

NEWS

What the research says about the best way to engage parents

Rather than just talking at parents — and asking them for money — research shows being welcoming, responsive and listening can create true learning partnerships

by CARALEE ADAMS

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LOVELAND, Colo. — Soft instrumental music played in the background as families walked into the gym at Laurene Edmondson Elementary School around 5:30 in the evening. Dani Roquett, a school psychologist, held four colors of Post-It notes as she greeted kindergartener Ellison Hutt: “Hey, love. Do you remember what the zones are?”

Each morning, kids at Edmondson pick a color for the “zone” they’re in that day — green for happy, blue for sad, red for mad, and yellow for scared. This evening, the children showed their parents the routine. Ellison and her dad picked green; Ellison’s mom took yellow, signaling to her daughter it was okay to be a little nervous at the big event.

Bree Roundy, the school’s social-emotional learning paraprofessional and PTA president, quieted the packed room of families eating pizza together with two words at the microphone: “Waterfall, waterfall.” The children responded: “Shhhhh.”

The evening event was not the classic school fundraiser or social. No one from the PTA begged for donations; the kids didn’t dance across



School Psychologist Dani Roquett greets Anne and James Hutt with their daughters, Ellison, 5, and Quinn, 10 months, at the “Zone Check-In” at the GET Together family educational event in January. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

The Washington Post

This story also appeared in [The Washington Post](#)

the stage in costumes. The goal was to connect with busy families in a more meaningful way: showing parents what's happening in the classroom and, critically, how they can support learning at home.

The school calls the events, held twice a year, GET Togethers — Guaranteed Education Teams. The name captures Edmondson's intention to elevate parents as team members in their child's education. In keeping with that spirit, the evenings are designed to be far more interactive than a typical curriculum night, in which teachers run through what they'll be teaching that year. Last fall, the students themselves explained new homework policies. At another event, teachers taught parents math games to play with their children. In January, adults could attend two 30-minute workshops on everything from how to set limits to understanding trauma — topics the parents had suggested themselves.

“I have never met a parent who didn't care about their children or value education — but they may not show it in ways that white, middle-class people would expect.”

Investing time and creativity in getting parents involved often pays off. Out-of-school factors weigh heavily on student success, studies show, and research indicates family engagement can lead to higher grades and test scores, improved attendance and better behavior.

challenging to connect with families.

And yet, surveys suggest most teachers find it

Many schools rely on counting noses at traditional Back-to-School nights or parent-teacher conferences to gauge whether parents are engaged in their children's learning. At schools where parents don't show up for PTA meetings or volunteer to chaperone the school field trip, it can be a blame game: Teachers think parents don't care and families say they don't feel welcome or valued.

But at Edmondson, the focus on building relationships is grounded in research showing that trusting relationships with families can improve learning outcomes. The 220-student school extends personal invitations to events, solicits parent input, communicates in Spanish and works to get families basic resources, including groceries, when they need it. In some cases, teachers and school staff even visit families at home, a practice that's gaining traction in schools, such as Edmondson, that serve vulnerable populations.

“I have never met a parent who didn't care about their children or value education — but they may not show it in ways that white, middle-class people would expect,” said Anne Henderson, a senior consultant for the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, based in Alexandria, Virginia.

One study of 71 high-poverty schools found that when teachers were active in outreach to families, students' reading and math scores improved at a 50 percent faster rate in reading and a 40 percent faster rate for math.

What worked? Meeting every family face to face, sending materials home for parents to use to help their kids, and staying in regular touch with families on kids' progress.

Edmondson's strategies are consistent with the latest data: A **new study** from the Washington, D.C.-based Center for American Progress calls for more frequent and consistent communication between schools and home. It suggests policymakers take a community-informed approach and help schools conduct parent surveys, provide teacher training and hire technology experts to increase the quality and quantity of school-parent communications.

"The more we can educate parents and are all speaking the same language, the more powerful it is going to be for kids and easier to be moving toward the same goals," said Trish Malik, Edmondson's principal.

Initially, Malik relied on traditional meetings to get

Reading scores improved at a 50 percent faster rate, and math scores improved at a 40 percent faster rate when teachers were active in outreach to families, according to one study.

"I felt very fraudulent saying I was going to get input from my parents when only one or two people showed up and they, honestly, didn't represent the majority of my population," she said.

At the same time, the school population was changing. An artsy town located about one hour north of Denver, Loveland has more than nearly doubled in size in the past 30 years, from just over 37,000 in 1990 to a



Second grade teachers Amy Hart (center) and Alina Turner (right), with her dog, Mello, meet with Karen Shutt (left), instructional coach for a planning meeting at Edmondson Elementary. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

parent feedback. She convened a "school accountability committee" an hour before PTA meetings to make attendance convenient, but turnout was low. Malik said it felt like she was presenting information for a stamp of approval rather than having a dialogue.

population of about 77,000 — stretching the resources of the city’s schools. By 2016, almost 70 percent of Edmondson’s students received a free or reduced-price lunch and came from low-income families; the school was eligible to receive Title 1 funds from the federal government. A decade ago, less than a third of the school’s students came from low-income families.

Malik brainstormed with her team about a more creative way to reach families. One that centered on listening.

Malik retooled her approach into an evening event designed to attract families, who were offered both pizza pie and dessert pie, and the promise of childcare in exchange for their ideas. Nearly 100 people attended the first gathering in the spring of 2016, attendance that has remained steady every year since.

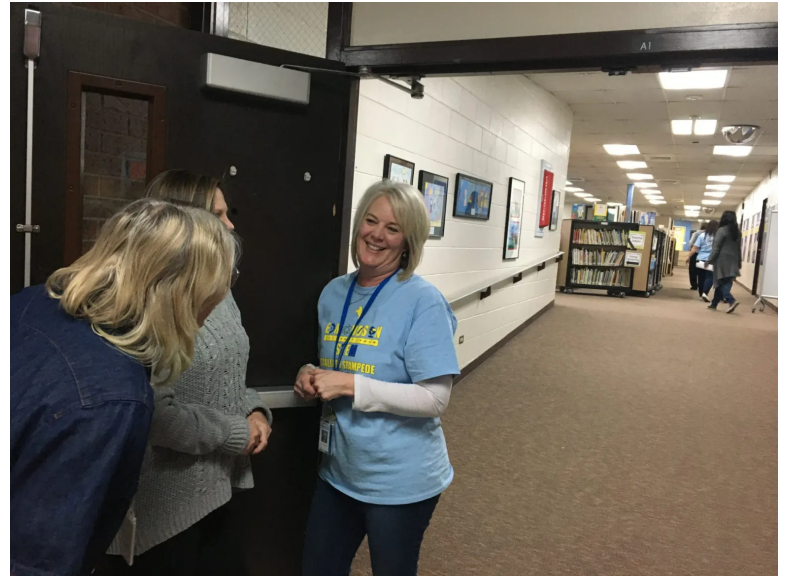
The idea for the GET Togethers emerged from parents’ suggestions at that inaugural meeting. They wanted meetings to be more interactive, and to equip them to help their children with academics. But Malik also still holds one meeting a year to get feedback. And she still serves pie as adults and kids rotate to nine stations where staff members write down the community’s ideas on large pieces of chart paper. Afterwards parents review the data with school leaders and come up with solutions.

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For instance, feedback from the annual meeting generated changes in traffic patterns for drop-off and pick-up and triggered the addition of more after-school programs.

To boost turnout for all evening events, Malik covers each teacher’s class so they can personally invite parents by phone. And surveys on tablets are distributed immediately after every program to collect data from families on how to improve the events.

The whole staff has embraced the effort to be more hospitable. The school’s office manager, April Hoyland, says a cheerful hello to everyone who walks through the front door. “One of my goals is to learn every



Edmondson Elementary Principal Trish Malik, who has been at the school since 2012, visits with Cheryl Cook and Michelle Myers, who work on family and community partnerships at the Thompson School District, before a January family event. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

student’s name and every parent’s name,” said Hoyland, who last year turned her desk to face the entryway to be more welcoming.

Colorado has been a leader in family engagement policy and provides support to districts to promote evidence-based practices. In 2009, the state passed legislation creating a State Advisory Council for Parent Involvement in Education, which meets quarterly to share best practices. Last year, it established an Office of Family, School and Community Partnerships in its education department, led by Darcy Hutchins, who said having a dedicated role at the state level and legislation gives the issue traction. Hutchins has been working on this issue with the state since 2013.

Each month, Hutchins holds “coffee chats” around the state to swap family engagement ideas with district leaders who are mandated to do this work by both federal and state regulations. At its annual retreat in January, the office rolled out four essential elements to guide programs: create an inclusive culture, build trusting relationships, design capacity-building opportunities and dedicate necessary resources. Hutchins relied on the [PTA’s National Standards for Family Engagement](#), along with data from research at [Harvard University](#) and [Johns Hopkins University](#).

“If a district is doing a family night or a carnival, I say that’s a great starting point,” said Hutchins. “I encourage them to look at the overall school population. Are you getting the two-parent white family or are you getting everybody? When we say every, we mean every.”

Several [studies](#) demonstrate the positive link between family engagement and student achievement. An [analysis](#) of 100 public schools in Chicago that had strong parental involvement found that students were **four times** more likely to improve in reading and 10 times more likely to improve in math than at schools in which ties to community were weak.



Allan Wilger, a regular parent volunteer at Edmondson Elementary, helps (left to right) fifth graders Gabe Wooten and Aresa Rodriguez, and third grader Tyler Goyne, in the after-school LEGO Robotics Club. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

Some school districts are completely flipping the script in their parent engagement efforts. Teachers and school staff are going into homes to meet parents, rather than expecting parents to take time away from family and work to visit the school. Buoyed by promising research, the Flamboyan Foundation, based in Washington, D.C., partnered with teams in 10 cities to expand family engagement strategies, including home visits.* A Johns Hopkins [study](#) found students in the families who received home visits had 24 percent fewer absences and were more likely to read at or above grade level than students from similar families who did not receive visits.

“In these locales, we are hearing similar themes of broken trust,” said Robert Crosby, managing

“The idea is changing the way we have done family engagement from doing to families — to doing with families.”

Elsewhere in the country, researchers have found promise in [Academic Parent-Teacher Teams](#), a model developed in 2009 by then-doctoral candidate Maria Paredes, which is now used by educators in 26 states. Teachers hold three classroom meetings with all parents in the class to explain academic goals, share individual data about children’s performance and suggest home activities. The approach also includes collaborative 30-minute conference between a teacher, a student and his or her family each year. Evidence shows it is effective in promoting a sense of community, decreasing discipline problems and encouraging parent-teacher communication.



Office Manager April Hoyland (left) and Michelle Ferrin, a health tech at Edmondson Elementary, greet families arriving at the school for a January evening GET (Guaranteed Education Teams) Together for a series of socio-emotional learning workshops geared to help parents be supportive of their children in school. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

director of program design at the Flamboyan Foundation. “Many see home visits are a powerful way to start this process ... to rebuild trust.”

Related: Home visiting in high school: Trying an intervention for toddlers on teenagers



Nicole Taggart, a parent volunteer at Edmondson Elementary, helps second graders Maci Smith (left) and Sophia Smith in the classroom. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

“It’s an opportunity to have more focused time with the teacher on academic progress and get ideas. The conversation gets interesting because all the parents pitch in with questions,” said Paredes, now a senior engagement manager at WestEd, a nonprofit education research agency based in San Francisco. “It’s a more interactive approach ... The idea is changing the way we have done family engagement from doing to families — to doing with families. We want to learn from one another.”

L

ast year, Edmondson began to offer home visits to all kindergarten families. About half of the families agreed to the 30-minute informal chats before the school year started: Teachers and administrators hope that more participate this year. Kindergarten teacher Erik Hagan said the meetings were invaluable to establish rapport and get a glimpse into his students’ world.

“Some parents can be intimidated by school and by us going to their home first and visiting with them, I feel it’s more comfortable,” Hagan said.

Throughout the year, teachers are encouraged to keep in touch with families. Malik makes sure it happens by designating time in staff meetings to write postcards home with positive news about individual students. Once those relationships are established, educators said it’s easier for teachers and parents to tackle challenges that may arise

Tiffany Rodriguez and her husband are raising four children, along with three nieces and nephews, ages 3 to 16. She doesn’t hesitate to text or call to alert the school before drop-off if her nephew is having a rough morning. “They are always on top of it, getting back to me if he still has a bad day, texting me, calling me — or letting him call me,” she said. “They are respectful and kind and they love the kids.”

Related: [This program is proven to help moms and babies—so why aren’t we investing in it more?](#)

Maria Carsi, another Edmondson parent, said she learned how to better communicate with her four children — and especially manage bedtime struggles — in parenting classes sponsored by the school district and promoted by family engagement liaisons at Edmondson. The six-week session, conducted in Spanish, her



Maria Carsi, a mother with three children attending Edmondson Elementary, meets with Michelle Myers, family outreach liaison for the Thompson School District, who often provides translation services at events for Carsi and other Spanish-speaking parents. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

primary language, was held at the Loveland Public Library. As a bonus, the location prompted her to get library cards for the family.

The school has also partnered with community groups to offer more basic services to its families. Crossroads Church, located less than two miles from Edmondson, provides food donations and volunteers for events, and the nonprofit organization, KidsPak delivers weekend grocery bags to families in need.

Edmondson's innovative approaches have been **recognized** by the State Advisory Council for Parent Involvement in Education. School district leaders said other schools in Loveland are looking

“It’s not just sit-and-get activities, where information is just sent to them. Parents are actively engaging in learning how to partner and what kids are doing.”

Robin Keen, a first grade teacher who has lived in the Edmondson neighborhood for years, said her role has changed.

“I’m more active in their family’s lives,” said Keen, who starts the day serving breakfast in her classroom through the school’s universal free school breakfast program. “I feel like we are meeting their basic needs more than me just meeting them academically.”

Since trying these new approaches to connect with families at Edmondson, informal parent perceptions surveys show the school is on the right track. While there have been no big boosts in test scores, growth rates in student achievement have increased slightly in recent years and the school has begun to meet state performance measures.



Tom Carrigan, volunteer chairman of the nonprofit KidsPak, addresses community members gathered to fill weekend grocery bags of food to be distributed to families at 46 schools in the Thompson School District. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.

to replicate its engagement model.

“It’s not just sit-and-get activities, where information is just sent to them. Parents are actively engaging in learning how to partner and what kids are doing. It’s an example of great two-way communication,” said Superintendent Marc Schaffer.

Robin Campbell, the mother of a fifth grader at Edmondson, moved from California to Loveland because of its small-town community vibe. She and her husband regularly volunteer and attend Edmondson's evening events, because the message is clear that parents are welcome. "It's always, 'How we can help you at home and how you at home can help us at school?'" Campbell said. "It's a collaboration."

This story about family engagement was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the Hechinger newsletter.

**Clarification: This story has been updated to reflect the fact that Flamboyan has now ended its partnerships with the teams in 10 cities.*

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Jennifer Guthals (left), an employee of the Thompson School District joins community volunteers to help fill weekend grocery bags through the local nonprofit organization, KidsPak, in Loveland, Colorado. Credit: Caralee Adams for The Hechinger Report.