

# Family Partnerships

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# Family Partnerships

## Overview

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The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Office of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP) define **family engagement** as

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*a collaborative relationship between families, educators, providers, and partners to support and improve the learning, development, and health of every learner*

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In 2020, the MDE reviewed the research, focus group data, stakeholder survey data, federal and state laws and regulations, and MDE policies to create MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework. Research reveals that family engagement is fostered through a deliberate process embraced throughout programs or school buildings. Effective family engagement systems, policies, and practices are mindful of diverse school communities rich in language, culture, and school experiences and responsive to student and family needs (Henderson et al., 2007).

Family engagement expands on traditional family involvement by recognizing broader notions of family and a wider set of behaviors related to student learning and development, both in and out of school (Carreon et al., 2005; Lopez et al., 2001). As such, family engagement goes beyond family involvement strategies such as checking homework, attending open houses, parent-teacher meetings, and strong partnerships between family members and educators. Family includes:

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*“A group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family.” (US Census Bureau, 2021).*

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Research suggests that, in addition to parents, family members are critically important in improving their child's outcomes and creating more significant equity in educational systems. Research shows that family members' experiences, culture, discipline, and understandings of their children influence outcomes for children from birth through age 20 (Bang et al., 2014; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ishimaru et al., 2015; Wang & Huguley, 2012; Warren et al., 2009). This research informed MDE's definition of family used throughout this framework.

Michigan's Family Engagement Framework supports the MDE, MiLEAP, ISDs, school and center buildings, community partners, and families in developing families as primary partners in their child's learning.

## Family Engagement/Partnership Principles

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District processes (e.g., Communication Plan, Process to Address Implementation Challenges) should be referenced and linked within school-level processes to support use. All school-level teams (e.g. School-Leadership Teams, Grade-Level Teams, and Multi-disciplinary Teams) can leverage the same teaming tools and resources at the school level to support using MTSS to enact the tiered delivery system.

### **Principle 1- Relationships are the Cornerstone of Family Engagement**

Relationships of trust and respect between home, school, and community create the conditions for family engagement to flourish, promoting improved outcomes for all learners (Patrikakou et al.; H. J., 2005). Efforts to engage families and community members must focus on developing trust, which in turn helps partners view one another as equal partners and create the conditions for respectful relationships and partnerships (Henderson & Mann, 2010). Developing trusting relationships requires two-way engagement to discuss and understand social norms and cultural capacities that can inform social institutions and families.

Research demonstrates the role trust plays in families' ability to advocate for their students, as it is essential for families to feel comfortable interacting with school staff. To foster strong relationships with families, schools can look at families through a strength-based lens (Caspé et al., 2011). By working to capitalize on the strengths of families, schools can build the capacity of families to effectively support their child's education at home and in the community. Taking steps to establish these relationships and foster family engagement is critically important, as research has shown that levels of family engagement are strongly predictive of students' long-term academic success (Mapp & Bergman).

To foster strong relationships, schools and community-based organizations should consider employing specific strategies to address barriers faced by family members. Families participating in focus groups, research, and other state family engagement frameworks reveal that the following strategies can work across all age groups to address specific barriers.

The most significant barriers identified in existing research and through focus groups of families throughout the state of Michigan are:

Table 1. Strategies to Support Strong Relationships Can Address Barriers to Family Engagement

Example Strategies	Barriers to Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Virtual connections (through phone calls, emails, texts, etc.)</li> <li>● Alternative scheduling of meetings between providers/schools and family members</li> <li>● Innovative use of technology (such as Apps)</li> <li>● Home visits</li> <li>● Community events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of time, difficulty scheduling</li> <li>● Families' work schedules</li> <li>● Lack of transportation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family ambassadors</li> <li>● Translation services</li> <li>● Connections to community-based language and literacy resources</li> <li>● Training of school staff in cultural, linguistic, and racial competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Differences in language/literacy and culture between families and schools</li> <li>● Cultural differences between families and schools</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Policies that support the engagement of extended family members and guardians</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family structures that are not traditional two-parent families</li> </ul>

To facilitate respect between educators and families, professionals must be aware of their verbal and non-verbal skills and their intentional actions to form relationships with families. Building a solid partnership should include:

- Respect for the family's capacity and ability to provide appropriate care
- Sensitivity and responsiveness to the family's strengths and successes
- Observance of the pride and pleasure that the family has in the child (Weatherston & Tableman, 2002. pg. 83-84)

It is often difficult for educators to conceptualize and implement trusting relationships. Zakrzewski (2015) documented that trust relates to psychological safety and looks and feels like:

- Speaking freely without retribution or other consequences
- Fostering high trust levels among families and schools, which leads to improvements in math and reading achievement (Sheldon & Jung, 2015)

To support trusting relationships, it is important to establish policies and procedures to promote family engagement.

- Have adequate and welcoming space to engage families
- Help support families and their basic needs
- Connect families to each other, to the program/support staff, and to other community institutions
- Be intentional about hiring all staff and training them to promote effective staff-family interactions

**Principle 2- Families are Engaged and Supported Partners in their Child’s Education**

Authentic family engagement recognizes that all families, regardless of income, education, or cultural background, are involved in their children’s learning and want them to do well. Support for families should be offered along a continuum that reflects the importance of meeting families where they are and supporting their engagement based on their child’s needs (Epstein, 2010).

Partnering with families in their child’s education includes establishing a shared awareness of the strengths and challenges families face. It also acknowledges the importance of promoting parenting skills and establishing a shared understanding of best practices in fostering child and adolescent development. Promoting families as partners in their child’s growth, development, and learning requires the targeting of supports, as these differ for children from early childhood through high school and beyond. Programs and schools partner with families by providing adequate resources and funding for activities, training, and staffing to engage with families (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Table 2. Strategies to Ensure Families are Engaged and Supported: Partners Can Address Barriers to Family Engagement

Example Strategies	Barriers to Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Parent leadership classes, adult learning activities, and parenting classes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of shared understanding of best practices in supporting children from birth through transition out of high school</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family ambassadors</li> <li>● Translation services</li> <li>● Training of school staff in cultural, linguistic, and racial competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Differences in language/literacy and culture between families and schools</li> <li>● Cultural differences between families and schools</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family involvement in major decisions, including parent-initiated projects</li> <li>● Parent organizations inform decisions are engaged in decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● School supports and educational opportunities are not targeted to the needs of all learners</li> </ul>

Building a strong partnership should include:

- Understanding the challenges and needs that make supporting young children difficult
- Non-judgmental responses to the family's vulnerabilities, needs, and culture
- Nurturing of the family relationship (Weatherston & Tableman, 2002. pg. 83-84)

Zakrzewski (2015) documented that establishing engaged and supportive partnerships requires:

- Being open and honest when communicating
- Offering the opportunity to be involved collectively in decision-making
- Building agency and community within the school environment
- Focusing family engagement strategies on the message and using observations to discuss concerns or gather information about home life
- Building on the student's strengths relative to other students in the class
- Establishing trust broadly encompasses the ability to forge positive social relationships with families (Zakrzewski, 2015)

Focus groups conducted with families across eight regions in Michigan in early 2018 revealed that families across the continuum reported a need for nurturing relationships and non-judgmental responses to families' vulnerabilities and would like more information about the single trusted community organizations that can support their children (rather than navigating the dozens of organizations on their own).

### **Principle 3- Family Engagement Efforts are Purposeful, Intentional, and Clearly Identify Learner Outcomes**

School improvement research demonstrates the importance of focusing family engagement on specific outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010). Authentic family engagement activities are designed so families can support and monitor their children's education and behavioral goals through partnerships with schools and community-based agencies.

High-quality family engagement is linked to learning outcomes (Mapp, & Kuttner, 2013). Family engagement is strongly linked to higher levels of academic achievement, increased attendance, more positive attitudes toward school, and higher graduation rates (Henderson, & Mapp, 2002).

A meta-analysis of over 28 studies investigating the impact of family engagement has found a significant and large association between family engagement and the academic achievement of students from early childhood through secondary school (Jeynes, 2016). Family engagement activities that support high expectations for learners and help learners make real-world connections are the strongest predictors of achievement (Jeynes, 2005).

Table 3. Strategies to Ensure Engagement is Purposeful, Intentional, and Linked to Outcomes Can Address Barriers

Example Strategies	Barriers to Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Families engage in the process of assessing the academic progress of children and youth</li> <li>● Families are asked for input regarding children’s learning and progress and are given information through a variety of means</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of shared understanding of children’s academic progress</li> <li>● Lack of awareness of how to best support learning along the continuum</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family members are given resources to support children and youth’s ongoing and intentional learning</li> <li>● Liaisons check in with parents about their learning at home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of consistency in support to focus children’s growth and development</li> </ul>

Jeynes (2016) reported that specific types of family engagement yield improved student academic achievement:

- Family engagement that considers parental style
- Home-school communication is paramount; family engagement needs to target communication strategies to family needs
- Family engagement is designed to support parental expectations, participation in educational opportunities as well as engagement in supporting out-of-school time learning

Sanabria-Hernandez, (2018) reports that the following are important for all learners to achieve improved academic outcomes:

- Articulate high expectations: Help families be aware of the school or program’s expectations for achievement, learning goals, curriculum, and strategies for success for every child
- Celebrate achievements: Share the accomplishments of learners and students using a variety of communication strategies

Focus group participants reported that families feel a need to connect to useful resources and would like the opportunity to support their children’s learning and development.

**Principle 4- Family Engagement Efforts are Targeted to Address all Learners so All Families Are Successful**

Studies have demonstrated the importance of targeting strategies to reduce the achievement gap among white, middle-class, low-income, and students of color. (Henderson, & Mann, 2002). Moreover, the 2015 federal ESSA law and associated regulations require family engagement to address the needs of all families, including those with disabilities, limited English proficiency, and migrant children. Targeted services are responsive to differences in race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, education, income, family configuration, geographic location, ability, and

other characteristics that contribute to human uniqueness (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Research supports the value of family engagement as a predictor of academic achievement and the need to design interventions that target parenting practices for the highest-risk students. Family management skills have an influence on the developmental patterns underlying student behaviors (Fosco et al., 2012).

Family factors greatly influence family engagement in the home, school, and community. More educated families tend to be more involved in a child's life overall. Yet, additional factors can negatively affect family engagement, such as poverty, language minority status, disabilities, family structure, and process factors (Hindman et al., 2012). Many children with specific demographic characteristics may enter kindergarten behind in school readiness skills. Learning gains required for children from high-risk homes to be ready for school are often not recognized (Landry et al., 2017). While risk factors can negatively affect school readiness outcomes, a variety of interventions implemented before elementary school and within the first years of school can potentially mitigate these obstacles.

Schools in the United States continue to increase in diversity rapidly, yet the teaching force remains mostly white, female, and middle class (Evans, 2011). This leads to a socio-cultural disconnect between teachers, students, and families. Families with language minority status often demonstrate a lower level of family engagement due to the difficulty of engaging with a school or community structure that cannot communicate with the family. Families from non-dominant communities often feel unwelcome, powerless, and marginalized within their child's school (Ishmaru et al., 2016). Some individuals within the school can serve as "cultural brokers" to play a role in bridging the racial, cultural, linguistic, and power divides between schools and families. Cultural brokers can create safe spaces to help families understand the school culture, educate family members about improving their child's achievement, connect families to institutional resources, and advocate for change (Ishmaru et al., 2016).

Children with social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties not adequately supported by classroom or school structures often develop negative relationships with teachers and school staff, receiving less instruction and more criticism in the classroom (Herman & Reinke, 2017). Those children are often rejected by their teachers and classmates throughout elementary school and fail to develop school and social skills essential for success. Further, teachers of students with severe behavior and academic problems often develop negative perceptions of the students and their families (Stormont et al., 2013). By ninth grade, having just one suspension doubles the chance that a student will drop out of school, suggesting the need for services to address problem behavior as early as elementary school (Smolkowski et al., 2017).

Table 4. Family Engagement Targeted to All Students is Most Effective

Example Strategies	Barriers to Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family ambassadors</li> <li>● Translation services</li> <li>● Connections to community-based language and literacy resources</li> <li>● Training of school staff in cultural, linguistic, and racial competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Differences in language/literacy and culture between families and schools</li> <li>● Cultural differences between families and schools</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● School/educator training to understand issues of equity and family circumstances</li> <li>● Connections to community-based resources, including mental health, employment, and comprehensive services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Poverty and lack of resources of families and their children</li> <li>● Family stress, crises, and lack of energy to engage</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Policies that support the engagement of extended family members and guardians</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family structures that are not traditional two-parent families</li> </ul>

To develop individual family interest and engagement, the following strategies are successful (Sanabria-Hernandez, 2018):

- Communicate frequently:
  - Provide chances to communicate in person, through printed materials, or online.
  - Try to make frequent contact with families.
  - Ask families whether the shared information is useful and how it could be improved.
- Encourage family networking:
  - Create a family contact list, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and other important school/program staff.

To develop individual family interest and engagement, the following strategies have been found to be successful (Sanabria-Hernandez, 2018):

- Make the most of pick-up and drop-off activities:
  - Greet families with enthusiasm and acknowledge their arrival.
- Share one or two details:
  - Add some specific information about the child's progress.

Focus group participants reported several issues related to targeting family engagement to all parents. As the research suggests, family members reported decreased family partnerships after their child exited kindergarten, while families still desired to partner with their child's school. Similarly, they reported that they would appreciate opportunities for greater peer engagement to meet their children's educational needs. Finally, greater connection to community resources, especially for families of children with special education needs, English language learners, and

families living in rural areas was reported. All focus groups directly or indirectly expressed a need for:

- Effective communication between schools and families
- Ensuring strong family partnerships during transitions
- Cultural competency and awareness among school staff

## **Principle 5- Positive Learning Environments Contribute to Family Engagement and Learning**

A safe, secure, and healthy school environment supports learners and families by fostering a positive school climate and culture and meeting families where they are most comfortable (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Positive learning environments are welcoming, safe, and secure, actively taking steps to prevent bullying, drug use, and violence while supporting healthy discussions with learners and their families to address all issues of concern.

Well-designed environments:

- Decrease challenging behavior
- Facilitate appropriate social interactions among children
- Provide structure and predictability
- Are valued by families and enhance home learning activities (Boudreau, 2020)

Climate and culture play a significant role in teacher morale, student behavior, and the relationships built between school and the family community. The communities that public schools serve have become increasingly diverse, and more minority students will be concentrated in public schools in more segregated residential areas of the United States. According to research conducted by the National School Climate Council (2007), "positive school climate reduces dropouts and fosters youth development and academic achievement, as well as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to be responsible and productive members of society," (p. 2).

The school climate is the "attitude of an organization" (Gruenart, 2008, p. 56). If the climate in a school environment is unappealing for school staff, families that engage with that school have likely felt it. A school's culture represents its unwritten rules, beliefs, and expectations that guide the climate of the program or school. Consequently, if low expectations represent the culture at a school, families will also experience the "norm" of lowered expectations through their students' engagement with school staff and administration.

Schools that invest in a positive, proactive development of climate and culture positively influence learner outcomes (Gruenart, 2008). When families feel connected with the climate and culture of their child's school, they will more willingly engage, embrace, participate, and trust in their school and its environment for their children. MacNeil, Pratter, and Busch (2009) suggest that "culture is complex because it has a unique and idiosyncratic way of working" (p.74). When an organization clearly understands its purpose, why it exists, what it must do, and who it should serve, the culture will ensure that things work well" (MacNeil et al., 2009, p. 74).

Schools succeed in establishing positive, trusting relationships when considering the community context in which relationships exist. According to McAlister (2013), schools must strongly consider involving families in critical decisions, partnering with community organizations, and developing teams of family members to increase family and community engagement in their schools. Consistently soliciting family participation builds an interconnectedness between school and family and gives families a sense of agency in their school community. McAlister (2013) strongly advises a reliance on “deliberate and sustained efforts around family and community engagement, supported by capacity building and resources for building a positive foundation of parent and family engagement”(p.37).

Considerations of community context are essential as family engagement is not limited to involvement just for school-age children and takes place beyond school buildings (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall & Gordon, 2009, p. 15). Targeting the diversity of activities, times, and venues for family and community engagement predicts successful relationships with families and their students. Schools that intentionally acknowledge the context in which they are operating and respect and honor cultural differences in their districts have a more realistic view and are more successful at engaging families and students.

Table 5. Family Engagement that Accounts for the Environment Can Address Barriers

Example Strategies	Barriers to Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Open-houses</li> <li>● Opportunities for family members to share their expertise in the classrooms</li> <li>● Community café’s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Parent perception that schools are not welcoming</li> <li>● Lack of understanding of family and educator assets</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Councils, advisory groups, and training opportunities that engage both families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Perception that the environment is not understanding of family and educator assets</li> </ul>

Families participating in Michigan’s statewide focus groups indicated the importance of feeling needed and wanted within the school environment. Providing a purpose of support for families develops trusting relationships and helps families see their role as being integral in their child’s learning and success (Kelty, & Wakabayashi, 2020). Engaging families in the decision-making process from enrollment fosters greater and stronger engagement. According to one family member in the focus group, “It makes me feel important when I can be a part of making our schools better.”

Michigan’s focus group study found that families felt that knowing they served a purpose was another key driver to their engagement (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Research on families as consumers of early childhood education has found that families are motivated to engage and invest based on societal and personal levels. Families want their children to be capable, confident, and confident both socially and educationally, and will make decisions about their children based on how well a program fits their needs in these areas.

## Family Partnerships within the Tiered Delivery System

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Engaging families in MTSS provides opportunities for families to partner in a way that is aligned to differentiated family and learner needs. The MTSS approach does not assign families to tiers, but provides an opportunity for schools to categorize activities, services, and family supports into tiers, which are made flexibly available to families and staff. Three tiers, including universal, targeted, and intensive, provide a systemic and targeted approach for families to partner with their child's school. Tiers are intended to be layered with intensification of supports matched to learner needs.

- Tier 1 is universal, meeting the needs of all learners and their families.
- Tier 2 is targeted to provide resources and activities for families with similar needs for additional support or engagement.
- Tier 3 supports are available for very few families to provide intensive support and assistance for children with individualized needs.

### **Tier 1/Universal**

Key elements:

- Meets the needs of 80% or more of families
- Linked to whole-child tenets
- School and program-wide supports accessible to all families (examples: family-teacher conferences, whole-school family surveys)
- Helps establish a school climate and culturally inclusive of family partnerships

Examples:

- Family handbook
- Materials outlining graduation requirements
- School goals and objectives, inclusive of the family voice
- Assessment data shared with families
- In-person meetings and conferences early in the school year
- Demonstrated commitment to partnering with families

### **Tier 2/Targeted**

Key elements:

- Programs and strategies for groups of families with similar needs or interests for additional, deeper partnerships
- Foster family knowledge development

Examples:

- Follow-up phone calls to families
- Grade-level specific programs
- Family focus groups (gathering family feedback on School Improvement Plans or the Yearly Calendar)
- Develop and share guides, webinars, and/or online learning modules for families
- Increased levels of communication around progress and data sharing

## Tier 3/Intensive

Key elements:

- Focused on very few families with individual needs
- Intensive supports

Examples:

- Weekly communication around progress and data sharing
- Behavior charts, both at school and at home
- Monthly check-in conference between families and schools
- Direct behavior ratings

## Resources

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Michigan Department of Education. (2020). MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework. Retrieved from: [https://www.michigan.gov/mileap/-/media/Project/Websites/mileap/Documents/Early-Childhood-Education/Family-Engagement/mifamily\\_family\\_engagement\\_framework.pdf?rev=ba9e9f456e094f0c896d738b253e6f69](https://www.michigan.gov/mileap/-/media/Project/Websites/mileap/Documents/Early-Childhood-Education/Family-Engagement/mifamily_family_engagement_framework.pdf?rev=ba9e9f456e094f0c896d738b253e6f69)

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