school and being interested, informed, and proactive in their communication with staff

and teachers. Parents and teachers talked most often about the importance of having positive connections and good communication with one another. Parents and students also suggested that family engagement includes parents talking with their child's teachers and checking on their behavior and academic progress. Students stressed the importance of these check-ins, emphasizing the sense of care and the responsibility they felt to do well in school when their parents and teachers were in communication.

***About 75% of adult study participants described family engagement as a school-family partnership in which both the family and the school make valuable contributions.***

In its most concrete and familiar form, partnership was described as parent contribution through volunteering in classrooms and at the school. Teachers emphasized parent support of classrooms and the school as an important component of family engagement. Likewise, parents in about half of the focus groups believed that family engagement meant volunteering. All principals and most teachers also described school-family partnership as a general shared responsibility for students' education. Students and parents strongly agreed with this, highlighting the ways parents' roles and responsibilities at home support students' learning and well-being.

A smaller number of study participants, including all principals and community school coordinators, defined family engagement very specifically as a mutually beneficial partnership between schools and families. One community school coordinator summed up the general sentiment: "Family engagement means that there's shared ownership, shared leadership, shared appreciation, shared celebration, and that we do it in every aspect of our work."

Parents and students most often described family engagement as support for children's school work and general well-being at home while school staff most often described family engagement in the context of the school setting. School leaders and coordinators, in particular, emphasized efforts to engage parents in the classroom, at school-wide events, or in specific programs.

### **Perceived Obstacles to Family Engagement**

Although staff and families described many activities in place to promote family engagement, all schools and role groups also identified a range of factors that they perceive as hindering family engagement efforts. These were universal concerns at all of the schools and were not specifically linked with any one family engagement approach.

***Over 90% of all study participants agreed that parents seemed hesitant to approach teachers and school staff.***

All community school coordinators and most principals, teachers, and parents interviewed discussed parents' discomfort at school. Even when parents attended school events, staff described them as shy and uncomfortable or uncertain about how to behave. Students and parents attributed the discomfort to their parents' poor English skills, explaining that this makes

it difficult for [their] parents to communicate with the school. Parents also described being deterred by negative experiences with school staff.

*About 90% of all study participants believed that cultural attributes interfered with parents' capacity to engage with the school.*

Parents in 90% of focus groups discussed barriers to family engagement in terms of cultural practices or patterns of behavior they perceived as common in their native countries. Many school staff also referenced similar cultural patterns as explanations for why parents may not volunteer in classrooms, initiate interactions with teachers, or participate in school events and activities. In addition, all parents and nearly all teachers, as well as the majority of school staff, talked about parents' lack of availability due to the hours they spend working. Parents and teachers noted that parents often are not available to engage with the school in the evenings because they are taking care of younger children or have responsibilities at home such as feeding, bathing, and making sure homework is completed.

*More than 60% of school staff we interviewed directed attention to the lack of staffing and structures in place at schools to support families' interest in and efforts to engage.*

Community school coordinators, family engagement specialists, principals, and teachers all discussed the need for more time and staff to make family engagement a priority.

### **Intentional Alignment of Approach with Family Engagement Goals**

Through our analyses, we learned that study participants believed the goals of family engagement include supporting student achievement and emotional well-being, informing parents and building their capacity, and improving school climate and programs. We also found variation and overlap in the ways that different role groups approached and practiced family engagement.

*Overall, our study found very few instances of a shared vision guiding family engagement strategies within individual schools.*

While some school leaders stressed that family engagement requires the whole school community to be on board and share responsibility, we found very few instances of a shared vision guiding family engagement approaches and practices within individual schools. With the exception of one school, there were few clear examples of teachers, parents, after school staff, and school leaders within the same school using common language and consistent messaging about their vision and goals for family engagement. In addition, few study participants described their vision of family engagement as purposefully linked to activities or intended goals.

**Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study have important implications for practice. Family engagement has the potential to benefit students, families, and schools. In order to achieve these benefits, establishing a shared understanding and consistent school-wide messaging about family engagement is critical. Family engagement is not one person’s job, especially in a community school setting. Responsibilities are distributed to principals, teachers, community school coordinators, outside program providers, and others who serve as important resources in engaging families. However, having many staff connecting with families increases the need to use common language and agree upon a shared vision for family engagement. Intentionally linking school programs and activities to explicit family engagement goals is also essential. Community schools in this study provided a multitude of activities offering families a wide menu of options for engagement. With better alignment between activities and intended outcomes, family engagement efforts might be more efficient while maximizing the potential benefits to students, families, and schools (Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2: Family Engagement as an Intentional Pathway toward Desired Goals**



Our findings also highlight the importance of acknowledging parent support of students at home as a critical component of successful family engagement as well as viewing families through an asset-based perspective. Parents and students in this study primarily described family engagement as family support of students’ needs at home; however, few of the study schools’ family engagement efforts were explicitly linked to home-based activities or support. Schools may benefit from intentionally building parent capacity to support their children at home academically as well as physically, socially, and emotionally.

In addition, our research suggests that school leaders may benefit from exploring negative cultural attitudes and biases among families as well as teachers and staff. Nearly all study participants believed that cultural attributes interfered with parents’ capacity to engage with the school. Addressing stereotypes and cultural misconceptions is a prerequisite to pursuing a family engagement approach or strategy and is critical for an inclusive and welcoming school climate.



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