

**The Role of School Leaders in Fostering Collaborative and Equitable Family Partnerships**

Parker Morse Andreoli and Edwin Nii Bonney

Department of Educational and Organizational Leadership Development

Clemson University

**Author Note**

Parker M. Andreoli <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7106-7139>

Edwin N. Bonney <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3537-7188>

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Parker M. Andreoli, Clemson University, 101 Gantt Circle, Clemson, SC 29634. Email: [epmorse@clemson.edu](mailto:epmorse@clemson.edu)

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

There is overwhelming evidence that schools alone cannot educate children and that it takes the effort of many stakeholders; including educators, families, and the broader community (Bonney et al., 2021). According to Curry (2018), the way families engage in schools is likely to predict student achievement, underscoring its significance in influencing educational outcomes (Curry, 2018). The extent to which families are welcomed to engage in their students' educational experiences, however, depends on school leadership. School leaders are essential in creating a school environment that welcomes, empowers, and fosters collaborative and equitable partnerships between schools and families. In this article, we expand on the term "parent engagement" to "family engagement" and examine what is needed from school leaders to ensure that families are equipped with the tools to engage in their children's educational experiences in ways that value their contributions as partners to the school community. Over the past decade, family engagement has become a much more integral part of school reform efforts, with greater responsibility being taken on by state governments to prioritize family-school partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Additionally, a greater call has also been issued to understand and emphasize the role of school principals (Grissom et al., 2021) and their leadership teams in developing and sustaining stronger family-school partnerships for more equitable student outcomes. We provide a broad overview of the research that highlights the significance of school leaders as agents of fostering meaningful and collaborative relationships between families and schools. We begin by addressing why these types of relationships are important and directly linked to successful student outcomes. We then describe the changing nature of school leadership as it pertains to developing positive school-family relationships by creating school cultures that value and empower students and their families during a time of growing parent mistrust of schools.

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

### **Creating Meaningful and Collaborative Family–School Relationships**

It is widely acknowledged that family engagement in students’ educational experiences can improve student outcomes and aid in mitigating opportunity gaps for marginalized students (Lowenhaupt & Scanlan, 2020). When schools work to build purposeful and positive relationships with families, student outcomes have been proven to increase (Flores & Kyere, 2020; Ishimaru, 2013; Jeynes, 2018). Stronger collaboration among school stakeholders, families, and communities to create greater educational outcomes for students has been called for as the three main factors on which student learning and development is dependent (Epstein, 2011; Jung & Sheldon, 2020). Authentic school and family relationships are essential to enhancing the educational outcomes of students. When schools create an environment that fosters mutual trust and respect with families, regardless of how well-resourced or not the schools and communities are, it can benefit students (Flores & Kyere, 2020). We discuss some of these benefits, but first, we highlight the shift from parental involvement to engagement and empowerment, and how that can reframe how schools engage with family.

#### ***Engaging Families as Partners in School Communities***

In recent years, the focus on “parental involvement” has shifted to “family engagement.” The evolution of parent involvement to family engagement signifies moving parents from routinely attending school functions as invited participants to a more active role as partners in students’ achievement (Ferland, 2009; Quezada, 2016). The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) recognizes the value of family and community engagement and the important role it serves in supporting the components of the Profile of a South Carolina Graduate (Profile) (SCDE, 2019). The SCDE defines family engagement as when, “[f]amilies are actively involved in the learning and development of all students to become college- and career-ready” (SCDE,

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

2019). In previous years, the discourse on parental involvement was framed around families who had direct interaction with schools and participation in school events such as parent-teacher conferences, events like book fairs, and fundraising activities (McKay et al., 2003). Hence, families who were unable to participate in such events due to barriers such as finding childcare, working multiple jobs, transportation, and miscommunication or language issues, were viewed as uninvolved or uninterested in their children's education. Often these families were socioeconomically disadvantaged, families of color, culturally and linguistically diverse, and newcomer and immigrant families. Furthermore, the utilization of the term "parent" overlooked (and continues to exclude as it is used today) an entire population of students who may have guardians other than a biological or adoptive parent as their primary caretakers. The shift to "family engagement" therefore acknowledges both a wider array of caretakers and domestic circumstances for students as well as the barriers that families may experience in participating in school events. Thus, a recognition of potential familial inability to attend functions does not translate to families' disinterest in supporting their students. It reframes the relationship between schools and families as collaborative in nature, where families are empowered to co-plan and co-lead activities that leverage families' funds of knowledge and expertise (Moll et al., 2006).

It is critical for schools to create an environment where all types of families, not just families with the loudest voices or greatest influence, feel empowered to contribute to the school community (Ishimaru, 2017). Empowering families to engage with schools means school leaders and other educators need to be intentional in inviting all types of families to contribute to the learning process and school activities or events (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; Flores & Kyere, 2020; Lopez et al., 2001). This could look like eliciting ideas from families about what could be done to help their child learn better, feel welcomed at school, and address their needs holistically

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

and with greater intentionality. Sometimes, certain families may feel hesitant to share because of their past experiences or knowledge about schools (Martinez & Wizer-Vecchi, 2016). School leaders and other educators should, therefore, persist in centering parents and families and offering opportunities for them to co-design with school staff to do something they (families) feel is important. For example, families in a study by Schultz et al. (2023) co-designed a celebration of día de la Madre (Mothers' Day) with teachers. Although Latinx families were initially hesitant to do "something" when they were invited to plan an event, teachers continued to ask what families wanted to do over many weeks and then helped co-plan and co-lead the events with families. The relationship between multilingual families and the school was strengthened through the process, with these families feeling welcomed and empowered to contribute their expertise and ability to reach out to other families in the school community. This connection was to be particularly important. The resulting teamwork among families demonstrates the formation of collaborative social relationships that can provide a level of protective support for families who may face challenges (Henderson et al., 2007; Quezada, 2016; Ramirez, 2010; Yosso, 2005). This is especially true for immigrant families who can often feel a sense of isolation in their communities (Bonney et al., 2021; Quezada, 2016). Orchestrating these types of collaborative social relationships occurs within the intersection of micro- and macro-level policy contexts. Such an orchestration requires understanding the policy priorities within these contexts in an educational culture of high-stakes accountability in the United States. Even educators who value relationships with families, and partners in helping students thrive, often feel underprepared to foster partnerships as little training is provided on engaging families and their cultural contributions (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

### **The Role of School Leaders in Fostering Relationships with Families and Communities**

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

School leaders are central to the establishment of effective family–school partnerships. They play an important role in fostering the types of relationships with families that create supportive environments for student learning (Flores & Kyere, 2020; Thapa et al., 2013). The practices of school leaders are pivotal to determining the degree to which schools are welcoming and inviting spaces for families and whether the necessary resources for establishing personal connections between families and educators are available (Auerbach, 2009, 2012). Principals, in particular, have agency to equip families with such tools for student success and to enact change that increases equity (Theoharis, 2009) as they structure schools (classes, teacher, and student assignments) and impact school culture. A recent meta-analysis of the significance of principal influence calls for reorienting the work of school principals toward greater educational equity and for school districts to prioritize the needs of increasingly diverse student backgrounds in the same fashion (Grissom et al., 2021). While there is less evidence that assistant principals contribute as strongly to improved student outcomes, assistant principals have been found to be uniquely positioned to promote equitable outcomes for students by paying attention to cultural inclusivity and equitable learning environments in their own efforts (Goldring, Rubin, and Herrmann, 2021). To move beyond a traditional top-down approach in which school leaders set a particular agenda for a school community and invite parents to join in ways set forth by the school, an emphasis must be placed on the bidirectional nature of an effective and sustainable family–school relationship, in which shared governance and decision-making processes with families and communities drive change. DeMatthews (2018) argued that school leaders who value parent relationships have been shown to engage in such “associational justice.”

### *Driving Paradigm Shifts of Power Dynamics in Family-School Partnerships*

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

To date, many studies have suggested that effective program organization is an important part of establishing strong partnerships between schools and families and that the positionality of school leaders provides agency to create a collaborative culture by setting expectations and modeling what these strong partnerships look like (Jung & Sheldon, 2020; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008; Weiss et al., 2009). Evidence has shown, furthermore, that school leadership can provide the conditions necessary to enable strong program organization in ways that foster effective teacher practices for family engagement and ensuring that school–family partnerships are sustainable (Epstein et al., 2018). Green (2018) referred to school leaders as “social brokers” who connect all aspects of the school with community-based organizations as a mechanism for providing opportunity to families. With a title descriptor as strong as “social broker,” comes great responsibility on behalf of school leaders to ensure that they approach “brokering” with asset-based perspectives. After all, school leaders can also play a key role in engaging families in positive ways by believing in the leadership capacity of families and viewing them as partners in establishing a strong school–community culture (Quezada, 2016). Essentially, school leaders must work to empower families by believing in a concept of “co-powerment” (Vargas, 2013) that shares power in changemaking efforts.

As we previously discussed, the shift in power dynamics to include families’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2006) in their students’ educational experiences is paramount to creating inclusive and welcoming school cultures. Moreover, this paradigm shift is needed by school leaders to create more equitable outcomes for marginalized students. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) asserted that principals are in a prime position to create a school culture and climate that focuses on equity and justice when they are willing to do so. Additional extant literature emphasizes that a school leader’s willingness to challenge and reflect on deficit models of explaining differences

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

in student achievement is arguably the single most influential factor in the academic successes of minoritized students (Beard, 2018; Shields et al., 2004, p. 4). Deficit ways of viewing student ability (rather than the assets that a student contributes to a school community) derived from a primary focus on achievement gaps (disparities in standardized learning outcomes) since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. The focus on these disparities rather than on the inputs that create them presents only one dimension of academic performance, while ignoring the complex and nuanced reality that students' test scores vary based on the learning opportunities they are afforded (Milner, 2012). Often, the motivation to engage in a task is preceded by an interest or deep understanding. Thus, it is important for school leaders to consistently engage in critical reflection [rather than compliant thinking] (Riehl, 2000) on how they are serving marginalized students and their families beyond academic achievement in the form of standardized test scores.

A synthesis of extant literature that emphasizes the ways in which school leaders influence organizational culture and climate has shown that there are three intersectional primary drivers that contribute to either the mitigation of or perpetuation of opportunity gaps that are experienced by minoritized student groups: people (building relational capacity), policies (understanding, implementing, and changing), and practices (actions of stakeholders that contribute to students' educational experiences) (Andreoli, 2023). In figure 1, we argue that it is at the intersection of each of these three drivers that families must be included as partners in school improvement work. Importantly, we also demonstrate that school leaders must understand the context in which family partnerships are fostered, considering local and greater educational and social contexts. It is a combination of familial inclusion in this regard that is paramount to establishing inclusive and sustainable family-school partnerships that "co-power" (Vargas,

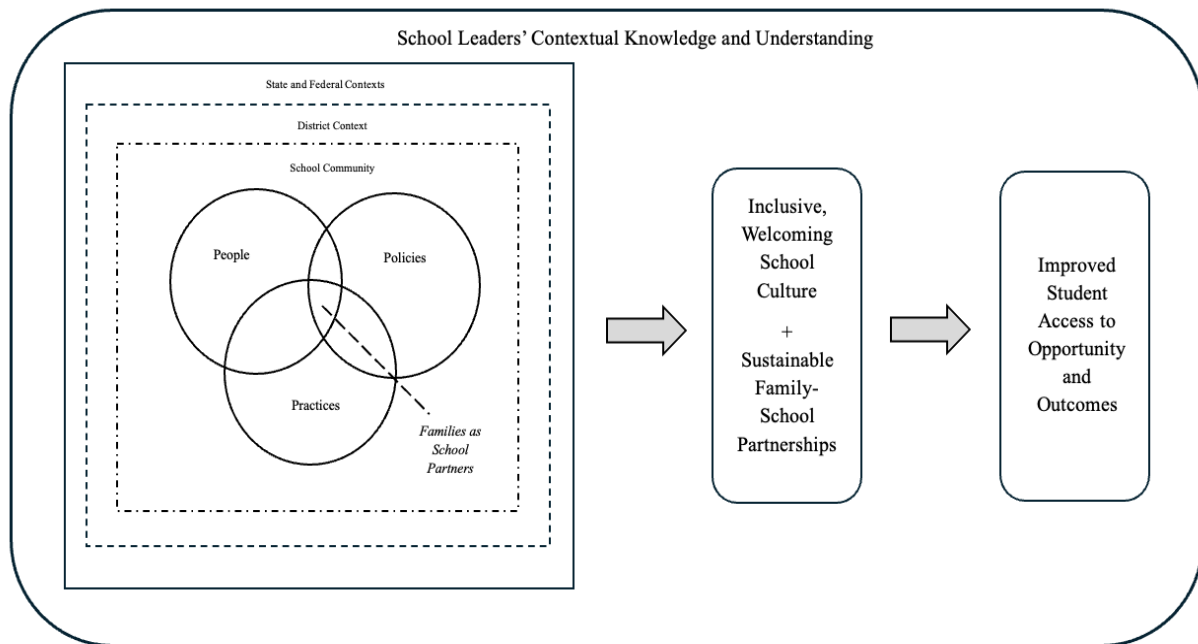


## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

2013) and ultimately that have been shown for some time to improve minoritized students' access to greater opportunity and outcomes.

### Figure 1

*Framework for School Leaders to Enhance Family Partnerships for Equitable Student Outcomes*



### Conclusion and Implications for Practitioners

School leaders should recognize that student achievement is only one indicator of school success. Effective family engagement and the overall school community's health are crucial for long-term success. Creating a climate that empowers and engages families to contribute their funds of knowledge to schools and the learning process takes times as it requires systemic change. Efforts must be embedded in the school's culture, policies, and practices. We conclude with a few recommendations in Table 1 for how schools, in particular, can create collaborative and equitable partnerships with families based on our synthesis of research, field observations and work with schools, families, and community

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

organizations.

**Table 1**

---

*Recommendations for Empowering and Engaging Families*

---

1. Create multiple, accessible channels for communication (e.g., newsletters, social media, emails, text messages, phone calls, etc.). Ensure communication is available in the primary languages spoken by families.
  2. Form committees that include family members, teachers, and administrators to regularly discuss and plan engagement activities and ensure marginalized families are on the committee and that their voices are heard.
  3. Schedule meetings and events at various times to accommodate families' different work schedules. Offer virtual participation options for families who cannot attend in person.
  4. Create opportunities for families to provide input and feedback regularly.
  5. Highlight and celebrate the diverse ways families contribute to the school community. Invite families to share or co-design how their cultures can be celebrated in schools to avoid tokenism.
  6. Regularly assess the effectiveness of family engagement strategies. Use feedback from families to make continuous improvements to engagement practices.
-

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

**References**

- Andreoli, P. M. (2023). *Addressing the elephant in the room: An exploratory multiple case study of principals' perceptions of opportunity gaps, their leadership practices, and access to Advanced Placement courses for marginalized students*, [Doctoral dissertation, Clemson University]. Educational Leadership Commons.
- Auerbach, S. (2009). Walking the walk: Portraits in leadership for family engagement in urban schools. *The School Community Journal*, 19(1), 9-32.
- Auerbach, S. (2010). Beyond coffee with the principal: Toward leadership for authentic school–family partnerships. *Journal of School Leadership*, 20(6), 728-757.
- Auerbach, S. (2012). Conceptualizing leadership for authentic partnerships: A continuum to inspire practice. In S. Auerbach (Ed.). *School leadership for authentic family and community partnerships* (pp. 29-51). Routledge.
- Bonney, E. N., Bonney, V. N. A., & Sweeney, H. (2021). Schools alone cannot educate refugees, it takes a community. In D. Warriner (Ed.), *Refugee education across the lifespan: Mapping experiences of language learning and use*, (pp.17-34). Springer.
- Chavkin, N. F., & Williams, D. L. (1987). Enhancing parent involvement: Guidelines for access to an important resource for school administrators. *Education and Urban Society*, 19(2), 164-184.
- Corres-Medrano, I., Santamaría-Goicuria, I., Fernandez-Villanueva, I., & Smith-Etxeberria, K. (2022). The role of families in the response of inclusive schools: A case study from teacher's perspectives. *Frontiers in Education*, 7(1), 970857-970867. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.970857>
- Ergin, D. Y., Dogan, C., & Cayak, S. (2024). Parent-school collaboration based on the frequency of visits to their child's school. *Asian Journal of Education and Training*, 10(2), 81-88.

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Ferlazzo, L. (2009). *Parent involvement or parent engagement*. Learning First Alliance blog.

Flores, O. J., & Kyere, E. (2021). Advancing equity-based school leadership: The importance of family-school relationships. *Urban Review*, 53, 127-144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00557-z>

Goldring, E., Rubin, M., & Herrmann, M. (2021). *The role of assistant principals: Evidence and insights for advancing school leadership*. The Wallace Foundation.

Green, T. L. (2018). School as community, community as school: Examining principal leadership for urban school reform and community development. *Education and Urban Society*, 50(2), 111-135.

Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. The New Press.

Ishimaru, A. (2013). From heroes to organizers: Principals and education organizing in urban school reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(1), 3-51.

Ishimaru, A. (2017). From family engagement to equitable collaboration. *Educational Policy*, 33(2), 350-385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817691841>

Jeynes, W. H. (2018). A practical model for school leaders to encourage parental involvement and parental engagement. *School Leadership and Management*, 38(2), 147-163.

Jung, S. B., & Sheldon, S. (2020). Connecting dimensions of school leadership for partnerships with school and teacher practices of family engagement. *School Community Journal*, 30(1), 9-32.

Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*. Laboratory for Student Success, Temple University.

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

- Lopez, G.R., Scribner, J.D., & Mahitivanichcha, K. (2001). Redefining parental involvement: Lessons from high-performing migrant-impacted schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(2), 253-288.
- Lowenhaupt, R., & Scanlan, M. (2020). Lessons from the primary and secondary school context: Building capacity to support migrant and refugee students. In L. Unangst, H. Ergin, A. Khajarian, T. DeLaquil, & H. de Wit (Eds.). *Refugees and higher education* (pp. 275-294). Brill.
- Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). *Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships*. SEDL, in partnership with the United States Department of Education.
- Martinez, P., & Wizer-Vecchi, J. (2016). Fostering family engagement through shared leadership in the district, schools, and community. *Voices in Urban Education*, 44 (1), 6-13.
- McKay, M., Atkins, M., Hawkins, T., Brown, C., & Lynn, C. (2003). Inner-city African American parental involvement in children's schooling: racial socialization and social support from the parent community. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 32(1-2), 107-114.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (2006). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. In N. Gonzalez., L. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.). *Funds of knowledge* (pp. 71-87). Routledge.
- Quezada, M.S. (2016). Strengthening relationships with families in the school community: Do school leaders make a difference? *VUE*, (44).
- Ramirez, J.D. (2010). Building family support for student achievement: CAFE project INSPIRE parent leadership development program. *The Multilingual Educator*.

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Ross, E.M. (2023). *The case for strong family and community engagement in schools*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/23/03/case-strong-family-and-community-engagement-schools>

Schultz, L. M., Bonney, E. N., Dorner, L. M., & Song, K. (2023). From attendance to collaboration: Contextual differences in teacher perceptions of multilingual family engagement. *Teachers College Record*, 125(1), 132-162.

South Carolina Department of Education. (2018). Office of Learning and Literacy Family Engagement Framework. <https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/early-learning-and-literacy/family-learning-and-resources/office-of-early-learning-and-literacy-family-engagement-framework/>

Stefanski, A., Valli, L., & Reuben, J. (2016). Beyond involvement and engagement: Role of the family in school-community partnerships. *School Community Journal*, 26(2), 135-160.

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357-385.

Theoharis, G. (2009). *The school leaders our children deserve: Seven keys to equity, social justice, and school reform*. Teachers College Press.

Uline, C., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2008). The walls speak: The interplay of quality facilities, school climate, and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(1), 55-73.

Vargas, R. (1987). Transformative knowledge: A Chicano perspective. *Context, A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, 17, 48-53.

Vargas, R. (2013). "Co-powerment." Rockwood Leadership Institute blog.

<http://goo.gl/YYlxWO>

## FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 169-191.