# issue brief
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## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SANGER UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Over the years, Sanger Unified School District (SUSD) has been engaged in rigorous efforts to improve student outcomes through instructional and organizational innovations—for example, Universal Design for Learning and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). While these efforts have facilitated important gains in student outcomes, schools sometimes struggle to engage with families as partners in efforts to foster students' academic success and social-emotional health. Recently, SUSD joined forces with the Sanger Family Resource Center (FRC), a program of Comprehensive Youth Services of Fresno, Inc. Their shared work is to create a new Family Engagement Multi-Tiered System of Support (FE-MTSS). In 2018, SUSD engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (Gardner Center) as a research partner to inform these efforts. This issue brief reports research findings from a qualitative study conducted during fall 2018, detailing the current family engagement landscape in Sanger schools and discussing considerations for practice.

**Key Findings**

- Most participants emphasized the importance of home-school partnerships; however, different stakeholders emphasized different aspects of engagement.

- Across the district, the extent to which families felt welcome and supported at schools varied.

- Current practice and district policy provides opportunity to further develop a systemic, multi-faceted approach to family engagement.

**Why Family Engagement?**

In both research and practice, family engagement is a strategy for improving student achievement as well as supporting families and schools (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Grolnik & Slowiaczek, 1994; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Researchers and practitioners 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 &Hong, 2010). Consonant with this prior research, California's Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) establish, as a state priority, that parents have meaningful opportunities to become involved in designing school plans and partnering with schools in efforts to improve the academic achievement of children and youth in their communities.

Despite these trends, schools and districts often lack systematic strategies to engage families, resulting in "random acts" of involvement rather than sustained shifts in practice (Weiss et al., 2010).[1] Without clear organizational goals, objectives, and strategies around family engagement, the potential benefits of family involvement are less likely to occur. The U.S. Department of Education dual-capacity framework for family engagement states that successful initiatives must be systemic, integrated, sustained, linked to learning, developmental, and collaborative (Mapp 2013). Additionally, while schools and families both bear responsibility for home-school partnerships, schools and districts are best positioned to create key organizational and process conditions for meaningful family engagement (California Department of Education, 2014).

**Why Multi-Tiered Systems of Support?**

MTSS "is an integrated, comprehensive framework that focuses on Common Core State Standards, core instruction, differentiated learning, student-centered learning, individualized student needs, and the alignment of systems necessary for all students' academic, behavioral, and social success."[2]  MTSS includes Response to Intervention (RTI), an approach that focuses on providing additional academic supports for individual students. (See https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/mtsscomprti2.asp for more details on MTSS/RTI in California.)  MTSS/RTI has the potential to help school districts close achievement gaps (e.g., in the area of literacy), address disproportionality in special education, and meet the diverse needs of all students.

The MTSS framework includes three tiers of differentiated supports to enable students to succeed.  Tier 1 is the broadest level, seeking to address the needs of about 80% of students in the classroom environment.  Tiers 2 and 3 are intended to provide more specialized support to 15% and 5%, respectively, of students whose classroom needs are unmet.  MTSS serves the whole child and provides a basis for aligning supports and resources at a systemic level. However, systematically implementing MTSS/RTI is challenging for school districts.  Many districts adopt specific programs to address various tiers.

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[1] Many schools lack clear organizational goals and objectives on how best to involve parents (Zarate, 2007). And teachers themselves receive little training on supporting meaningful engagement of families in children's learning. Linguistic and cultural differences between families and school staff can also be barriers.
[2] MTSS includes "focusing on aligning the entire system of initiatives, supports, and resources," "promoting district participation in identifying and supporting systems for alignment of resources, as well as site and grade level," and "Integrating instructional and intervention support so that systemic changes are sustainable and based on CCSS-aligned classroom instruction."

**The Emerging FE-MTSS Framework**

Sanger Unified School district has adopted MTSS as an organizing framework, not only for students, but also for family engagement. While not yet formally defined, a FE-MTSS would provide a system of supports and practices that bolster meaningful family engagement across Sanger school, community, and district settings. That system would include broad-based strategies to ensure that all families are informed about and confident in how to help their children succeed; targeted strategies for families who may need additional services and supports to build family strength and student success, and intensive strategies for engaging with families who are struggling and not typically engaged.

Both the U.S. and California Departments of Education have provided family engagement frameworks to school districts; however, there are few well-documented examples of robust *district* strategies for family engagement in the literature. Oakland Unified School District offers one framework (OUSD 2019), articulated in their Theory of Action. Oakland's family engagement strategy is of relevance to a FE-MTSS in that it emphasizes tiered levels of family engagement, including broad-based practices to engage families in their children's learning such as home visits, Academic Parent Teacher-Teams, and family workshops on Common Core. It also includes more targeted strategies to involve families in school improvement and governance structured around each school's LCAP process, School Site Council, and School Plan for Student Achievement. While limited research on OUSD's family engagement approach exists, it provides a compelling example of a systemic and multi-tiered approach to family engagement.

Sanger's existing success with MTSS and strong site-level engagement work position it well to advance a systematic approach to family engagement. Our hope is that this brief contributes to these important efforts.

**The Study**

This study contributes to ongoing efforts to bolster systematic family engagement strategies across SUSD.  Together, the Gardner Center and SUSD developed the following research questions to guide our inquiry:

1.  What are SUSD's current practices regarding building school and family capacity for meaningful family engagement?  How do different stakeholders (e.g., parents, FRC staff, school staff) perceive these efforts?

2.  What factors facilitate or hinder meaningful family engagement currently?

3.  How can these perspectives inform an emerging FE-MTSS framework?

To begin to address these questions, Gardner Center staff engaged with SUSD and community partners to create a working Family Engagement Theory of Change (See Appendix).  The Theory of Change captures the goals, strategies, assumptions, and desired outcomes of the

district's family engagement work.  Subsequently, Gardner Center staff conducted qualitative research at four elementary and one middle school in SUSD.  Gardner Center staff interviewed administrators and parents at each school, as well as FRC staff.  In total, we interviewed 34 individuals.

| Roles | Interview Participants |
|---|---|
| Site administrators | 5 |
| Parents | 23 |
| District Administrators | 2 |
| Family Resource Center staff | 4 |
| | 34 interviews total |

**Findings**

*Most participants emphasized the importance of home-school partnerships; however,different stakeholders emphasized different aspects of engagement.*

Most stakeholders interviewed described the importance of family-school partnerships in supporting student success and were engaged in efforts to support family engagement. Throughout our interviews, participants described multiple efforts to bolster family engagement. We listened closely to the ways in which different stakeholders described engagement, and identified the following distinct and interconnected arenas of family engagement.

**Academic Engagement**. Multiple stakeholders described family engagement around students' academics; for example, parent-teacher conferences, Math Nights, and homework help. School staff and parents emphasized these supports in particular, and identified distinct roles around academic engagement.  School staff primarily referred to family engagement in academics at the school site, whereas parents primarily referred to academic engagement at home.  As one principal stated:

> I think family engagement means having parents on campus, involved in students' education.  We had parent conferences this week, and pretty good turnout for that, but I'd love to see more involvement throughout the year. We have family literacy nights; we get 175 to 250 participants who attend. In our kindergarten classes this year, we have a few solid parents who have come weekly to support teachers in the classroom.

In contrast, parents tended to emphasize their involvement in students' academics at home.  In the words of one parent:

> I consider that [it's the parents job to] be present, to be checking on the kids, not leaving all the work to the teacher. The parents also have to be watching that the kid's grades do not fall; and if they do fall they have to make an appointment with the teacher.  I take responsibility for my part, and the school does their part.

**Social Emotional Learning.** Stakeholders described engaging with families around students' social-emotional development. This could include working with families around students' behavior expectations, managing discipline issues, navigating challenging behaviors, and helping families build students' reliance. Parents particularly emphasized the important role they played in students' social-emotional development; for example, setting expectations about the importance of school, supporting "future-orientation" in their children, and helping them maintain clear behavioral and academic expectations.  In the words of one parent:

> What I do is to try to keep my children focused only on their school, because that is what they have now. I tell them, all you have to do is study, sleep, and eat. I take care of everything else. I take care of making sure that they come to school, and that they come to study. I encourage them by telling them that school is the best thing for their future, as well as for mine. I tell them they should come to school to study and in school… that they have been given the necessary tools that will allow them to continue studying and that will motivate them to better themselves. This way I try to make them understand the importance of studying and to help them manage their lives so that they have time to dedicate themselves to their studies.

Parents also emphasized their role in supporting their children to make healthy choices:

> What I do with my daughter is to ask her everyday 'how was school?' I know her teacher's name; I try to talk to her teacher frequently, as frequently as I can.  I know her friends' names; I check her backpack. I tell her she has to have a routine at home, [and] sleep the necessary hours so that she is ready to perform well the next day. I have to be responsible of what concerns me. Because school does its part. I do not worry about the school's part, I worry about my part.

They also expressed concerns around their students' social-emotional well-being, especially in the transition to middle school and high school.

**Family Support.** Stakeholders also described engaging with families to provide resources and supports (e.g.,  food assistance, immigration counseling, ESL classes, health insurance enrollment, or legal aid). This type of engagement was especially emphasized by FRC staff, who provide families with key support services through ongoing case management.  Additionally, FRC

staff often support families at school sites by providing translations during parent-teacher conferences and other events.

**Family Leadership.** Stakeholders also described family engagement activities related to building family leadership. This includes building families' strengths to empower participation in school governance and decision-making. Many of these efforts are tied to LCAP goals. Some efforts— for example, Parent University-focused on building families' capacity as advocates for their child and community leaders as well. School and district staff and families most frequently emphasized this type of engagement. School staff especially emphasized how family participation in the LCAP process was a district priority. Many parents discussed the importance of being active in the school community (e.g., coming to meetings and school events), and supporting the school. Some parents described their leadership trajectory as one of empowerment, as they learned to believe in themselves and make a difference in the lives of their children and their school.

**Figure 2. Family Engagement Pyramid**
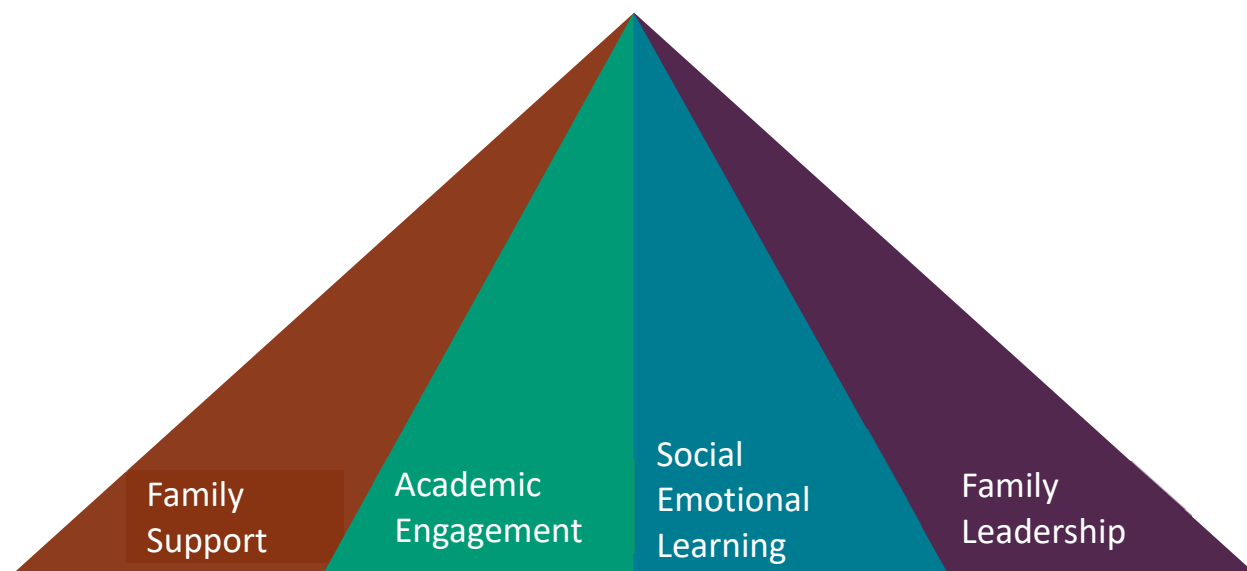


Family engagement can mean different things to different people. While all stakeholders emphasized the importance of home-school partnerships writ large, different stakeholders appeared to emphasize distinct aspects. As described above, school staff tended to highlight family involvement in academics and leadership (e.g., school governance), whereas FRC staff tended to emphasize family supports. Parents underlined their involvement in students' social-emotional development, academics, and school leadership. These distinct perspectives underscore that family engagement has multiple facets; stakeholders' distinct emphasis on specific facets may indicate an opportunity for complementarity and deeper understanding.

*Across the district, the extent to which families felt welcome and supported at schools varied. Many families described powerful, life-changing connections with school staff. Some families had mixed experiences of not feeling welcomed and in partnership with school staff.*

**Life-changing Experiences.** We heard many positive examples from families of positive, life-changing experiences with their students' teachers. They primarily described teachers who made a special effort to connect to family members personally, and who made a difference by setting high expectations and offering high levels of support. For example:

> This teacher loves her profession so much that she makes everyone work in the class – my daughter used to admire her for this. And even when my daughter graduated from high school, this teacher was there for her, and said to her 'When you graduate from college, I'll be there with you.' She was so motivating, and my daughter felt that love. When a teacher is able to inspire confidence and love in the kids, the kids will rise.

Some parents also described teachers making concerted efforts to reach out to families and build families' confidence and ability. As one parent narrated:

> My child's teacher is responsible for me being here today. She is the reason why I have a GED… Due to her I now come to the [school] meetings, and I owe her part of what I am today; what I have achieved here. Because if it hadn't been for her nagging and nagging, I wouldn't be here, I wouldn't have learned as much; maybe I wouldn't have supported my kids as I'm now doing.

Most parents had stories of teachers who went above and beyond to support their students and their students' families. Many parents credit teachers with the ability to change their students' life courses. In some cases, they credit teachers with the ability to change parents' life courses as well.

**Welcoming Families.** Many families describe not feeling welcome. Some families also expressed more mixed experiences. One of the most common concerns was not feeling welcomed by administrative and instructional staff. In the words of one parent:

> One day, as I went around the school, I counted 13 people [I passed by] and only 2 of them said good morning. I felt like I was intruding, like I was ignored, I was totally not welcome as a parent.

In contrast, another parent with positive experiences at the school stated:

> All the teachers have been good teachers. They have a nice way of addressing, not only the kids, but also the parents. As soon as we arrive they say 'Buenos días como están' ('good morning, how are you?'). They are not Spanish speakers, but they try to greet you in Spanish, or they say it in English, but they are very polite.

Nearly all of the parents we interviewed spoke about the greeting as a particularly important moment in which school staff can signal to families that they are welcomed and respected partners. A focus on greetings echoes an emerging practice in some schools of greeting each student at the door with a smile and positive message (Cook et al, 2018). Described as a "low cost, high yield" practice, research shows the strategy can increase academic engagement for students, decrease negative classroom behaviors, and diminish teacher stress.

*Current practice and district policy provides opportunity to further develop a systemic, multi-faceted approach to family engagement.*

**Need for More Systemic Approach.** Most school, district, and FRC staff described family engagement in terms of specific school-based events and programs; for example, Math Night and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) or English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC) meetings. Further, most school staff interviewed felt that these school-based events, while important, felt "scattershot," rather than strategically considered and thoughtfully developed as part of a systematic and sustained effort to integrate families into the school. This underscores the importance of district-wide commitment to developing a shared strategy around family engagement. As one school leader stated:

> [I need support with] strategies for how best to get parents involved. I'm sure there are some great things you can do… I try to work with my teachers to inspire them. Give them some ideas of what they can do. Be proactive. But it's just strategies… I don't have the answers for that one.

**Concern About Reaching All Families.** Again, while most school staff were making efforts to engage with families, they all expressed concerned about reaching the broad spectrum of parents. While staff reflected that they have strong family participation at students' sporting events, cultural demonstrations, and special family days (e.g., Donuts with Dad, Muffins with Mom), they felt these forms of engagement to be "thin," and struggled to engage with families in more substantive ways. As one principal stated:

> "The only time I see my other parents are for leadership meetings or discipline. That's the tough one. If I don't have prizes or food, I struggle to get people here. And I get it, if I'm doing something at 6 p.m. you have got to have food. We used to be able to use 1% of our categorical for food for parent engagement, but we can't do that anymore so now it becomes a side expense.

Several school leaders described having a small group of highly involved parents, along with parents who they frequently interacted with around discipline issues or other student concerns. Otherwise, they report little parental involvement. To some extent, this may reflect different perceptions of involvement by school staff and other stakeholders. Research has underscored that parental forms of involvement in their children's learning and development often take place at home (Westrich & Strobel, 2013), and may not be visible to school staff (Zarate, 2014). Building a shared understanding among school staff and other stakeholders of what family involvement looks like could help elevate existing forms of parental involvement. That said, there may also be opportunities for more universal practices of engaging with families, many of which that can be integrated into existing practices or priorities. For example, Academic Parent Teacher Teams is an approach that leverages the parent-teacher conference and integrates new strategies and forms to foster greater parent-teacher collaboration, engage with classroom data, and offer strategies that families can apply at home to support student learning (Paredes, 2010).

**Considerations for Practice**

- **Develop a shared understanding of family engagement.** Essential to meaningful family engagement is a shared understanding of the goals, objectives, and strategies. As our research illuminated, different stakeholders bring distinct perspectives. A comprehensive family engagement strategy must consider, recognize, and celebrate this diversity of perspectives, experiences, and roles. While SUSD has been working to arrive at a clear definition of family engagement, this understanding will need to be collaboratively developed and shared widely by central office, school-site, and FRC staff. Further, this definition could be enhanced by identifying the multiple facets of engagement, as well as distinct and complementary roles of various stakeholders (e.g. families, FRC staff, etc.).

- **Seek high-leverage opportunities to integrate family engagement into existing district practices and priorities.** When family engagement activities are closely linked to specific district goals and priorities (e.g. academic or social-emotional learning targets), they are more likely to receive the necessary support for successful implementation. Opportunities could include targeted practices for families as part of an emerging social-emotional curriculum (see CASEL's materials on Schools, Families, and Social-Emotional Learning, CASEL 2015) or strengthening parent-teacher conferences through evidence-based approaches like Academic Parent Teacher Teams (See WestEd, "What Is APTT?"). The district should especially focus on opportunities that reach a broad spectrum of parents and that have a strong evidence-base.

- **Develop a district-wide family engagement framework and plan that supports school-sites.** The work of developing a district-wide family engagement framework and strategic plan is well underway. However, the district could further strengthen their framework and plan with greater elaboration, including specifying key strategies (at the

district, school-site, and family-level), and clarifying the roles of different players in relation to the framework (e.g. distinct and/or shared responsibilities of the district, FRC, school sites, and families). The plan should also clarify specific district supports for school-site engagement efforts.

- **Develop a robust evaluation and learning plan.** As the district develops its framework and strategies, we also suggest an accompanying evaluation and continuous improvement plan. Working to identify outcomes and concrete measures, as well as undertaking an ongoing review of data, could help the district and partners assess ongoing efforts. As SUSD has a well-established culture of continuous improvement and innovation, they are poised to extend this strength into the area of family engagement.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Sanger Family Engagement MTSS Theory of Change - DRAFT

**Problem Statement:** Many Sanger USD students are not achieving at high enough levels. Students exhibit low academic achievement, behavioral challenges, and attendance issues. Schools often struggle with engaging families as partners in fostering student success.

**Goal:** We aim to develop a robust system of supports and practices that bolster meaningful family engagement across Sanger school, community, and district settings, in which: (1) Schools have the support, guidance, and resources to develop meaningful relationships with families that bolster student success (2) Families feel welcomed, valued, and supported to participate in their child's learning, school, and college/career success (3) All students are successful

| STRATEGIES | SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES | INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES | LONG-TERM OUTCOMES |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **DISTRICT & COMMUNITY** | | |
| Develop & incorporate evidence-based district-wide family engagement strategies into Sanger's existing MTSS framework | • Provide a FE-MTSS framework to support school-site practices<br>• FE-MTSS programs & tools respond to family needs, school-site needs, & district priorities<br>• FE-MTSS training is accessible to school staff<br>• Communication with schools & families is effective & systematic. | • Distribution of resources for FE-MTSS reflects school & student needs.<br>• Mechanisms for strategy, accountability, & decision-making reflect culturally responsive, strengths-based approaches to family engagement | • Improved social-emotional & academic learning<br><br>• Families partner in students' success in high school, college, & beyond |
| | **SCHOOLS** | | |
| Partner with Family Resource Centers to provide culturally relevant, strength-based supports to families | • Offer culturally responsive services, opportunities, & supports that build family strengths<br>• Have high-quality FE-MTSS systems & practices<br>• Staff access resources related to FE-MTSS<br>• Staff understand their role in fostering meaningful family engagement and implementing FE-MTSS | • Staff have capacity to meaningfully engage families in student learning & school improvement<br>• Seamless implementation of FE-MTSS services & opportunities to support learning<br>• Families & school personnel collaborate.<br>• School-wide discipline issues decline, attendance increases, & signs of student achievement increase | |
| | **FAMILIES & STUDENTS** | | |
| Bolster school staff capacity to meaningfully implement family engagement MTSS & build meaningful relationships with families | • Know how to access supports, services & opportunities<br>• Feel welcomed, valued, & supported to participate in students' learning<br>• Have the confidence & opportunity to participate in school/district governance<br>• Come to school daily ready to learn, be engaged, & participate | • Consistently access supports, services, & opportunities<br>• Arrive at school on-time, ready to learn, engaged in school every day<br>• Decreased discipline issues<br>• Increased learning & achievement | |