Promoting High-Quality Family Engagement in San Mateo County School Districts

An Evaluation of the Engaging Families in the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) Development Process Initiative
Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contribution to this evaluation:

**Wendy Dougherty** – Chief Operating Officer, CDE Foundation
**Teneh Weller** – Founder, High Expectations Parental Service
**Liz Wolfe** – Administrator, Learning Analytics and Continuous Improvement Services, San Mateo County Office of Education

**San Mateo-Foster City School District (SMFCSD)**
**Heather Olsen** – former Assistant Superintendent of Education Services, SMFCSD
**Alexandra Friel** – former Coordinator of ELD Services, SMFCSD
**Amy Snow** – Principal, Beresford Elementary School
**Lori Brogdon** – Teacher, Beresford Elementary School
**Lauren Bottani** – Teacher, Beresford Elementary School
**Parents**, Beresford Elementary School

**Redwood City School District (RCSD)**
**Linda Montes** – Executive Director of Educational Services, RCSD
**Patricia Ortiz** – Director of Community-School Partnerships, RCSD
**Warren Sedar** – Principal, Selby Lane School
**Cesar Zuniga** – Family Engagement Coordinator, Selby Lane School
**Nuria Godcharles** – Teacher, Selby Lane School
**Parents**, Selby Lane School

**Cabrillo Unified School District (CUSD)**
**Joy Dardenelle** – Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum & Instruction, CUSD
**César Gaytán** – Principal, Farallone View Elementary School
**Rachael Sage** – Reading Intervention Specialist, Farallone View Elementary School
**Rebecca Jeffs** – Teacher, Farallone View Elementary School
**Erin Fitzgerald** – Teacher, Farallone View Elementary School
**Parents**, Farallone View Elementary School

**Jefferson Elementary School District (JESD)**
**Sandy Mikulik** – Assistant Superintendent Educational Services, JESD
**Jennifer Knopf** – Principal, Daniel Webster Elementary School
**Karen Hong** – Teacher, Daniel Webster Elementary School
**Phyllis Cunningham** – Teacher, Daniel Webster Elementary School
**Jermel Aure** – Teacher, Daniel Webster Elementary School
**Parents**, Daniel Webster Elementary School

**Public Profit Evaluation Team**

**Roshni Wadhwani** – Research Associate
**Hannah Pickar** – Research Assistant
**Da'Shon Carr** – Project Assistant
**Corey Newhouse** – Founder and Principal

---

1 We have not named individual parents who participated in the evaluation to respect their privacy.
Table of Contents

Intro

Introduction p. 4

Lesson 1: Build and strengthen relationships with and among families p. 8

Lesson 2: Intentionally link family engagement to learning goals p. 12

Lesson 3: Make family engagement a district priority, and invest in supporting systems, resources, and infrastructure p. 14

CUSD
Cabrillo Unified School District
Farallone View Elementary School p. 18

JESD
Jefferson Elementary School District
Daniel Webster Elementary School p. 21

RCSD
Redwood City School District
Selby Lane School p. 25

SMFCSD
San Mateo-Foster City School District
Beresford Elementary School p. 28

End

Key takeaways from the evaluation p. 34
Introduction

In 2017-18, Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation (CDEF) supported four school districts in San Mateo County in building their capacity to meaningfully engage families. This work was made possible by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and was carried out in partnership with the San Mateo County Office of Education (SMCOE) and High Expectations Parental Service.

The initiative, known as the Engaging Families in the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) Development Process Initiative (“Engaging Families initiative”), was designed to build capacity among district leaders, educators and families to partner with each other around student success, thereby creating the conditions necessary for family engagement initiatives linked to student achievement and school improvement.

Thirteen schools across the four districts participated in the initiative in 2017-18:
The participating districts and schools committed to a year-long engagement with the initiative. They took part in research-based professional development and capacity-building activities throughout the year. They also received technical assistance and a stipend to support family engagement practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional development and capacity-building</th>
<th>Technical assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• One-day district-level workshop with district leaders, family engagement staff and parents from the District English Learner Advisory Committee (DELAC) or LCAP Parent Advisory Council</td>
<td>• Post-FELI meetings with school teams to finalize their family engagement plans for the year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Two-day Family Engagement Learning Institute (FELI) with school teams</td>
<td>• Mid-year check-ins with school teams to provide implementation support and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One-day year-end evaluation workshop with school teams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Engaging Families initiative has been extended into the 2018-19 school year with the generous support of the Hewlett Foundation, allowing additional schools in the four participating districts to take part in the initiative.

**Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships**

The Engaging Families initiative aims to help participating districts and schools shift from family involvement (and an emphasis on “keeping up the numbers”) to high-quality family engagement. To aid in the shift, the initiative’s work has been closely guided by the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. The framework attributes ineffective family-school partnerships to a lack of opportunities for both school staff and families to build the capacity for partnership. It suggests that the goal of any family engagement policy or program should be to build and enhance this capacity. Rather than expecting families to “figure it out” when it comes to meaningfully engaging with their child’s school, the Dual Capacity-Building Framework specifies that both the school and the family need to build capacity to meaningfully connect to support their child’s learning. The framework goes on to describe the process and organizational conditions required for high-quality family engagement.

---

Family engagement should be...

**Process conditions**

- **Linked to learning**
  Initiatives are aligned with school and district achievement goals and connect families to the teaching and learning goals for the students.

- **Relational**
  A major focus of the initiatives is on building respectful and trusting relationships between home and school.

- **Developmental**
  The initiatives focus on building the intellectual, social and human capital of stakeholders engaged in the program.

- **Collaborative**
  Learning is conducted in group rather than individual settings, and is focused on building learning communities and networks.

- **Interactive**
  Participants are given opportunities to test out and apply new skills.

and...

**Organizational conditions**

- **Systemic**
  Initiatives are purposefully designed as core components of educational goals.

- **Integrated**
  Capacity-building efforts are embedded into structures and processes such as training and professional development, teaching and learning, curriculum and community collaboration.

- **Sustained**
  Programs operate with adequate infrastructure support.


The training offered by the Engaging Families initiative emphasizes these processes and organizational conditions. It gives schools and districts strategies, tools, and support to implement them.
About the Evaluation

CDEF is interested in lifting up the lessons learned from the four districts in order to motivate other districts in California to build their own capacity to meaningfully engage families. CDEF commissioned Public Profit to conduct an evaluation study of the initiative and develop case studies to describe the journeys that participating districts and schools took in developing and implementing their family engagement strategies.

Public Profit applied a mixed-methods approach to the evaluation. Data collection and reporting was guided by these questions:

- What learning experiences did the Engaging Families initiative offer to participating schools and districts?
- In what ways did district-level and school-level policies and practices change over the course of the initiative? What motivated those shifts?
- In what ways did the mindsets and practices of principals and educators change over the course of the initiative? What motivated those shifts?
- In what ways are family members’ mindsets and practices different than in the past? What motivated those shifts?

Public Profit used the following data sources:

- 2017-18 & 2018-19 district LCAPs
- Family Engagement Action Plans developed by participating schools
- Survey responses and presentations by training participants
- Interviews with district leaders
- Interviews with principals, teachers and parents from Daniel Webster Elementary School, Selby Lane School, Farallone View Elementary School, and Beresford Elementary School
- End-of-year debrief session with participants from CDEF, SMCOE and High Expectations Parental Service

About this Report

This report is a guide for other districts and schools that want to adopt more meaningful family engagement strategies in their communities. The first section of this report highlights key lessons for family engagement with accompanying best practices. The second section of this report comprises case studies of each of the four participating districts and describes the mindset and practice shifts seen in the districts and participating schools as a result of the initiative. Readers may choose to read the entire report from beginning to end, or skip ahead to sections they are most interested in.
Lessons for Family Engagement

This section of this report highlights three key lessons for family engagement with accompanying best practices.

Lesson 1: Build and strengthen relationships with and among families

Lesson 2: Intentionally link family engagement to learning goals

Lesson 3: Make family engagement a district priority, and invest in supporting systems, resources, and infrastructure

Many of the lessons and best practices presented in this section will be familiar to readers. This is not surprising, as these strategies are research-based and build on what we already know contributes to effective family engagement.

What made the Engaging Families initiative different, and why so many participants found it transformational, is the way it shifted the mindsets of parents and school staff around the value of partnering together. The Engaging Families initiative brought an equity lens to family engagement work and demonstrated how targeted outreach to families could break down barriers to participation especially for traditionally marginalized families, including families with limited formal education, families who speak languages other than English, and families who are not familiar with the U.S. education system. It also kept participating districts and schools accountable for their family engagement efforts, and provided school and district teams with flexible supports such as professional development, technical assistance, and a stipend that could be used for family engagement events and activities.

These factors – a focus on shifting mindsets and balancing accountability with support - set the Engaging Families initiative apart from other similar efforts. We believe that districts and schools should ensure that these factors are in place if they want to see deep and long-lasting partnerships with families.
Lesson #1: Build and strengthen relationships with and among families

The first lesson from our evaluation is that schools should focus on building and strengthening relationships between school staff and families, with targeted outreach to traditionally marginalized families. They should also encourage families to build relationships with each other.

The two-day Family Engagement Learning Institute held at the beginning of the school year helped school staff recognize how much of an impact strong family engagement could have on student outcomes. The Institute emphasized that families were critical allies in children’s education, and that school staff and families should work together to support students.

"Parents have a lot to offer. Parents have a voice and we need to hear more from them to help them be engaged in their children’s education."

Linda Montes - Executive Director of Educational Services, Redwood City School District

Some participants we spoke with said they had initial concerns about being able to connect with families across different cultures and languages. Others spoke about differing cultural norms, and that some families tended to defer to teachers on matters involving their child’s education. To address these concerns, the training provided by the initiative stressed the relational aspects of high-quality family engagement and shared specific strategies that school staff could use to bridge cultural and language barriers and build strong relationships with families. It showed participants how targeted outreach to families could break down barriers to participation.

"What moved me the most about High Expectations training is that in order to establish rapport and strong relationships with parents, you have to be willing to ask them about what their hopes and dreams are for their children. Once [families] know that they actually want what we want for the children, that’s what creates the connection."

César Gaytán - Principal, Farallone View Elementary School

Furthermore, the training clarified that it was the responsibility of districts and schools to take the first step and reach out to families to encourage dialogue and engagement, not the other way around. Building and strengthening relationships between school and families, and among families, was the foundation of all other aspects of family engagement.

"Before, I felt like there was a big road block in communicating with some parents. The trainings have helped me realize that that can be worked on, especially if it is done as a school- or district-wide effort. [It has] made me more hopeful. [It has] put some fire under us and got us excited about the possibilities about how the academics for these kids could change if we get families involved."

Erin Fitzgerald - Teacher, Farallone View Elementary School

---

3 Quotations from interviewees are based on notes taken during each interview and may not be precise transcriptions. Edits to quotations made by Public Profit for greater clarity are indicated with square brackets.
Families are critical partners in the education of children, and schools should provide opportunities for them to share their perspectives, ideas, and questions. For example, to increase family voice, some schools changed the way they ran their parent-teacher conferences. Teachers asked family members to share their child’s strengths, goals, and concerns. They also asked family members what they needed from the school team in order to best support their child’s education.

“We need to listen to our families to see what they need and how they want to be engaged with their child’s education.”
Joy Dardenelle - Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Cabrillo Unified School District

Schools should help families feel comfortable on school grounds and with school staff by creating a warm and welcoming campus. This can be achieved through simple gestures like waving, smiling, maintaining eye contact, and saying “hello,” which can go a long way in bridging cultural and language barriers between school staff and family members. When planning events, schools should intentionally design the events around the needs of families by providing translation, childcare, transportation, and food.

“I remind staff to greet parents and families when they come on campus by making eye contact and saying ‘hello’ and ‘welcome.’ In interactions throughout the school, we try to be kind and have a positive attitude. We are not a neighborhood school, many of our parents are travelling to bring their kids to school.”
Warren Sedar - Principal, Selby Lane School

Schools should create a variety of opportunities for families to interact with school staff throughout the year. These can include quick conversations during pick up and drop off, coffee with the principal and other school staff, and online communications. Schools can also consider holding family engagement events in the community. Any contact with families, whether planned or by chance, is an opportunity to build a relationship.

“I used to think that if a family/parent didn’t show up, it was that they weren’t interested/concerned/caring. I now think they just need more opportunities, communication, and variety of forms of engagement.”
Teacher, Jefferson Elementary School District
Creating opportunities for families to connect and learn from each other is essential to creating an inclusive school community. Opportunities to connect with one another also increases families' motivation to participate in family engagement events and activities at the school. Schools should create multiple opportunities for families to talk to one another at family engagement events, during pick up/drop offs, and in the community.

Schools should offer opportunities for families to volunteer and be engaged with the school community. They should provide a wide range of commitment levels (e.g. from helping set up chairs for a family event to leading a weekly book club with students). Families can also be champions for family engagement events and encourage other families to participate (e.g. by leading a phone tree to remind families about upcoming events or volunteering to carpool to events).

“I participated in helping the Principal with the phone tree for families that speak Spanish so I can inform them about the meetings, the times, and be more involved. I go to the bus stop and talk to the parents and engage them so they can come participate.”
Parent, Beresford Elementary School
Lesson #2: Intentionally link family engagement to learning goals

The second lesson from our evaluation is that schools should intentionally link all family engagement events and activities to learning goals.

The Family Engagement Learning Institute supported participating school teams in developing family engagement action plans that were directly linked to academic and developmental goals for their students, and that were firmly rooted in data. The training provided by the initiative also helped participants recognize that any contact with families, whether planned or spontaneous, were opportunities to share concrete skills to support their children’s learning at home. These skills, such as how to ask questions while reading, were universal ones that families could use even if they had limited formal education or did not speak English.

“From trainings I learned it’s not just about having parents present, but [them] taking something home and having a link between school and home... Once I shifted my mind about family engagement being about giving parents tools, then it became more successful and beneficial.”

Lauran Bottani - Teacher, Beresford Elementary School

Many participants we spoke with said that they had been initially concerned about the additional time, commitment, and effort perceived to be needed for this work. However, the training emphasized that incorporating a link to learning only required a small shift in the way that schools were already running activities and events.

“The training opens your eyes as to how to better engage families. You don't have to change what you are already doing, but enhance existing events.”

Sandy Mikulik - Assistant Superintendent Educational Services, Jefferson Elementary School District

The training also addressed a common fear experienced by school staff around discussing student achievement data with families. It gave participants constructive ways to talk about learning gaps that were not centered on blaming any party for those gaps and helped build their confidence to communicate with families honestly and transparently.

“Schools that participated [in the initiative] feel more comfortable taking data to their team and have less fear of recognizing the gap. This wasn’t a magic bullet, but it gave them a step forward. This isn’t about me, it’s about the kids and what they need. Not about what we didn’t do. [Teneh Weller from High Expectations Parental Service] framed that in such a great way. A lot of principals said, ‘I might be able to do this.’ Baby steps!”

Alexandra Friel - former Coordinator of ELD Services, San Mateo-Foster City School District

Taken together, the initiative encouraged participants to think deeply about how to implement the process conditions in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework. They learned how to plan events that were linked to learning, developmental, collaborative, and interactive.
Best practices

School teams should adopt a structured process to develop family engagement plans based on their schools’ data. For example, school teams that participated in the Engaging Families initiative analyzed their data, determined areas of growth, identified root causes for challenges, developed a theory of action, set SMART goals, and developed an action plan. By setting clear goals at the outset, school teams had a tangible way of tracking and measuring their progress throughout the year.

“Teneh walks you through it, you feel like it’s effortless. Looking at the data and being honest with it - is this good enough? And then thinking about what the root causes are. And then what the school can do to make a change, that feels doable and productive. [Then] action planning - really planning out your year.”

Amy Snow - Principal, Beresford Elementary School

Professional development and capacity-building activities for district leaders and school staff should be focused on building their knowledge and skills to help parents support learning at home. In addition, districts and school teams should consider investing in systems and infrastructure that would aid learning at home. For example, a number of participating schools wanted to see improvement in their students’ reading outcomes so they invested in online reading software that students and their parents could access on their own devices at home. They also put in place reading logs to track time spent reading outside of school.

“I used to think that increasing [parent] attendance was a success. I now think that empowering parents as partners creates student success.”

Teacher, San Mateo-Foster City School District

A link to learning should be embedded into all ongoing events and activities, such as back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences. Schools do not necessarily have to run new events.

“I used to think events were intimidating. I now think events need to be linked to learning and can be simple.”

Rebecca Jeffs - Teacher, Farallone View Elementary

---

4 SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timely
Lesson #3: Make family engagement a district priority, and invest in supporting systems, resources, and infrastructure

A final lesson from our evaluation is that school districts should make family engagement a district priority. They should invest in supporting systems, resources, and infrastructure to promote high-quality family engagement in schools, including outreach to and engagement with traditionally marginalized families.

To ensure buy-in and support at the district level, the Engaging Families initiative trained district leaders alongside school administrators, teachers, and parents.

“[Meaningful family engagement] was a missing element and I didn’t even know that it was missing.”

Heather Olsen - former Assistant Superintendent of Education Services, San Mateo-Foster City School District

The initiative also built in accountability structures and mechanisms. Participating districts and school teams were asked to set up dedicated school-site action teams comprised of school administrators, teachers, parents, and community partners (e.g. after school providers) that committed to a year-long engagement with regular check-ins. Participating schools also developed Family Engagement Action Plans that they held themselves accountable to throughout the school year. The training provided by the initiative stressed that family engagement was not the sole responsibility of any one person, and that it was a team effort.

“I used to think it was all on me to encourage family engagement. I now think it is a team and once we have teacher buy-in and work, we make a change.”

Amy Snow - Principal, Beresford Elementary School

The district leaders we spoke with pointed out that sustainability and replication of the model across the district required investment of time and resources. The initiative addressed this challenge in several ways that districts can consider adopting and adapting. First, to promote district-wide spread of promising practices, the initiative provided opportunities for participating schools to share the work that they had been doing with other schools in the district and county. Second, the initiative provided participating schools with a $1,000 stipend to support family engagement activities at their sites. The schools had discretion to spend the stipend on whatever they deemed necessary for the activities, such as food, transportation, child care, translators, and teacher stipends. For example, Selby Lane School used the stipend to pay for teacher stipends, food, and day care for math night, and for reading comprehension boxes. The schools overwhelmingly found the stipends to be helpful as they could be used flexibly. Districts should consider how they can continue to support schools in this way in the future.
Finally, the initiative helped districts link family engagement with teaching and learning goals, an important first step towards developing more meaningful family engagement goals in their LCAPs. Our review of the four district LCAPs revealed that while they all mentioned family engagement goals in some capacity, only some of them had managed to successfully embed family engagement goals into their student achievement goals. For some districts, we observed a disconnect between their continued focus on quantity of family engagement in their LCAP and the transformative work that schools were doing on the ground, both in terms of quantity and quality of engagement. Initiative stakeholders brought up the challenge of the LCAP not readily lending itself to having family engagement embedded into academic goals, because “Parental Involvement” is a stand-alone priority in the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and is distinct from “Student Outcomes” and “Student Achievement”. We believe that tying family engagement to student outcomes in the LCAP remains an area of growth for participating districts and schools.

Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) priorities

Overall, the Engaging Families initiative guided district leaders and school administrators in implementing the organizational conditions needed for high-quality family engagement and making family engagement systemic, integrated, and sustained throughout the districts and schools. The initiative has been extended into the 2018-19 school year with the generous support of the Hewlett Foundation, allowing additional schools in the four participating districts to take part in the initiative. CDEF is hopeful that with more schools trained, districts will be able to make bigger strides in their family engagement practices.
Best practices

Tie family engagement to student outcomes in the district LCAP

Districts and schools should see family engagement as a way for them to achieve their student achievement and outcome goals, not as a competing priority. Districts should refine their LCAP metrics and goals to reflect this shift, and to capture not just the quantity but also the quality of family engagement activities.

“*I used to think family engagement was a secondary goal (student achievement is primary goal). I now think family engagement is the way we can collectively increase student achievement.*”

*Heather Olsen - former Assistant Superintendent of Education Services, San Mateo-Foster City School District*

Create accountability mechanisms for schools

Districts should ensure that professional development and capacity-building activities for school teams are more than just one-off trainings, and that there are longer-term mechanisms in place to keep schools accountable for improving the quality of family engagement at their sites. These mechanisms include having school-site family engagement teams, regular follow-up meetings and technical assistance, and a clear expectation for schools to participate in district-wide practice sharing.

“After the initial training, the follow-up meetings ensured we did not lose momentum or get put aside (as often happens when we go to trainings and get great ideas).”

*Family Engagement Team, Daniel Webster Elementary School*

Commit resources to supporting high-quality family engagement in schools

Districts should dedicate sufficient resources towards family engagement if they want to sustain and scale up high-quality family engagement practices within their districts. They should consider setting aside funds for professional development of district leaders, school administrators and teachers, ongoing technical assistance, and stipends to schools to support family engagement activities and events.
Case Studies

In the next part of this report, we delve into each of the four districts that participated in the Engaging Families initiative. In each section, we provide an overview of the district and outline how they shifted their approach to family engagement in 2017-18 as a result of participating in the initiative. Then, we highlight ‘bright spots’, or promising practices, within each district. For each ‘bright spot’, we feature the family engagement practices that the district or school demonstrated and describe the specific ways they exemplified these practices.

Source: San Mateo County GIS Open Data, retrieved October 2018.
Cabrillo Unified School District

Cabrillo Unified School District (CUSD), located south of San Francisco on the Pacific Coast, serves about 3,200 students. The district has four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, a continuation school, and an adult education program.

CUSD is a large, geographically rural district. It is majority Hispanic/Latino (52%), with many Spanish-speaking families. Some communities within the district are geographically separated with large distances between them. Because of these circumstances, CUSD schools took the approach of holding family events in communities where their parents resided to build relationships and increase the level of participation and engagement. In its most recent LCAP, the district focused on implementing a stakeholder communication plan to support the Parental Involvement priority. This plan included exploring new website and online communication platforms, continuing to field surveys to assess parent perceptions of family engagement, and expanding parent engagement meetings based on family needs. In 2017-18, CUSD schools hosted an average of three parent engagement events per site that were designed specifically to address site-based needs, an increase from an average of one event the previous year. Given the large population of Spanish-speaking students and families, the district had Spanish bilingual community liaisons available for interpretation and translation during parent engagement activities. District leaders added that they held family engagement events in Spanish at some school sites and ensured that traditionally marginalized families had opportunities to participate in district-level committees.

Sources: California Department of Education DataQuest, retrieved October 2018; San Mateo County GIS Open Data, retrieved October 2018.
Bright Spots - Farallone View Elementary School

Farallone View Elementary School is located in Montara – a small, coastal community – and serves about 300 students. During our visit to the school, we spoke with school administrators, teachers, and parents to learn more about the shifts that the school has made since participating in the Engaging Families initiative.

Building and strengthening relationships with and among families

Farallone View made outreach to traditionally marginalized families a priority. For example, in addition to holding family engagement events at the school site, the school held family engagement events at Moonridge, a nearby community where many students lived.

“...The first [family engagement event] that we did was the most effective. We have two communities - kids from our neighborhood and kids bussed in 15 minutes away from here. Those are the parents that we don’t engage as much. We took our first event to their community and did an event there.”

Rebecca Jeffs - Teacher, Farallone View Elementary School

During literacy-focused family engagement events, Farallone View included opportunities for parents to connect with one another.

“...What was the most effective for me was the first thing that we did was have the parents talk to each other. The event was about literacy... So first we talked about ‘what does reading look like at your house?’ They talked to each other. They don’t always do that. And then we had them share their answers with us... Parents came up to us afterwards and told us that it feels empowering to hear from each other and then talk to us about it.”

Rebecca Jeffs - Teacher, Farallone View Elementary School

Intentionally linking family engagement to learning goals

Farallone View’s focus for family engagement was to decrease the gap between students that speak a language other than English at home and students that speak English at home by two reading levels in K-2 using the Fountas and Pinnell reading assessment. Family engagement events were therefore designed around increasing students’ reading levels, including several Family Literacy Nights.
Farallone View invested in professional development for staff to learn how to use the reading comprehension boxes that were the foundation of literacy-focused family engagement events. During Family Literacy Nights, school staff communicated student and grade-level goals to families, taught them how to use reading comprehension boxes with their children, and introduced a Reading Calendar to encourage and monitor student reading. Farallone View also invested in supporting systems and infrastructure by collaborating with community partners such as the local library branch to provide books at family engagement events.

“I think our Literacy Night where we built comprehension boxes and the parents practiced using them [was most effective]. It was the 3rd one here at Farallone View. There was momentum building. It was successful because the other ones had been moderately successful, and then other people had heard that they were great, so they came. The skill we taught them was really valuable.”

Rachael Sage - Reading Intervention Specialist, Farallone View Elementary School

Family engagement activities at Farallone View encouraged and celebrated reading. The school hosted five Family Literacy Nights in 2017-18, which teachers supported and attended. The school also organized Student Success Team (SST) meetings that taught reading strategies to families and a Jog-A-Thon that celebrated children who met their reading goals.

Looking ahead to 2018-19, Farallone View has scheduled eight Family Literacy Nights for the year. The family engagement committee has implemented school-wide reading logs and are introducing them to families at the Family Literacy Nights. The school is also incentivizing participation in this initiative through Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)-sponsored prizes and a field trip to the local library. At the time of writing, about 55% of students are turning in their reading logs regularly. The family engagement committee plans to analyze students’ progress and growth on Fountas and Pinnell reading levels and use these insights to plan more effective family engagement events.
Jefferson Elementary School District

Jefferson Elementary School District (JESD) serves about 6,000 students from four San Mateo County cities just south of San Francisco – Daly City, Colma, Broadmoor Village and Pacifica. The district has 10 elementary schools, one K-8 school and three middle schools.

JESD’s ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic diversity has had clear influence on the design of its family engagement events and activities in the past year. In its most recent LCAP, the district describes funding of translation services for various district and school events and programs in the 2017-18 school year. District and school staff acknowledged that linguistic barriers remained a challenge given that more than 20 languages are represented in the district. The district tried to get translators for all languages for family engagement events but were sometimes resource-constrained. Recognizing that some families might not have access to reliable transportation, the district was mindful about where district-level events were held and offered them at different locations to allow as many families as possible to attend. Finally, the district provided food, often a full dinner, and childcare at district-level family engagement events.

Sources: California Department of Education DataQuest, retrieved October 2018; San Mateo County GIS Open Data, retrieved October 2018.
Bright Spots - Daniel Webster Elementary School

Daniel Webster Elementary School is located in Daly City and serves about 500 students. During our visit to the school, we spoke with school administrators, teachers, and families to learn more about the shifts that the school has made since participating in the Engaging Families initiative.

### Building and strengthening relationships with and among families

Daniel Webster made their school environment more welcoming by implementing a new policy of opening the school yard to families in the morning. This provided more opportunities for families and school staff to interact with each other. Seeing the value of increased family engagement, school staff started to use other routine interactions with families, such as during after-school parking lot duty, as additional chances to interact with them.

“I’ve seen a shift in the way in how we approach families. Our black top used to be closed. It sent a message that people were not invited... I’ve also seen a change in the afternoon pick-up. Even if it’s just for a few minutes to talk to parents... we took away from the training how we should make parents feel more comfortable around us.”

Karen Hong - Teacher Daniel Webster Elementary School

The school also created opportunities for families to build relationships with other families at family engagement events.

“I started to connect with a lot of parents. We recently had an Open House where everyone was greeting each other. The community is working with my daughter and knows everyone’s name. You learn something new. It’s good to see parents coming closer because we care about our children.”

Parent - Daniel Webster Elementary School

### Intentionally linking family engagement to learning goals

At the 2017-18 Family Engagement Learning Institute, the Daniel Webster team used student achievement data to guide their family engagement focus. Their overall achievement goal was to increase the percentage of students scoring proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) from 34% of students to 44% in all subgroups as measured by the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Summative Assessment. To do this, they set a related goal of having a minimum of 75% of all students in grades K-6 read for 30 minutes per night, four nights a week between Nov 22, 2017 and Mar 2, 2018.
The team quickly realized that achieving their goal would require buy-in and mindset shifts for both staff and families around reading for homework. The school therefore invested in systems and infrastructure, and trained teachers and families to support reading at home.

One of the biggest investments Daniel Webster made was purchasing a license to an online reading software, Raz-Kids, for every student. The school also developed a new “reading as homework” policy and resources for families to use with their children at home (e.g. bookmarks with guiding questions).

Teachers were provided training on Raz-Kids, as they were expected to monitor their students’ reading on the software and submit weekly percentages. They had to dedicate time to monitoring reading just as they did with homework packets. Teachers also undertook staff development activities about reading for homework.

At Teacher Conferences, teachers reviewed Raz-Kids, the new homework policy, and the bookmarks with guiding questions. To build families’ capacity, the school held a Family Technology Night to teach families how to download the Raz-Kids app. The principal posted weekly videos on ClassDojo (an online communication platform) that shared with families different strategies to support reading at home. Class reading goal results were also posted on the platform. The school newsletter included strategies to support reading at home.

“[The big shift in mindset was] to not tell, but to teach parents.”

Jennifer Knopf - Principal, Daniel Webster Elementary School
Ongoing family engagement activities at Daniel Webster were also linked to reading. At parent-teacher conferences, teachers went over Raz-Kids and the bookmarks with families, and families watched a video about how to read with their children at home. At the school’s Winter Concert, the principal worked with two 6th graders to model for families how to read with a child and how to ask guiding questions at home. At the Valentine’s Ball, students read to their family members, and family members practiced using the bookmarks to ask guiding questions.

The school enlisted the support of the Parent Leadership Team to further their reading agenda. The team helped to monitor classroom reading percentiles, organized weekly “Fun Friday” activities for classes that met their reading goals, and lent Chromebooks to families who did not have access to a device.

Daniel Webster has seen marked progress towards their reading goals. They started with 50% of students reading nightly. With 85% of students now reading nightly, they surpassed the goal they set for themselves at the beginning of the school year.

“Parents and students no longer believe reading nightly is optional homework. Events include a link to learning (teaching parents how to support reading at home). Students are starting to get excited about leveling up, learning new things they read and see the positive impact reading has in other academic areas.”

Family Engagement Team, Daniel Webster Elementary School
Redwood City School District

Redwood City School District (RCSD) serves about 8,800 students from Redwood City and some parts of Atherton, Menlo Park, San Carlos, and Woodside. The district has seven elementary schools, seven K-8 schools, and two middle schools. Six of the schools are community schools.⁵

RCSD is unique among the four participating school districts. The district has had a long history of partnership between schools and the community because of the community school model adopted by many of its schools.⁶ Examples of RCSD’s community-school partnerships abound. In 2017-18, for example, the district built capacity for parent leadership through Familias Unidas,⁷ and offered other family engagement opportunities through Raising a Reader, Community Based English Tutoring (CBET), and Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) Parent Engagement Programs. The role of the Engaging Families initiative was therefore slightly different in RCSD, where it served as a complement to this already established foundation.

---

⁵ The Coalition for Community Schools defines fully-developed community schools as follows: “Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities. Partners work to achieve a set of results through an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement.”

⁶ See https://www.rcsdk8.net/Page/8904.

⁷ Familias Unidas is a program that empowers parents to participate in their children’s education. See https://www.unitedthrougheducation.org/.
Bright Spots - Selby Lane School

Selby Lane School is a K-8 community school located in Redwood City. It serves about 700 students. During our visit to the school, we spoke with school administrators, teachers, and parents to learn more about the shifts the school has made since participating in the Engaging Families initiative.

Building and strengthening relationships with and among families

Selby Lane has been a champion for creative, innovative ways to connect with families. School administrators and teachers we interviewed said that the need to build strong relationships with families was especially important for a school like Selby Lane, which was not a neighborhood school. Families had to commute back and forth to participate in activities in the school, so it was especially important that they found those opportunities meaningful and valuable.

Selby Lane’s principal, Warren Sedar, described how he expanded his use of social media as a platform to communicate with families.

“I have stopped doing so many newsletters as parents do not always read them in favor of posting photos of events around school more frequently on our school Facebook page. All of our parents have cell phones and can connect to the school via Facebook and social media and stay engaged even though they might not step on the school campus.”

Warren Sedar - Principal, Selby Lane School

Mr. Sedar also shared that he held regular coffee sessions with families. One parent we spoke with said that she noticed more parents attending the coffee session, and that she thought the principal was open to change and hearing what parents needed.

“I’m growing more accepting or understanding of parents’ schedules. I have families who are always working and don’t have the time. I’m thinking of ways to communicate with parents effectively due to their schedule. I’ve had principal’s coffee in the morning.”

Warren Sedar - Principal, Selby Lane School

Facebook post inviting families for coffee with the principal

Design innovative ways for families to engage with school staff

Facebook post inviting families for coffee with the principal

Facebook post inviting families for coffee with the principal
Selby Lane provided opportunities for families to take up leadership roles and to volunteer at the school. These opportunities were for events such as Math night and Literacy night.

Facebook post calling for family volunteers

Sharing reading tips during Back to School night

Intentionally linking family engagement to learning goals

Embed learning activities into ongoing family engagement activities

"[We share] Tips and Tools (TNT) with parents. Whatever event we are having, we explain how the reading log works and how to log into Lexia so they can use it outside school."  
Warren Sedar - Principal, Selby Lane School

---

8 Lexia is an online reading program.
San Mateo-Foster City School District

San Mateo-Foster City (SMFCSD) School District serves close to 11,900 students from San Mateo and Foster City. The district has 14 elementary schools, three K-8 schools and three middle schools.

Like many school districts in San Mateo County, SMFCSD is culturally and linguistically diverse with a large Spanish-speaking population and more than 20 languages represented. In its most recent LCAP, the district reported that it had provided interpretation and translation services for over 93% of community meetings, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, and conferences in 2017-18, a clear effort to overcome language barriers. District leaders we interviewed also highlighted wide socioeconomic differences between the schools in the district. Some schools had very high proportions of students who were low-income or English learners, while other schools had a high percentage of students from high-income families. The schools in the district have also seen very different levels of family engagement. The district has therefore had to consider how to meet the varied needs of these families, including ensuring all families continue to have access to information as the district shifts to using more online technology and paperless modes of communication.
Bright Spots - San Mateo-Foster City School District

To learn more about the shifts that SMFCSD has made since participating in the Engaging Families initiative, we spoke with district leaders and reviewed SMFCSD’s 2017-18 and 2019-19 LCAPs.

Making family engagement a district priority, and investing in supporting systems, resources, and infrastructure

SMFCSD’s 2018-19 LCAP, which includes a review of their achievements for the 2017-18 school year and plans for 2018-19, demonstrates how family engagement can be tied to learning goals in the LCAP. SMFCSD’s family engagement achievements and plans are captured in the goal “Families will participate in their child’s education” (Goal 7). The wording of the goal itself strongly suggests that SMFCSD sees family engagement as a way to support the education of their students.

“I think the biggest shift and the change for systematic family engagement support is really reflected in the LCAP regarding academic focus.”
Alexandra Friel - former Coordinator of ELD services, San Mateo-Foster City School District

“The decision to … focus on partnering with High Expectations was a great success. Rather than holding district level parent institutes, the shift [was] to focused family engagement that supports academic and social emotional outcomes for students. The schools who participated noted a steep increase in parent participation as well as teacher buy-in. The three schools focused on engaging families in reading and understanding how to help their child read at home… The increase in parent engagement at the schools was evident through attendance at events as well as academic indicators of reading log completions.”

SMFCSD committed resources to building staff members’ capacity for family engagement. In 2017-18, SMFCSD started with three schools in the Engaging Families initiative. Because they found the training so successful, the district paid for an additional three schools to be trained that year. The district also set aside time to build the capacity of district leaders and the district superintendent on family engagement and facilitated sharing among principals in the district about best practices and the impact they were seeing around family engagement. In 2018-19, SMFCSD will be using LCAP funds to support teacher training and technical assistance in seven schools, including the six schools that participated in 2017-18 and one additional school.
SMFCSD will continue to implement the accountability mechanisms that the Engaging Families initiative introduced, such as a year-long commitment to family engagement, school site actions teams, and regular check-ins.

**Create accountability mechanisms for schools**

**Building and strengthening relationships with and among families**

In 2018-19, SMFCSD will fund transportation to and from events for communities that do not reside close to the schools their children attend. The district will also help schools with childcare costs and other expenses.

> The district has also determined the importance of bussing and providing additional funding for schools to include childcare and other needed expenses at meetings. Through bus funding, schools expect to increase attendance at family engagement events, ELAC, and Back to School nights. As sites increase their parent involvement and focus on student achievement in their meetings, outcomes should be evident in the academic indicators as well.

*2018-19 plans, San Mateo-Foster City School District 2018-19 LCAP*

We believe that SMFCSD is an excellent model for school districts that want to implement systemic, integrated and sustained family engagement practices.
Bright Spots - Beresford Elementary School

Beresford Elementary School is located in San Mateo and serves about 300 students. During our visit to the school, we spoke with school administrators, teachers, and parents to learn more about the shifts that the school has made since participating in the Engaging Families initiative.

Building and strengthening relationships with and among families

To promote greater dialogue with families about their children’s progress, Beresford shifted the nature and timing of parent-teacher conferences. Previously, these conferences were held when report cards were issued, and the ensuing conversation between families and school staff tended to be a review of students’ report cards. The timing of the conferences was shifted to before report cards were issued, so the conversation between families and school staff could be more focused on the students’ progress. Families were also asked to fill out a pre-conference form with information about their child to facilitate dialogue with school staff. This change to the structure of parent-teacher conferences supported a stronger sense of teamwork and trust between school staff and families.

Beresford was intentional about reaching out to and including traditionally marginalized families in family engagement events at the school. For example, many Beresford families live in the North Central neighborhood, a community that is across town from the school. Recognizing that transportation might be a challenge for some families, Beresford provided a bus for families from North Central to attend Back to School night. In 2018, 25 families took the bus, compared to 11 families in 2017. The school’s efforts to welcome families onto its campus have had a tangible impact. In 2018, 64% of families attended Back to School night, up from 58% in 2017.

Beresford also encouraged families to reach out to other families to increase participation in family engagement events, especially within the Spanish-speaking community at the school. For example, some Beresford families led phone trees in Spanish to spread word about upcoming events. Others encouraged families living in the same vicinity to meet up and walk to events together.
Intentionally linking family engagement to learning goals

After reviewing their school’s data at the 2017-18 Family Engagement Learning Institute, the Beresford family engagement team established the goal of increasing reading performance for 3rd to 5th graders by 10% in one year as measured by the Galileo Benchmark Assessment, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and Fountas & Pinnell. Over the course of the year, the school tracked the progress that students made towards this goal, including specific subgroups of students. Beresford’s principal, Amy Snow, worked with her teachers to use this data to create reading level targets for each child. The data was also shared with families and provided a basis for honest and transparent conversation between families and the school. In 2018-19, Beresford plans to track exactly which families are attending their family engagement events, so they can focus outreach efforts on parents of families who are not reading at grade level and those who need more support.

To support reading at home, Beresford implemented school-wide reading logs and incentivized reading by rewarding the classrooms with the highest participation. The school also tied all classroom celebrations to literacy. School staff taught families strategies to encourage their children to read at home, and how to use guiding questions (“B.E.A.R. Questions”) to promote active readers, have children talk about books, and improve reading comprehension.

“I learned that reading is not supposed to be a punishment or to force your kid to read. The principal says [reading] has to be a reward [and] something [that is] fun for the kids to do.”

Parent - Beresford Elementary School
Beresford included a link to reading in ongoing activities such as Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC) meetings, and ongoing events such as Literacy Week and Diversity Celebration. For example, at a PTA-sponsored Literacy Night, the school principal, Amy Snow, trained families on how to use the B.E.A.R. Questions. She also showed a video of a teacher using those questions while reading with a student.

“This was an event where everyone was learning something together, and I think that was really impactful for a lot of parents.”

Jenn Holthaus, PTA Board Member

Beresford has made progress towards their reading goals. In the 2017-18 school year, the reading performance of all 3rd to 5th graders increased by an average of 7%, which was slightly under the goal of 10% that they set at the beginning of the school year. However, some subgroups of students, such as Hispanic/Latino students, did achieve at least 10% growth in reading performance.
Key takeaways from the evaluation

Families care first and foremost about their children’s learning and what is happening in their children’s classrooms and schools. If districts and schools want deep and meaningful family engagement, they should prioritize engagement of families at the classroom and school level on issues that they care deeply about, such as their children’s learning outcomes. This insight suggests that districts and schools should first focus on building a strong foundation for family engagement, with equity as a priority.

- Schools should build and strengthen relationships between families and school staff and with other families. Schools should be intentional about outreach to traditionally marginalized families in their communities, and design family engagement events and activities around their interests and needs.

- Schools should use family engagement opportunities to help families support their children’s learning at home. This will have a direct impact on their children’s learning outcomes, which families care deeply about.

- Districts should invest in the systems, resources, and infrastructure to support high-quality family engagement in schools.

Once a strong foundation for family engagement is built, districts and schools can consider additional ways to deepen the level of engagement.

- Districts and schools can provide more opportunities for family leadership and participation at the district-level and school-level.

- Districts should evaluate the effectiveness of their ongoing district-level family engagement events and meetings, and consider if a more decentralized approach where most of the engagement takes place via the district’s schools - which families have a closer connection to - would be more effective.

More engaged families lead to more successful students. We hope that the lessons, best practices, and bright spots presented in this report provide inspiration and guidance to districts and schools that want to transform the way they work with families for the better.