

# Element 6: Family and community engagement

When families are engaged in the process of addressing school climate, they are more likely to participate in keeping it safe. Similarly, the community surrounding the school has a vested interest in the school being safe. Family and community engagement can be extremely difficult, yet incredibly rewarding. Inviting families and communities to participate in discussions might entail making information more digestible; having meetings in the evening or when parents or other family members are free; providing childcare, youth activities, or other supports to reduce the burden of participation on families; carefully listening to concerns and addressing them; and actively applying family and community input to decision making. Family and community engagement does not just mean coming to meetings, attending back-to-school night, or filling out surveys. True engagement means acknowledging the voices, importance, and leadership of families and the community.

## Family and community engagement do's

- **Use multiple forms of communication to make messaging accessible to all.** Make sure to consider the needs of families and communities when communicating. Consider whether families have regular access to the internet, and whether they need materials translated into other languages or assistance to read written materials.
- **Schedule meetings but consider family and community needs.** Often, schools will schedule meetings in the late afternoon or evenings for the convenience of school staff, but such times may be difficult for working parents or other family members. Consider hosting multiple sessions to allow for the greatest participation.
- **Address barriers to participation.** Child care, translation needs, and transportation are among the most common barriers that prevent families from actively engaging with their schools' governance. Helping families overcome these barriers, or using innovative models such as virtual townhalls, can encourage broader participation from the school community.

This tipsheet was supported by Award No. 2015-CK-BX-0016, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.

## About This Series

From 2016 to 2020, a group of public schools and public charter schools in Washington, DC participated in the "Improving School Climate in DC" project (ISC-DC). ISC-DC was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Justice (NIJ) under the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, and aimed to evaluate whether supporting schools through a research-based framework (Safe School Certification; SSC) could improve students' perceptions of school climate and reduce incidents of violence. SSC is not a structured program; rather, the framework consists of eight key elements that underscore a data-based decision-making and program implementation process: leadership, data, buy-in, policy and policy enforcement, student engagement, parent and community engagement, training, and programs. As part of the process, key stakeholders and experts formed an independent Certification Advisory Board (CAB) to assess schools' progress in achieving key milestones for each component, provide feedback, and provide opportunities to obtain grant funding. The CAB had a birds-eye view of what schools were doing and how they found innovative ways to achieve each element, and of the common struggles and pitfalls that schools faced. The CAB also focused on ensuring that schools' efforts were grounded within an equity lens to ensure that all students would benefit. This educator tipsheet is based on the CAB's review of workbooks schools submitted through the process of completing Safe School Certification. It should be noted that these briefs do not necessarily reflect the findings of the more rigorous implementation study conducted by Child Trends, but rather reflect our learning through our review of workbooks.



- **Engage families and communities as partners.** Provide opportunities for families and communities to actively participate in decision making, and not simply learn about steps that schools are taking.
- **Be transparent with families and communities.** Often, schools are reticent to share challenges with families. Without this information, however, families and communities cannot participate in the process of developing solutions.

## Family and community engagement misdirections

- **Don't get discouraged over low family or community engagement.** Engaging families and communities can often be difficult. It is not unusual for schools to have low family and community participation. Even the most successful schools will often get feedback from less than 50 percent of families.
- **Don't forget that families and communities have their own needs above and beyond those of students.** Families are an integral part of the school community. Their voices must be considered as strongly as those of students and other stakeholders.
- **Don't engage families and communities without listening.** Truly engaging families and communities in decision making is not just about giving them a platform. Follow up and provide justification for decisions made.

## Family and community engagement equity reflection questions

Applying an equity lens requires considering power, identity, and justice when making decisions, creating systems, or prioritizing issues. Many schools target families and communities around the school that are already engaged. But engaging those already engaged perpetuates the status quo and can often lead to resentment and assumptions by the school and engaged parents toward those that aren't participating. Taking an equity lens to family engagement means reaching those families that are experiencing inequity and injustice, and are often shut out of the school. It also means recognizing that many families may have their own negative experiences with school. Communicating with marginalized families, asking for their feedback, involving them in decision making, and training them as true partners with the school will support their experience of feeling safe. Questions to ask when engaging families and communities include:

- What families are already engaged? How do those families hold power, authority, and decision-making control in your school?
- How can your school go beyond typical engagement? Has your school surveyed the entire community to think about best communication strategies (email, text, in-person, etc.)?
- How is your school linking family and community engagement to student learning and academic success? How can your school engage families in a way that will support student progress and accountability?
- What are your school staff members' assumptions and biases about parents and community members at the school? How might those ways of thinking influence how staff interact with families?
- How is your school accountable to parents' own experiences in the school, school system, or community when they themselves were young? How might their experience impact how they interact or engage now?

Examples of how schools that participated in the Improving School Climate in DC project approached the Family and Community Engagement Element can be found at: [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SafeSchoolCertificationAppendix\\_ChildTrends\\_October2020.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SafeSchoolCertificationAppendix_ChildTrends_October2020.pdf)