

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



LESSONS LEARNED

from the

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPACT PROJECT (FEIP)



This resource was produced by:



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Families, professionals, and community organizations each play a distinct, yet inter-related, role in family engagement. Efforts to promote family engagement are most successful when these partners have the ability and resources to collaborate in support of student success.

The purpose of this brief is to highlight how one initiative, the Family Engagement Impact Project (FEIP), improved the capacity of families, professionals, and organizations to work together and bolster educational outcomes for young children.

The FEIP was a Heising-Simons Foundation initiative. The Foundation awarded funds to multiple grantee partnerships—collaborations among school districts, community organizations, early childhood providers, and others—that leverage existing community resources and strengthen public-private partnerships to coordinate family engagement efforts across organizations. The goal of the FEIP was 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) planning (2013), (2) implementation (2014-2016), and (3) sustainability (2016-2017).¹ This brief describes how grantee partnerships built capacity among families, professionals, and organizations to support family engagement in low-income, immigrant communities. Information in this brief comes from an evaluation of the implementation phase of the initiative conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

What Does it Mean to Build Capacity for Family Engagement?

Capacity building can have many forms. In general, it is the process of building the knowledge, skills, and confidence of individuals within a system. In the context of family engagement, capacity is built among three key groups of partners:

- 1. Families:** parents and caregivers gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence to support young children's learning;
- 2. Professionals:** preschool and elementary school teachers, school staff, childcare providers, and community service providers enhance their knowledge of child development and gain the skills to engage parents; and
- 3. Organizations:** schools, public agencies, libraries, and family service organizations in a coordinated network share information and collaborate to ensure effective communication and service delivery

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



These Three Partners are Equally Important in the FEIP

Like gears (see Exhibit 1), each one plays a key role in supporting young children as they prepare for school.

EXHIBIT 1:

Families, Professionals, and Community Organizations have distinct, yet related, roles in Family Engagement.



Building the Capacity of Families

Parents want their children to learn and succeed in school, but they may not know how best to help them. This can be especially challenging for immigrant parents unfamiliar with the local school system, unaware of community resources, or unable to communicate effectively with early childhood or service providers. To build family capacity to support engagement, grantee partnerships offered playgroups and parent trainings. These activities focused on parents sharing books with their children, and using learning materials. Other capacity-building activities included workshops on social-emotional and physical development, school selection, and accessing libraries and other community supports. Finally, some grantee partnerships provided coaching to parents on ways to support and encourage their children's learning and development.

Strategic communications were valuable tools to help parents navigate the school system, access existing community resources, and apply strategies for reading with their children. Videos, posters, and flyers were used to share information. Some schools upgraded their technology systems to better connect and engage with parents. In one FEIP location, teachers called new parents to welcome them to the school. Another FEIP school district provided more translators for parents at school events to support parent-teacher communications.



Families in the FEIP Improved Their Knowledge and Skills in Supporting Children's Learning

Overall, the FEIP helped to build the capacity of parents to engage with the schools and encourage their children's education. A parent survey conducted before and after participation in the FEIP activities found growth in parents' knowledge of community resources and in the ways they worked with their young children to support learning. After parents completed the FEIP activities, they did the following:

- **Placed a higher value on family engagement**

Overall, more parents rated family engagement as very important.

- **Knew of more available community resources**

Parents who participated in the FEIP increased their knowledge of resources to get advice and on how to find and use services in their communities.

- **Participated in more family engagement activities**

Over time, parents participated in more parent groups, parenting education classes, or home visits.

- **Spent more time engaging with their children**

The frequency with which parents engaged with their children in home and school learning activities increased, as did the amount of time parents spent looking at books together with their children, the number of books in the household, and the percentage of families having a home reading routine.

- **Engaged in supportive parent-child reading behaviors**

Parents reported letting their children turn the pages of the book, and ask questions about the story. They also let the children read the book or tell a story about the pictures more often than before participating in the FEIP training activities.

Flexibility and Creating Accommodations for Parents' Busy Schedules

Recruiting families to participate in trainings and playgroups was a challenge because some parents worked long hours or multiple jobs, had limited or no English proficiency, were concerned about their immigration status, or lacked the transportation and childcare necessary to participate. Other community-based and family events, such as sporting events and church activities, competed for parent time. Grantee partnerships overcame some of these challenges by offering programs at convenient times (such as immediately after parents dropped off their children at school) and offering food and reliable childcare. To encourage participation in family engagement events, the FEIP grantee partnerships found connecting with parents and personally inviting them to attend was valuable.



Building the Capacity of Professionals

A diverse group of professionals with varying educational backgrounds was involved in the FEIP. Professional development activities focused on early childhood development and family engagement strategies. Networking events for professionals provided an opportunity for preschool and elementary school teachers to meet with staff at community organizations and participate in peer learning. Trainings focused on evidence-based family engagement programs, how to conduct child development screenings, and helping parents support their children's learning and development. Some FEIP grantee partnerships used reflective practice and learning communities to support professional development and facilitated peer learning events. Ongoing training and coaching helped reinforce training for professionals. Continuing support varied by location, and grantees reported a general desire for more training and technical assistance activities.

Offering joint training to deliver family engagement programming for parents and professionals was both challenging and rewarding. FEIP provided an opportunity for parents and teachers to learn from each other and about their roles in early childhood development. In general, the participants reported this was a beneficial approach.

Professionals in the FEIP Improved Their Approach to Family Engagement

Professionals in the FEIP improved their attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to family engagement. In interviews, professionals participating in the FEIP reported they achieved the following:

- **A deeper understanding of and improved skill in family engagement**
Professionals in the FEIP had a greater appreciation for the value of family engagement and the strength of having parents as partners in supporting young children's education.
- **Increased understanding and skills related to early childhood education and early literacy**
Parents reported that teachers seemed better informed and more willing to discuss child development after teachers participated in the FEIP.
- **Improvements in their ability to collaborate with and make referrals to other agencies**
Staff got to know each other on a personal level, increased their ability to make appropriate referrals when working with families, and thought they could better reach parents with family engagement services.

Professional Learning Opportunities are Effective When Consideration is Given to Professional Time Constraints

Grantee partnerships faced difficulties recruiting and training teachers. Numerous trainings and professional development opportunities compete for teachers' limited time. The FEIP grantee partnerships found district and school administrator support critical to securing the participation of teachers and other school staff in the FEIP. One helpful strategy was to integrate family engagement training into existing meetings and professional development events. This was especially true in communities where multiple priorities or initiatives were in place.

We now think of family engagement as being meaningfully engaged in the lives of our children starting at birth.

– Grantee Lead

Moreover, training alone was insufficient. Ongoing technical assistance, coaching, and professional development activities were necessary to support change and keep programs in place when school or district staff turnover occurred. Several types of support were used to respond to the diverse challenges present in each community. Some grantee partnerships wanted additional peer support from other professionals delivering the same evidence-based model whereas others requested help directly from the model developers.



Building the Capacity of Organizations

The FEIP provided resources to build the capacity of organizations to support a variety of family engagement activities. These included the following:

For a long time, people have thought of family engagement as a checklist, but it is a total cultural shift in how we engage the student and the family.

– Grantee Staff

- **Hosting networking activities with staff and leadership from schools, preschools, early childhood centers, libraries, and family resource organizations; providing opportunities for learning across organizations and to build a common understanding of family engagement**
- **Providing training for community service providers on their roles in education**
- **Delivering new and expanded family engagement programming to additional locations to reach more families**

The FEIP organizations participated in oversight committees to improve communication and coordination across partner organizations. Defining organization roles and responsibilities within the partnership was important. Some FEIP grantee partnerships received training and technical assistance to create family engagement plans or had discussions with more experienced implementers to guide their efforts.

Organizations in the FEIP Showed Positive Changes in Organizational Culture

Positive changes in organizational culture and family engagement service delivery emerged among organizations in the FEIP. In interviews, representatives of the organizations reported the following examples of improved organizational capacity:

- **Positive shifts in community and school culture for family engagement**
Many grantees reported a more open and welcoming school environment, especially for families with children who were not of school-age.
- **Improvements in service coverage across children's early development**
One FEIP grantee partnership embraced a "no wrong door" approach to services for families with young children. This means that families seeking services from any partner organization could learn about family engagement. A universal referral form was developed to better align services across partners.
- **Supportive changes in district and school policies**
One school district board policy reflected time and accountability for family engagement activities due to the FEIP.
- **The acquisition of funding**
Two grantee partnerships received additional funds to further provide high quality learning experiences from preschool to 3rd grade and noted their work with the FEIP as instrumental to receiving the awards.



Building the Capacity of Organizations Takes Time and is Critical to Changing How a Community Approaches Family Engagement

Grantee partnerships followed a developmental trajectory in building their community capacity to implement a family engagement model. In the first year, they focused on areas where they had experience. For example, they worked to enhance the ability of professionals to engage meaningfully with immigrant parents. They also worked directly with parents on how to best promote young children’s learning.

In the second year the grantee partnerships grew their capacity to engage community partners in strategic planning, cross-agency training, and communications activities. This resulted in an increase in partners’ knowledge of each other’s roles and in family engagement, and in families receiving a consistent message about family engagement from schools and other community organizations.

Conclusion

The FEIP simultaneously increased the emphasis on family engagement across parents, professionals, and organizations and laid the groundwork for additional system change efforts in support of children’s learning and development. This was done through a mix of capacity-building activities targeted to different partners, all designed to build knowledge and skills about family engagement. Although improving young immigrant children’s educational outcomes is a long-term goal, the FEIP demonstrated promising short-term strategies to leverage community strengths and enhance family engagement activities for parents, teachers, service providers, and agencies.

Authors:

Courtney L. Harrison, President, CLH Strategies & Solutions

Margaret Caspe, Family Engagement Consultant

Dana Petersen, Senior Health Researcher, Mathematica Policy Research

Melina Salvador, Research Associate, James Bell Associates

1. 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” who was responsible for managing the grant.