

Issue Brief: Authentic Family–School Partnership October 2024

Guiding Question: How can authentic family-school partnerships be strengthened, particularly to support infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities?

The Law

The importance of authentic family-school partnerships is enshrined in several education laws including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA explains that: “Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by— (B) strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home.”¹ IDEA goes on to discuss the role and responsibilities of parents and families in sections that focus on:

- Parental consent: See <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.300>
- Parent participation in meetings: See <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.322>
- Parent involvement in placement decisions: See <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/e/300.501>

In addition, IDEA requires parent representation on local and state-level advisory groups that provide input to lead agencies on fiscal, policy matters and system improvement.

IDEA also requires and provides funding for a Parent Training and Information Center (PTI). The role of a PTI is to act as a resource for families seeking information and support regarding their child with a disability and assist in navigating the complexities of the IDEA. As the Maryland PTI, The Parents Place of Maryland (<https://www.ppm.org/>) provides families with one-on-one support, training, leadership programs, materials, referrals and resources that empower families to be their child’s best advocate.

ESSA has many provisions that focus on parent and family engagement. See:

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/parent-and-family-engagement-provisions-in-the-every-student-succeeds-act/>

Frameworks for Partnership

Foundational frameworks for family engagement and family-school partnership have been developed by Joyce Epstein at Johns Hopkins² and Karen Mapp at Harvard.³ Common threads in their work include power-sharing, co-design of engagement strategies, the need for training of educators and families, and centering the shared goal of student achievement and support.

First, Joyce Epstein describes a [Framework of Six Types of Involvement](#) including:

1. Parenting: Families support “children as students” and schools understand their children’s families.
2. Communicating: Co-design school-to-home and home-to-school communication.
3. Volunteering: Educators, students, and families “recruit and organize parent help and support” and parents are included as an audience for student activities.
4. Learning at Home: Information, ideas, or training for families about helping students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.

¹ Section 601(c)(5), Findings, Public Law 108-446, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

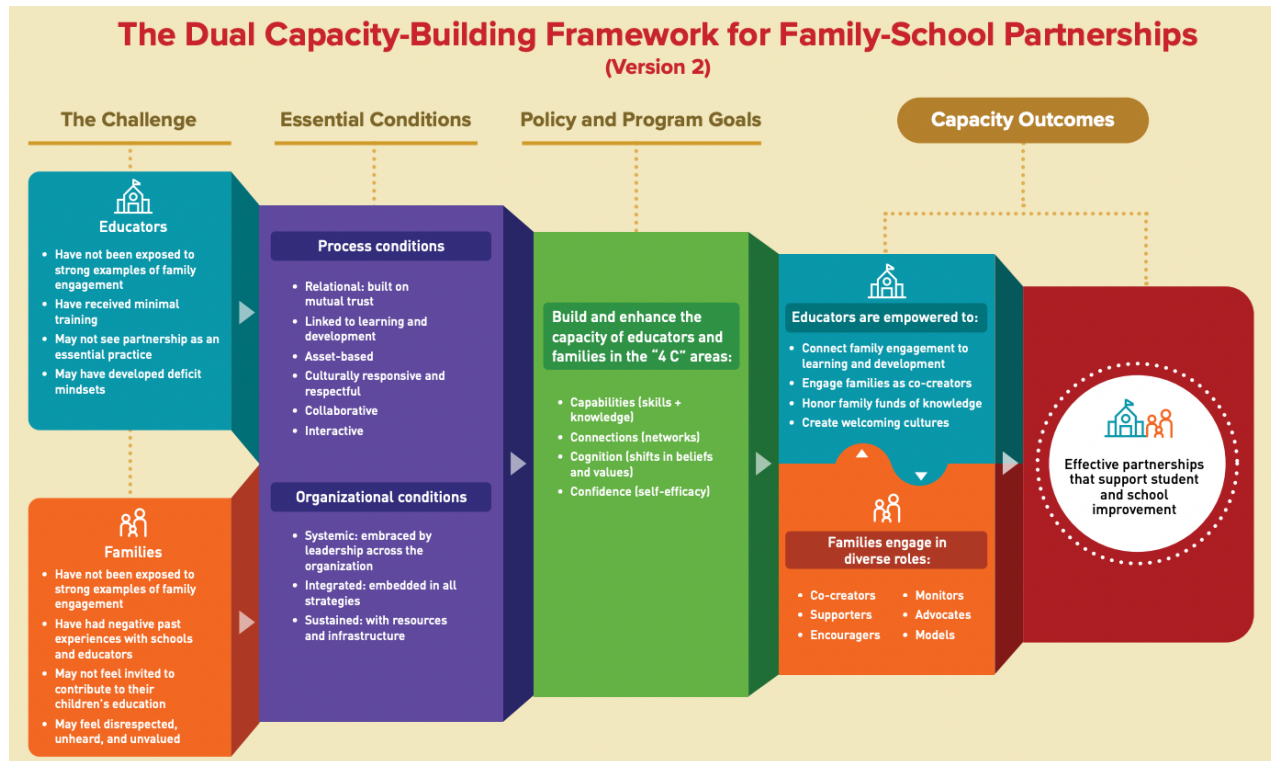
<https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ446/PLAW-108publ446.pdf>

² <https://education.jhu.edu/directory/joyce-l-epstein-phd/>

³ <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/directory/faculty/karen-mapp>

5. Decision Making: Schools include parents in decision and develop parent leaders.
6. Collaborating with the Community: Community services, resources, and partners are part of strengthening school programs, family practices, and student learning.

Karen Mapp’s [Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#)⁴ is rooted in the idea that we must build “the capacity of teachers, administrators, district personnel, and families to engage in authentic school–home partnerships” which will positively impact student achievement. This is predicated on the belief that there are shared goals, separate and unique challenges, shared benefits from effective partnership, and a need for reciprocal sharing of power to support growth. Mapp identifies family engagement as a core element of equitable educational practice and urges educators to “reject a deficit view of families.”⁵



There’s “power imbalance in the partnership, with families reporting feeling unequal in all aspects of student educational planning, specifically making decisions regarding addressing student needs.”⁶ Epstein describes the importance of addressing this power dynamic:

“There are two common approaches to involving families in schools and in their children’s education. One approach emphasizes conflict and views the school as a battleground. The conditions and

⁴ Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). [Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships](#). SEDL. Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2021). [Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement](#). Carnegie Corporation of New York.

⁵ Mapp (2021) notes that families from nondominant cultures are often spectators rather than full participants in schools. Even well-intentioned beliefs like “parents are too busy because they work multiple jobs” assign blame to families and minimize the school’s responsibility for creating a welcoming climate for them (p. 9). The expertise and cultural capital of families must not be overlooked and undervalued.

⁶ Gershwin, T. (2020). [Legal and research considerations regarding the importance of developing and nurturing trusting family-professional partnerships in special education consultation](#), *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, DOI: 10.1080/10474412.2020.1785884. p. 3.

relationships in this kind of environment guarantee power struggles and disharmony. The other approach emphasizes partnership and views the school as a homeland. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment invite power-sharing and mutual respect, and allow energies to be directed toward activities that foster student learning and development.”⁷

Trust involves a willingness to be vulnerable based on confidence that the other party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open. Fostering trust and this willingness to be vulnerable can be challenging for professionals because of a lack of pre-service preparation. Cultural differences between professionals and families intensify this challenge, as trust is most easily built between people who perceive similarities in one another. One way that professionals can reinforce trust is through their observable behavior during IEP meetings. For example, educators can be intentional about their attention, not interrupt parents, and be aware of their nonverbal behavior. “Engagement between family members and educators is seen through coordinated efforts as well as joint agenda setting and decision-making and is evidenced by higher levels of trust.”⁸

The IRIS Center provides examples of specific actions that schools and educators can take to build positive relationships and where educators should build capacity specifically with respect to special education.⁹ In addition, it is important that schools and educators understand parents as equal and valued members of the individualized education program (IEP) team because parents can provide insight about their child’s skills and abilities that educators can use to identify students’ strengths and areas of need to improve the quality of services. Parents can also serve as bridges between home and school and school and the community, and from year to year as the only permanent members of a child’s IEP team other than the student.

The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center reviewed the literature and developed seven research-based strategies for general and special educators to partner with families through special education.¹⁰

1. *Treat parents as experts and value their input.* There should be a two-way exchange of advice and knowledge. Talk with families to develop shared vision with clear goals and revisit vision at every meeting.
2. *Practice culturally responsive family engagement.* Address language barriers (translation services for meetings and document translation) and biases (teacher training in cultural competence).
3. *Practice effective, reciprocal communication.* Use frequent proactive communication, create a welcoming culture, and center family and child.
4. *Commit to inclusive, empowering, consensus-building IEP processes.* IEPs with clear how, when, and where services will be provided. Develop parent education programs on sections of IEP. Provide options for scheduling IEP meetings, with phone/virtual options.
5. *Start transition planning early and connect families to services for all aspects of a full life.* Use [US Department of Education Transition Guide](#).

⁷ Epstein, <https://organizingengagement.org/models/framework-of-six-types-of-involvement/>

⁸ CADRE, The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education, Family Engagement, <https://www.cadreworks.org/continuum/family-engagement>

⁹ IRIS Center, [How can educators engage families?](#) **Schools should:** schedule events at times convenient for parents; host special events that foster connections (e.g., Meet the Teacher Night, Family Fun Night); host parent nights that address parent concerns (e.g., Internet Safety, Adult English Classes, Your Rights as a Parent of a Child with a Disability); offer volunteer opportunities for parents (e.g., read to a class); hold a multicultural night to celebrate different cultures; provide translator and make information available in families’ home language. **Educators need capacity to:** understand how people of different ethnicities and cultures view disability; learn about family’s values, expectations and priorities for their child’s education; recognize differences in perspectives about education; discuss how best to work together; find ways to accommodate family involvement (e.g., transportation, translators); communicate with the family in ways respectful of their preferences.

¹⁰ Walker, K., Hicks, G., Johnson, K., & Boone, B. (2022). Partnering with Families through Special Education. The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center. <https://cete.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Special-Education-Research-Brief-2022.pdf>

6. *Support children and youth in their family engagement.* Proactively and intentionally plan and prepare students and families for meetings. Use checklist for student of IEP components, mock-meeting to practice self-advocacy skills, include student and perspectives in evaluation, IEP and transition processes.
7. *Support families by providing mentors.* Create a Parent Mentor Program (e.g., GA¹¹, OH¹²), support groups for parents, lists of organizations for support, informal mentoring (connect families with good experiences to new families), part-time parent mentor position.

Finally, Mapp and Bergman (2021) make recommendations¹³ for state and local education agencies and schools including:

- Make time during the workday for family engagement (i.e., protected time for educators to partner with families).
- Invest in professional learning to shift mindsets to an asset-based view of families
- Invest in ongoing support and coaching.
- Create senior-level positions in school systems dedicated to family and community engagement.
- Integrate family engagement into equity agendas.
- Develop authentic family engagement policies and metrics.
- School boards and leaders should model the capacity-building by bringing in community organizing and engagement partners to facilitate these learning experiences.
- Family engagement coursework should be required for all preservice teachers and included in teacher evaluation rubrics.

Meaningful Parent/Family Involvement in the IEP Process

Family–school partnership relies upon and also reinforces trust, and this is even more critical in the special education process where “a lack of, or broken trust is, one of the major causes of disputes between families and professionals.”¹⁴ Within the special education process, disagreement may be inevitable and dispute resolution procedures are “inherently combative and often include further harm to the relationship.”¹⁵

The breakdown of trust and relationship is reflected in the dispute resolution data, with the most recent national data from the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) showing a return to pre-pandemic levels.¹⁶ Maryland has the 8th highest rate of dispute resolution activity in the country for SY 2021-22 (72.6 per 10k child count), with filings for due process accounting for 36% and state complaints accounting for 25%.¹⁷

To limit the number of disagreements that end up in dispute resolution we must understand some of the root causes leading to disputes and employ preventative strategies that enable authentic family–school partnership to extend to the IEP table even when there are disagreements.

Ensuring that parents and families are equal members of the IEP team is key. Parent mentoring, as mentioned earlier, and parent training programs are valuable tools to promote family involvement in the IEP process. A 2017 metanalysis of parent training interventions to improve parent participation in IEP meetings, however, found no significant effects in the literature, leading the authors to conclude: “Solely focusing training on

¹¹ Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership, <https://parentmentors.org/>

¹² Ohio’s Parent Mentor Project, <https://parentmentor.osu.edu/>

¹³ Mapp, & Bergman, (2021). <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/embracing-new-normal-toward-more-liberatory-approach-family-engagement/>

¹⁴ Gershwin (2020), p. 4.

¹⁵ Gershwin (2020), p. 8.

¹⁶ CADRE, (Dec. 2023), [Trends in Dispute Resolution \(DR\) under the IDEA for SY 2021-22.](#)

¹⁷ CADRE, [National & State DR Data Dashboard.](#)

parent knowledge and ability may be insufficient in increasing parental participation and advocacy. Broader interventions that address not only parents, but also the behavior of other IEP team members (i.e., school personnel) should be studied.” Past research demonstrates “a clear power differential between the school and parent” and families who are “afraid of jeopardizing their and their child’s relationship with the teacher and school.” The larger context of family-school partnership and the specific behaviors of staff are as important as the knowledge and skills of parents. They conclude: “Without altering the dynamic of IEP meetings more broadly, requiring change by all team members, parent participation seems unlikely to increase based on a brief intervention that only targets parent behavior.”¹⁸

These challenges are compounded for culturally and linguistically diverse families in the special education process. There is a need for finding “equal ground” by examining biases, relationship building, communication before and after meetings, language access through interpretation and timely translation of documents, and identification of cultural brokers.¹⁹ Language access is non-negotiable: “under Title VI [of the Civil Rights Act of 1964] and the EEOA [Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974], state educational agencies and school districts have independent responsibilities to provide LEP parents of children with disabilities meaningful access through timely and complete translation and oral interpretation”²⁰ In addition, interpreters and translators must “have knowledge in both languages of any specialized terms or concepts to be used in the communication at issue.”²¹

The role of cultural brokers has emerged as a powerful intervention and additional support for culturally diverse families in the special education process.²² While informal relationships may play this role, often such cultural brokers are provided by community organizations, and funding to establish formal relationships with schools to provide this critical support may be needed.

Finally, there are strong state models²³ of programs that support facilitated IEP meetings, not through the use of school-system-based facilitators, but by building capacity for educators and parents/families to extend the trust and relationships of authentic family-school partnership to the IEP table with neutral facilitators. A model that encourages facilitated IEP meetings early in the special education process, rather than waiting for conflicts to arise, has the potential to demonstrate how the IEP process can channel the collective expertise around the table to best support students and produce improved outcomes.

¹⁸ Goldman, S. E.; and Burke, M. M. (2017). The Effectiveness of Interventions to Increase Parent Involvement in Special Education: A Systematic Literature Review and Meta-Analysis. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal* 25(2): 97-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2016.1196444>

¹⁹ Rossetti, Z., Bui, O, Figueroa, N., Kelly, R., Ramirez, M., Khanna, R., & Sauer, J. (2024). Equal Ground: Meaningful Collaboration with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families of Children with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2024.2393855>

²⁰ Dear Colleague letter from the Office of Special Education Programs regarding IEP translation, June 14, 2016, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/iep-translation-communication-from-osep/>

²¹ US Departments of Justice and Education, Information for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-lep-parents-201501.pdf>

²² Mortier, K., Brown, I. C., & Aramburo, C. M. (2021). Cultural Brokers in Special Education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 46(1), 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796920975386> Pang, Y., Dinora, P., & Yarbrough, D. (2019). The gap between theory and practice: using cultural brokering to serve culturally diverse families of children with disabilities. *Disability & Society*, 35(3), 366–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1647147>

²³ For example, Missouri’s Facilitated IEP Program (FIEP) <https://dese.mo.gov/special-education/compliance/facilitated-individualized-education-program-fiep> See also [Key2 Ed](https://key2ed.com/) which provides training at the school, LEA, and SEA levels to support facilitation of IEP meetings, <https://key2ed.com/>

State and Local Support for Families in the Special Education Process

MSDE Family Support Branch

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) established the Family Support Branch in 1999; most states do not have dedicated staff members in this role. The role of this Branch is to provide resources and information to Maryland families and referrals to other Maryland agencies or offices within MSDE, and to act as a liaison between the local education agency (LEA) and the family to provide informal dispute resolution where possible and appropriate. The staff members in this office also review and monitor state and federal grants, meet regularly with local Family Support Specialists, and conduct regional and state-wide professional learning activities for the Family Support Specialists to ensure that they have the most current and accurate information and strategies to support families. MSDE staff routinely have over 1,000 requests for assistance each year.

LEA Family Support Specialists

Each LEA, Maryland School for the Deaf and Maryland School for the Blind have Local Family Support Specialists who may assist families in many ways, including accompanying families to IEP team meetings or reviewing documents prior to IEP team meetings to ensure that parents have a full understanding of what will be discussed at the meeting. They hold workshops, bring in guest speakers, and work individually with parents and school staff. Family Support Specialists are trained in the IDEA and dispute resolution, and can offer families a variety of resources. They meet regularly with MSDE and consult with the MSDE Family Support Branch for challenging concerns.

One final note: A particular feature of Maryland's special education process that seeks to strengthen family involvement is the "5-Day Rule." Per COMAR 13a.05.01.07, schools must provide a student's family a copy of any assessment, report, data chart, draft individualized education program (IEP), or any other document the IEP team or other multidisciplinary team plans to discuss at that meeting, at least 5 business days before the scheduled meeting.²⁴

Discussion Questions:

1. What the specific areas of capacity building needed within our schools and systems to support authentic family-school partnership? How should the State support this capacity building?
2. How can state policy and guidance ensure that parents are full and equal partners in the special education process (e.g., addressing language/cultural barriers, ensuring parents are fully informed, etc.)?
3. What specific changes would you recommend within the special education process that would maintain and reinforce trust and positive family-school partnership?
4. What additional recommendations do you have about increasing positive family-school partnerships in Maryland?

²⁴ PPMD, (Sept. 2019). What is the 5 Day Rule and how does it affect me? <https://www.ppm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/IEP-5day-rule.pdf>