

SUPPORTING TEACHERS TO ENGAGE PARENTS



LESSONS LEARNED

from the

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPACT PROJECT (FEIP)



This resource was produced by:

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Family engagement is a process in which parents and teachers work together to support a young child's learning. However, while teachers are prepared to work with children, engaging with parents requires skills and approaches that might not have been directly addressed in teacher education programs.

This document outlines five important lessons learned from the Family Engagement Impact Project (FEIP) about building teachers' knowledge, skills, and confidence to engage families.

The Heising-Simons Foundation's FEIP initiative sought to enhance the capacity of communities, professionals, and parents to engage in children's learning and to improve educational outcomes for low-income immigrant children from birth through age eight. The FEIP took place in two California counties, San Mateo and Santa Clara, and consisted of three phases: (1) a planning phase (2013), (2) an implementation phase (2014-2016), and (3) a sustainability phase (2016-2017). Multiple grantee partnerships were awarded funds to coordinate family engagement efforts across organizations.¹ Through 120 professional development activities, the initiative reached 478 teachers (see text box). Data for this brief come from the evaluation of the implementation phase, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

LESSON 1: Focus on teacher priorities and needs. Family engagement trainings should respond to the interests and availability of educators. Effective FEIP strategies included:

- **Connecting family engagement training objectives directly to teacher top priorities (e.g., student success, state education standards)**
- **Integrating family engagement training into existing meetings and professional development events to address teacher time constraints**
- **Providing release time or other participation incentives to teachers**

Teachers in FEIP included:

- Head Start teachers
- Transitional kindergarten and Kindergarten through 3rd grade classroom teachers
- Preschool teachers
- Family support center staff
- Home and center-based infant and toddler care providers

Complete suite of FEIP resources:

1. FEIP Infographic
2. Capacity Building Brief
3. Evaluation Brief
4. Raising A Reader
5. Supporting Teachers ✓
6. 10 Tips from FEIP

Involving teachers in the planning and coordination of family engagement activities to increase their buy-in, and participation is recommended.

LESSON 2: Give teachers the knowledge they need to have meaningful conversations with parents about children’s learning and development.

Trainings on children’s social-emotional and physical development, how to screen for and explain developmental progress, and how to help parents support their children’s development were essential to growing the knowledge and skills of teachers in the FEIP.

LESSON 3: Build the capacity of teachers and parents together. Training parents and teachers together (either in the same or separate rooms but in complementary sessions) to support children’s learning and development allowed them to learn from and about each other’s roles in early childhood development. The offering of joint trainings by the FEIP grantee partnerships was reported to be the most beneficial type of training for improving family engagement.

LESSON 4: Garner administrative support. Having elementary school administrators encourage staff participation in family engagement trainings was essential to kindergarden through 3rd grade teacher recruitment. Specifically, one grantee lead noted that unless the district and school leaders encouraged attendance, elementary school teachers did not prioritize the training. Grantee leads also noted the importance of continually building and maintaining relationships with school leaders because gaining buy-in from administrators was sometimes challenging. Some district and school leaders said they were unaccustomed to working with community service agencies as partners and did not fully understand how to make such partnerships work.

LESSON 5: Provide on-going support. Some grantee partnerships assisted teachers with work plans, held monthly coaching meetings, and led support groups for staff to encourage the use of information provided in teacher trainings. The FEIP grantee partnerships varied in the amount of ongoing support provided to teachers to build their capacity to engage parents, but they generally agreed it was important and more was needed.

Conclusion

With many demands on teachers’ time, focusing their attention on family engagement can be difficult. The FEIP evaluation found that teachers who invested the time to expand their skill set came to further value family engagement and the strengths of parents as partners in their children’s education. One parent in a FEIP community noted that teachers seemed better informed and more willing to discuss child development. Similarly, a grantee lead reported that educators who attended the FEIP programming had a better understanding of the role of parents and families in supporting school success.

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In Year 2, we amended the model to make the events more numerous, smaller, and more focused on the parent-teacher-child relationship. We got teachers to show up, which was a big draw for parents.

- Grantee Lead

This [FEIP] training highlighted the importance of teachers and staff connecting with families and what brings them together – leading to some great discussions about the purposes of teachers and staff in the community.

- Grantee Lead

1. The FEIP supported grantee partnerships (e.g., schools, early childhood organizations, and non-profits) in replicating at least one evidence-based family engagement model and developing opportunities to build the skills of parents and professionals, with a focus on enhancing family engagement at home. In Phase 1 there were six grantee partnerships; in Phase 2 there were five grantee partnerships; and in Phase 3 there were four grantee partnerships. Each grantee partnership identified a lead partner or “grantee lead” who was responsible for managing the grant.