



The School/District Family Leadership Framework

Joanna D. Geller

Sara McAlister

Samuel Ashley

Keith C. Catone

Angela N. Romans

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The Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) at Roger Williams University formed in 2017 to partner with communities and schools to build capacity, alliances, and power, through learning, relationships, and organizing. We support youth, families, and educators to organize, fight for, and win policies and practices that create equitable opportunities and just outcomes for every student. We believe that quality public schools and equitable educational structures are the cornerstone of an authentic democracy and just society. By centering and prioritizing the experiences and expertise of people most negatively impacted by racial, cultural, and class-based hierarchies, public education can be a means to achieving collective liberation through dismantling systems of oppression. However, educational equity and justice do not come about solely through policy-level interventions that are placed into classrooms. Because we must address the immediate and cumulative impacts of current and historical oppression, we are committed to the complex, oftentimes messy, work of transformative systems change. Whole communities must be fully integrated into the change process, flipping power dynamics to radically reimagine the way that schools can be liberatory forces for young people and for our democracy. To achieve this vision, we work with multiple stakeholders in school systems—including youth, families, district administrators, teachers, and other school-based staff—to balance both “inside” (based within school systems) and “outside” (community-based) strategies, so young people, families, schools, and communities thrive.

AUTHORS | Joanna D. Geller, Sara McAlister, Samuel Ashley, Keith C. Catone, & Angela N. Romans

EDITING | Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

GRAPHIC DESIGN | Haewon Kim

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Strong family leadership develops in schools and districts when parents and families have a meaningful role in decision-making about issues that affect learning, such as curriculum, teaching, hiring, and budgeting. Family leadership is a type of family engagement – but unlike other types of family engagement that focus on parents supporting *their own child's* learning, parent leaders focus on improving opportunities and outcomes for *all children*.

Educational opportunities for low-income students and students of color increase when families are actively engaged as leaders in systemwide reform (Noguera 2004; Orr & Rogers 2011). Parents as an engaged collective can both support schools and school systems and hold them accountable (Noguera 2004). Parent leaders can contribute in these ways, among others (Fine 1993):

- place concerns that were not previously acknowledged on the school's agenda;
- suggest and act on new ways to solve problems;
- draw on their own networks; and
- bring to bear supportive resources.

Strong parent leadership pays off, but requires time, energy, skill, and thoughtfulness on the part of school districts and schools to lay the necessary foundations that, in turn, uphold a series of key building blocks for success. We highlight two factors that act as foundations for strong parent leadership:

- **District and school leadership** encourages parents to participate, consistently asking for input from parents on how to improve family engagement. Leadership truly understands families, values all viewpoints, and supports staff to engage families.
- **Infrastructure** allows families to fully participate in meetings. Language is not a barrier to participation, and schools have a welcoming parent center.

The foundations support these building blocks of success:

- **Parent capacity building**, including the development of leadership skills in areas such as relationship building, policy intervention, and knowledge of education and educational systems, leads to a **sense of community** among parent leaders and between parent leaders and other parents. Parent leaders trust each other; they feel a sense of unity and positivity about the community, and diversity is valued.
- **Educator capacity building**, including high-quality professional development and opportunities for educators and families to build relationships, leads to **educator-family collaboration**. School staff help parents to feel included and influential in the school community.

The foundations and building blocks allow the development of family leadership, which acts as the keystone that locks the other pieces into place and completes a strong and sustainable “archway” to high-quality, equitable education (see Figure 1 on next page). The rest of this document provides a checklist of key conditions for the success of each building block. We hope this checklist will be a valuable tool to help community, school, and district leaders examine their schools' support for family leadership.

FIGURE 1

Family leadership: Foundations and key building blocks



DISTRICT/SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

1. District or school leadership **ENCOURAGES EVERY FAMILY TO PARTICIPATE FULLY** and values all viewpoints.
 - When the school or district is identifying a problem, coming up with a solution, or putting a plan in action, they keep families informed and ask for their opinions.
 - The school or district has a written family engagement policy that was created in full partnership with a representative group of parents.
 - At meetings with parents, leaders use words, eye contact, and posture to convey respect; handle disagreements in a way that values all sides; provide space for small group discussions; and have a note-taker record questions and comments.
2. District or school leadership **CONSTANTLY ASKS FOR INPUT** to improve family engagement practices.
 - Leadership seeks all opinions through focus groups, surveys, home visits, phone calls, text messaging, etc.
 - Leadership makes sure all suggestions are considered and is clear about why some cannot be followed.

- Someone follows up with parents after a meeting to gather feedback about how the meeting could have been improved.
3. District or school leadership **UNDERSTANDS** families' needs, resources, and strengths.
- Leadership makes an effort to learn about and meet families' needs and supports them to reach their goals and dreams.
 - Leadership seeks to understand the needs or goals of families representing all of the district's races, ethnicities, religions, and languages.
 - Leadership spends time in the community, including religious institutions, local businesses, and libraries.
 - Leadership works with elected officials and community leaders to advocate for policies that will benefit families, such as improving access to transportation and healthy foods or reducing harsh policing.
4. District or school leadership conveys an **EXPECTATION THAT STAFF COMMIT** to family engagement.
- A strong belief in parent leadership and engagement is a key criterion for hiring administrators, teachers, and staff.
 - The district has written expectations in its family engagement policy for how school staff and administrators should engage families, and school staff know and understand the expectations.

INFRASTRUCTURE

1. **MEETINGS** support all families to participate fully.
- Meetings have childcare, food, time for parents and children to eat dinner together, and simultaneous translation.
2. There is a welcoming **PARENT CENTER** in or near all schools.
- Parents know the center exists and can describe its purpose.
 - The center is visible and accessible.
 - There is room for a big group to gather comfortably with plenty of seating.
 - There are cheerful decorations.
 - There is at least one computer.
 - Resources can be checked out.
 - There is a staff person or parent volunteer in the center.
 - Parents have input on design of the center.
 - There is dedicated ongoing funding for the center.

3. All families are able to engage regardless of LANGUAGE.

- Many staff at the school(s) speak the main languages that families speak.
- Staff who speak the languages parents speak have various roles, including teachers, support staff, and front office staff.

PARENT CAPACITY BUILDING

1. The district invites all parents to take on MEANINGFUL LEADERSHIP ROLES.

- Parent leaders represent the races, ethnicities, and languages of all parents.
- Parents who have expressed frustration or anger with the system are invited to become leaders.
- Parent leaders plan and conduct leadership trainings and mentor less experienced parent leaders.
- Parent leaders are encouraged to try out different roles and gain multiple skills.
- Ongoing events recognize and honor parent leaders.

2. Parent leaders have opportunities for PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

- Training opportunities are responsive to the interests of parents.
- School staff and teachers are aware of and support parents' professional goals.
- Trainings offer college credit or a professional certificate.
- Parent leaders are hired as school or district staff.

3. LEADERSHIP TRAININGS strengthen parent leaders' abilities to build relationships, change policies, and understand educational systems. Trainings:

- Support parents to build relationships among themselves, with other parents, and with teachers, principals, and school officials.
- Engage parent leaders in critical dialogue surrounding the issues that most concern them.
- Help parent leaders advocate for policy change, including planning a rally, attracting media attention, and delivering testimony at a hearing.
- Help parent leaders understand state and federal educational policies that affect them, including Title I, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

1. Parent leaders **TRUST** one another and other parents. They:
 - Believe that all parents care about their children and value education.
 - Believe that families are capable of change.
 - Recognize barriers to engagement that parents face.
 - Listen to truly understand the challenges that families face.
2. Parent leaders feel a sense of **UNITY** with one another and other parents. They:
 - Help support and mentor one another's children.
 - Care about all children in the community, not just their own.
 - Help each other out with basic needs, such as transportation.
 - Believe they can accomplish more together than alone.
3. Parent leaders have **POSITIVE OPINIONS** about the community. They:
 - Believe that the community is headed in the right direction.
 - Feel that the community belongs to them.
 - Challenge negative stereotypes about the community.
4. Parent leaders **VALUE DIVERSITY**. They:
 - Appreciate cultural traditions of all families.
 - Are friends with parents of different races, ethnicities, and language groups.
 - Understand that many families face oppression due to race, ethnicity, religion, language, and immigration status.

EDUCATOR CAPACITY BUILDING

1. There is **HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT** for school administrators, teachers, staff, and home/school liaisons.
 - There is ongoing dedicated time for professional development in family engagement for school administrators, teachers, staff, and home/school liaisons.
 - Professional development supports educators' connections with one another and families, positive beliefs/assumptions about their students and their families, and confidence and capabilities in engaging families.
 - Professional development directly addresses issues of race, class, language, power, and privilege.
 - Educators have opportunities to practice what they learned and reflect on their practice with one another.

2. There are opportunities for **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING** between educators and families.

- Educators and families have opportunities to build informal relationships, for example, through sharing a meal, home visits, or community events.
- Educators and families have opportunities to share stories with one another, for example, about their racial, cultural, and family backgrounds and their hopes and dreams for their children/students.

EDUCATOR-FAMILY COLLABORATION

1. Home/school liaisons or parent coordinators **BRIDGE HOME AND SCHOOL**.

- Liaisons/coordinators are skilled in cultural responsiveness, creating a family-friendly environment, working with teachers/staff, and supporting families to promote academic learning and as decision-makers.
- Roles and responsibilities are clear to most parents and district and school staff.
- Liaisons/coordinators spend most of their time engaging families and teachers in meaningful ways, such as facilitating parent groups, making home visits, and facilitating professional development for teachers.

2. School staff/teachers and families **COLLABORATE** toward common goals.

- School staff/teachers and parent leaders have agreed on common vision and goals and have created a unified plan.
- Parent leaders are able to observe teachers or volunteer in the classroom to gain an understanding of what it is like to be a teacher.
- Teachers know parent leaders by name, express their appreciation for parent leaders, and support parent-led initiatives.

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