



ACPS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and Methodology

Research efforts have long supported the benefits of parent engagement in education, but more recent research has demonstrated the myriad ways robust family engagement activities can benefit students, parents, educators, schools, and communities (see, for example Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Epstein, et. al, 2002; ICF, 2017; Lopez & Caspe, 2014; HHS, 2018;). School districts like Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) are actively promoting family engagement through strategic planning efforts and the establishment of Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Centers. The formative evaluation of ACPS family engagement programming involved a mixed methods study conducted in two phases. During Phase 1, ACPS staff conducted two parallel surveys of staff and families focused on the five key areas of their family engagement conceptual framework (key areas are bolded in the Guiding Research Questions box). For Phase 2, ICF used rigorous qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to broadly examine family engagement practices, services, and perspectives through interviews, focus groups, observations, and secret shopper phone calls. Details about the methodology for Phase 2 are presented in Appendix A.

GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent do ACPS schools and Central Office departments foster a welcoming and supportive **environment** for families?

To what extent is ACPS developing mutual **relationships** with families?

To what extent does ACPS include families in educational **decision-making** of their children?

To what extent do ACPS' **communication** practices meet the needs of families?

To what extent do current ACPS family engagement initiatives and **activities** meet the needs of families?

Key Findings: Environment/Culture

Welcoming Environment. A majority of families reported that ACPS schools provided a welcoming environment for families. More elementary school parents found schools welcoming than secondary school parents, however. Parents' opinions of how welcoming their child's school were shaped by a variety of factors, primarily their interactions with school staff, the physical school environment, and the school culture. Parents who described the school environment as welcoming recounted positive experiences with school staff and teachers who made them feel welcomed and valued. They indicated that support staff were friendly and helpful, and that they felt the staff and teachers sincerely cared about their family. Interviews and focus groups revealed that school principals and lead administrators set the tone for staff interactions with family, leading by example.

Challenges to Feeling Welcomed. Parents who did not feel their child's school was a welcoming environment described a variety of concerns, including negative experiences with staff and negative perceptions of the building. For example, parents who had difficulty communicating with their child's teacher or support staff, or who had had negative interactions with support staff, felt less welcomed at their child's school. Parents who felt that the physical building wasn't welcoming typically focused on maintenance and safety issues. Some parents, however, particularly from secondary school, mentioned being overwhelmed by the size or layout of the school building and were unsure where to go when they visited.

Non-white parents and non-native English speakers also faced unique challenges regarding the school culture, which made them less likely to feel welcomed at their school. Some parents reported explicit discrimination or negative comments related to their race or native language from

either staff or other parents. In addition, both staff and parents shared that parent leadership at several schools was dominated by affluent, predominantly white families, making families of color less likely to feel welcomed at their child's school.

Key Findings: Relationships

Definitions of Family Engagement. When asked to describe what family engagement means to them, many ACPS staff described the importance of a two-way partnership or two-way relationship between families and schools. Strongly associated with this partnership was bi-directional, responsive communication. For example, staff noted that parents and schools should be responsive to each other and that trust and rapport are needed between both parties in order for family engagement to grow and develop. Staff also mentioned family engagement in their child's learning as a key aspect of family engagement. This was described as families attending school-based events, as being comfortable raising questions or concerns, and as teachers and staff helping families understand the role that parents and families have in their child's learning.

Staff Roles. Overall, ACPS staff from all roles and levels stated that family engagement was part of their job. However, staff reported that the school principal had a large influence over the tone and culture of family engagement at the school. Front office staff or support staff were sometimes thought of as having an explicit role in family engagement, but parent liaisons were consistently described as playing a critical, explicit role in family engagement.

Perceptions of Relationships. Findings from the Phase 1 parent and staff surveys show disparities in perceived trust between families and schools. School staff reported a lower level of perceived trust by families than parents did; this disparity may play a role in relational issues between families and staff. There are differences by school level as well with high school parents and staff reporting lower levels of trust, care, and respect than middle and elementary schools.

Cultural Responsiveness. When asked to what extent parents/families felt that their child's school was respectful of their culture, values, and language, responses from the Phase 2 focus group participants were mixed. English-speaking and non-English speaking participants reported instances of discrimination and feeling unwelcome or ignored by their child's school. Indeed, the Phase 2 Secret Shopper Calls resulted in several evaluator staff members being hung up on when they called in non-English languages. In addition, in several Arabic-speaking focus groups, participants noted feeling overlooked by the division as they discussed the challenge of having Standards of Learning (SOL) exams scheduled during Ramadan. However, participants also noted feeling welcomed and respected by their child's school, specifically noting schools' efforts to translate written materials and provide cultural events.

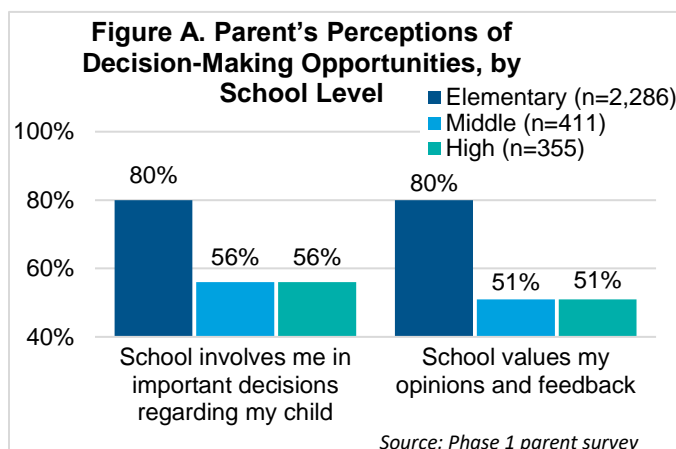
Key Findings: Decision-Making

Decision-Making Opportunities. Parents reported being involved in academic and behavioral decisions about their children primarily through parent-teacher conferences, with a smaller subset of families also citing Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 meetings, or advisory committees for programs like Talented and Gifted (TAG) or Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). Recurring events like Principal Coffees, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, and other division-wide meetings were often reported by school staff as opportunities for parents to learn about academic information or school-based events that could help inform decision-making; however, these events were often limited in attendance due to their timing or location, or a perception that they were not as welcoming to minority or non-English speaking families. Schools also provided a variety of one-time informational events intended to provide parents with critical information including orientation, back-to-school night, elective fairs, and information nights for special programs.

Information to Support Decision-Making. Parents, teachers, and administrators described a range of events to provide families with information about the school system, educational programs, or individual courses. Although substantial amounts of educational information and resources were provided through Principal Coffees, PTA meetings, and Canvas or PowerSchool, a combination of a general lack of parent resource rooms with various personal limitations (e.g., work schedules, childcare needs, language barriers, or lack of or limited access to technology) prevented families from accessing these resources.

Perceptions about Decision-Making.

Overall, parents at elementary schools reported higher levels of agreement about decision-making opportunities (see Figure A). In addition, Phase 2 respondents reported that in-person opportunities to share opinions and offer feedback varied by school, with greater opportunities across elementary schools than secondary schools. Title I schools also reported greater levels of agreement about decision-making opportunities than those with children at non-Title I schools.



Key Findings: Communication

Effectiveness of Communication Methods. ACPS schools and individual teachers leveraged a wide range of communication platforms across and within the categories of printed materials, telephone communication, in-person communication, and digital outreach. Families and staff participating in Phase 2 reported that in-person conferences and communication were essential and effective starting points for building relationships or beginning discussions. However, parents of secondary school students frequently raised concerns about the limited number of conference slots and the difficulties of connecting with teachers.

Although the majority of parents surveyed in Phase 1 expressed a preference for email communication, this varied by preferred language and was *not* the preferred communication method among non-English speaking groups, who instead reported phone calls or in-person communication as the best way to communicate with them. Families and staff also reported that access to translation apps (e.g., Google Translate) and online engagement platforms (Dojo, Blackboard Connect, Remind) have proven to be a strength for family engagement, although communicating to non-English speaking families through these platforms was not without challenges. In particular, many participants were unaware of these platforms, or had not participated in training on them. As one secondary school teacher explained,

Our teachers are not trained enough to know how to access Canvas well...[But] more than just the access, it's navigating it; it's using it; it's responding. Because [parents] can comment and they can send us messages through that. Most of our parents do not know how to do that because most of our teachers don't know how to do that.

ACPS leveraged a variety of methods to effectively communicate with non-English speakers including bilingual parent liaisons, translators, contracted interpreters, and the Language Line (contracted interpretation by phone). With the exception of parent liaisons, each of these methods was less effective than designed due to implementation issues, particularly the use of the

Language Line. Staff across several schools reported that they lacked confidence in using the Language Line, or had only a limited number of phones with conferencing technology to best use the Language Line. In addition, the Phase 2 “secret shopper” calls revealed a lack of consistent use of the Language Line across schools.

Communication Process and Content. Overall, a majority of parents surveyed in Phase 1 agreed that their child’s school responded to concerns promptly and connected them to appropriate staff or resources to address their questions or concerns, although this agreement declined among parents of middle and high school students.

At the elementary school level, school staff reported communicating the most about general news related to a class or the school (64%), while at the middle and high school levels, school staff reported communicating the most about student problems and behavior (76% and 79% respectively). Throughout Phase 2, participants reported that communication about school- and classroom-based events was sufficient in reaching families with key information and that communication from the division and from individual schools about registration and enrollment was accessible and provided in a timely manner. Among parents of secondary school students, participants frequently reported that communications about attendance policies were confusing.

Key Findings: Activities and Future Desires

Activities and Opportunities. Elementary schools reported hosting a larger number of social events for families, while all school levels reported relatively equal levels of educational activities, tailored in substance and format to the age of students. Across schools, the volume of available programs and events was frequently mentioned as a strength of the division’s family engagement efforts.

The Phase 1 survey found that across the division, 87% of parents surveyed agreed that they had opportunities to participate in school events, and 69% reported attending activities at their child’s school over the past year; however, these percentages decreased among parents of middle and high students. A substantially greater percentage of elementary school parents and Title I parents surveyed reported that their child’s school provided them with opportunities to better understand how to support their child’s learning at home compared with middle and high school parents.

Processes and Procedures for Engagement. Across the Phase 2 interviews and focus groups, several structural patterns emerged related to supporting events and activities. FACE-sponsored activities that provided childcare and interpretation services were positively perceived and mentioned as facilitators to participation. A few study sites and participants described key partnerships with community organizations that helped to facilitate family engagement. In contrast, many school-level staff reported that the preponderance of events were held during the first half of the school year, which limited the opportunities for continued engagement. And although parents across all schools reported opportunities to volunteer, some parents and staff reported that the necessary background checks were often overly burdensome for some families.

Staff Professional Development. Less than half of all staff who participated in Phase 1 agreed that staff had been trained on effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds. Teachers and staff at every school in Phase 2 reported needing additional professional development related to family engagement.

Key Findings: Strengths, Challenges, and Barriers

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRENGTHS

Elementary Schools and Title I Schools. Parents with children in elementary schools and in Title I schools reported more positive perceptions about and greater opportunities for decision-making related to their child's education compared to parents at secondary schools or non-Title I schools. Parents with children in elementary schools or at Title I schools also reported substantially higher rates of awareness of and attendance at events and activities. Elementary school teachers also reported strong practices related to teacher-parent communication and elementary school parents reported more positive experiences with communication in the Phase 1 survey.

Teachers and Staff. The most often-identified strength of schools in fostering family engagement was the personality and dedication of the teachers and staff. Many parents described positive interactions with individual teachers or support staff who were friendly, helpful, attentive, and caring and reported some teachers who truly went above and beyond to help children and families. Bilingual staff (including parent liaisons, front office staff, counselors, and classroom teachers) were particularly highlighted as an important resource to their schools.

School- and Division-specific Resources. Many staff reported that a strength of their school was the ability to provide resources for families with a variety of needs, including educational resources and food pantries. Division-wide supports including the FACE Center and its childcare services, the Language Line, interpreters, and translators were frequently mentioned as resources that strengthened family engagement.

Available Programs and Platforms. The events most commonly reported during Phase 2 by teachers and staff as contributing to family engagement were social or community events that included families such as International Nights or start-of-school events. Events where parents had the opportunity to learn about what their child was doing in school were also regarded as strengths by school staff and parents. These events included elective fairs, literacy nights, science or math night, and AVID night. Teachers and staff also reported that access to translation apps (e.g., Google Translate) and online engagement platforms (e.g., Dojo, Blackboard Connect, Remind) strengthened family engagement.

SCHOOL- OR COMMUNITY-RELATED CHALLENGES

Staff Limitations. Across ACPS, teachers and staff reported that there was not enough time in the day to engage families at the level they would like. Parents, teachers, and principals who worked at schools that did not have parent liaisons stated that they would like a liaison at their school to provide bilingual support and to better enable robust family engagement.

Cultural Challenges. Across school sites, parents and school staff reported a cultural divide between the highly engaged, middle-class, predominately white parents and the non-white and/or non-English-speaking parents. Various respondents pointed out that not every family feels equally welcomed across ACPS. In particular, staff noted that non-English speakers, African American families in gentrifying neighborhoods, and lower income families tended to feel less comfortable at school, although these perceptions and experiences varied among individuals. For Muslim families, a challenge was posed by the clash between the school calendar and the current Muslim religious calendar, particularly the need to take exams during periods of fasting during Ramadan.

Community Changes. Across Alexandria, individual schools were navigating the challenges of gentrification. They were trying to balance their mission of welcoming all families (including those

that have recently moved in) while coping with the genuine sadness for the people whose community was being disrupted.

Communication Limitations. Although teachers and staff across all Phase 2 schools were aware of a variety of communication tools and resources available to them, some participants reported limitations of these resources and platforms, noting a perception that the Language Line took a lot of time or was awkward to use, or citing translation limitations within some of the platforms used to track and convey student information such as Canvas and PowerSchool.

Representation. Teachers, parents, or administrators at nearly every school and staff at the Central Office reported that school- and division-wide committees and organizations such as PTAs or advisory groups lacked representation, reporting that these committees tended to be majority-white and middle-class.

INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS TO FAMILIES' ENGAGEMENT

Logistical Challenges. The biggest logistical concern cited in interviews and focus groups was parent work schedules, which was also mirrored in survey findings. Forty-two percent of parents reported that their work obligations posed a “medium” to “very large” problem in becoming involved in their child’s school. During focus groups, some families reported not attending events because they lacked access to a car or because the bus service between their home and school was inconvenient or prohibitively expensive. Childcare was also frequently mentioned as a barrier to participation in events or activities.

Technology Access. Some families in focus groups reported not having access to email, computers, or smartphones required to fully utilize the diverse communication platforms used by ACPS. In addition, ACPS staff found that some families’ phone numbers changed often, which made contacting them difficult.

Language Barriers. Across all of ACPS, one-fifth of the parents surveyed (20%) reported that language barriers posed at least a “small problem” to engagement at their child’s school with 5% reporting that this was a “very large problem.”

Structural Community Barriers. At some schools, a major road or dangerous intersection lay between the school and the neighborhoods that the school served. Many families didn’t live in the immediate neighborhood of the school and reported not having cars. These family members reported that Metro or DASH buses rarely had direct routes from their neighborhoods to the schools, requiring families to build in additional time to get to and from events.

Recommendations

The following are targeted recommendations for continuous improvement, that draw upon the research literature and best practices and are aligned with the family engagement concept map that guided this study.

Environment/Culture. ACPS could work to sustain and further leverage existing community partnerships to promote trust and meaningful relationships across the family populations it serves. These and new potential partners in the faith-based community could be a strong resource in identifying a more diverse and representative range of community leaders to support individual schools and division-wide efforts. Related to the physical buildings, ACPS could work to expand multilingual signage inside and outside school buildings and increase building accessibility to help families navigate with greater ease. Finally, secondary school parents reported feeling less welcome at the school. These schools could provide additional support or training for front office

staff on implicit biases or welcoming practices and using language services, or provide resource guides for parents to help them navigate the transition to secondary school.

Relationships. ACPS could capitalize on the strong parent-teacher/staff relationships at elementary schools by adopting similar practices and programs across school levels, which could include providing more opportunities for conferences in secondary schools, or having elementary and middle school or middle and high school principals jointly host Principal Coffees for parents of rising sixth and ninth grade students to help facilitate transition to a new school. The division could also provide principals and school leadership with practice-driven training on how to create a broader school culture that is welcoming and respectful to both staff and families, serving as the foundation for establishing family engagement. Other complex relational dynamics influenced by gentrification, transience, and implicit biases may be positively affected by supports including additional parent liaisons, additional cultural competency training for staff, intentional outreach into gentrifying communities, or buddies for new families.

Decision-Making. ACPS could expand opportunities for parent-teacher conferences or introduce academic parent-teacher teams or grade-level dialogues, particularly in secondary schools for parents to participate more directly in decision-making. To promote more widespread collaboration, information-sharing, and inclusive voice, ACPS could work to support PTAs in efforts to increase representation and diversity by modeling additional equity and inclusion practices in Principal Coffees or informally nominating or recommending diverse leaders for PTA leadership. In addition, school leadership could leverage and expand the more diverse Principal Coffees to disseminate critical information, solicit parental opinions, and create space to hear from a range of perspectives. To further support awareness and access, ACPS could build on the large amounts of information and materials already produced by schools and teachers by broadening their dissemination through increased training or awareness campaigns on existing resources such as PowerSchool or through the creation of school-based parent resource rooms.

Communication. ACPS should continue to build upon their communication strengths and leverage available resources for family engagement through additional training on the Language Line, additional phones with available three-way calling, ongoing efforts to ensure written communication in English is family-friendly, which will therefore support clear and concise translations and hiring additional bilingual staff including full-time Arabic-speaking and Amharic-speaking parent liaisons and full-time Arabic and Amharic translators. Many bilingual teachers and staff were providing information interpretation and translation; ACPS could consider offering stipends to these individuals to reduce burnout and compensate these staff for their additional work. In addition, ACPS could provide guidelines for written digital communication both through email and digital apps used by staff for communication and translation across the division. Parents also recommended additional follow-up about emergency or building incidents and increased access to course syllabi and greater distribution of translated report card templates.

Activities and Future Desires. ACPS could build off the strengths of events at the elementary school level and tailor similar events at the secondary school level, particularly events with a more relationship-building function, as schools across all levels provided a variety of educational opportunities. ACPS could also consider expanding home visits, which can cut across both educational and relationship-building functions and have been shown to positively impact family engagement, student achievement, and teachers' cultural understanding. Related professional development and practical guidance would greatly support the success of this effort. Across all school levels, some Principal Coffees, particularly about critical topics like SOLs or school safety, could be held in the evening to broaden the range of parents able to participate. In addition, although the process to volunteer may be necessary to ensure student safety, steps could be taken to broaden volunteer opportunities, for example, by creating a list of "skilled" volunteers to

participate in after-school volunteer activities for those unable to complete a full background check. Finally, ACPS could work to create opportunities for all staff, specifically front office staff, to participate in professional development related to family engagement and cultural competency.

Conclusions

To support the utilization of this evaluation, this report concludes with two, high-level recommendations that cut across several family engagement domains and could be prioritized for systematic improvement across the division.

Priority Recommendation: Relationship Building. Relationships are at the heart of family engagement. A key investment that ACPS could make to support relationship building is more comprehensive family engagement-related training for all staff, with a focus on front office staff and secondary school teachers and staff. Investing in additional key staff including increased parent liaisons and/or bilingual staff, particularly to support Arabic- and Amharic-speaking families, could increase the comfort level of a broader range of families in engaging directly with the schools. Finally, the division could work to expand opportunities for face-to-face interactions between families and schools across secondary schools through increased conferences, the introduction of Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, additional school-specific programs focused on relationship-building, or dedicated Principal Coffees across all secondary schools.

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