

When you find out that you've been doing it wrong

New research helps family engagement to produce results, become more effective

By **Randy Olson**, Family Engagement Program Specialist

Firsts are hard.

First child. First date. First year of teaching. You think you know what you're doing. You hope things go well. But as the saying goes: You don't know what you don't know.

That's how it's been with family engagement. Up until the 1970s or so, no one gave too much thought to the role of families in schools and there wasn't much research. In the late 70s, Joyce Epstein became one of the pioneers and provided a frame schools and districts could use in building family engagement plans and policies. And that was more or less the beginning of family engagement as we know it.

Since then, however, we've learned a few things--and it turns out that quite a few practices we *thought* were effective aren't.

Out--Measuring family engagement by the number of parents and guardians who show up on campus.

In--Relationships and making family engagement an integral part of the educational system.

"Some of the things we've done for hundreds of years around family-school partnerships have actually turned out to be not the most effective," states Karen Mapp, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and arguably the top family engagement expert in the country.

She goes on to the say in *The 74* interview that it's important to look at context: "Where is the school? What are the backgrounds and the demographics of the children? What are their goals? Those answers help shape the family engagement strategies at a school."

Her other key points in effective family engagement programs are "building relationships of trust and respect," "linking family engagement to learning" and collaborating with families using a dual-capacity framework and an asset-based lens.

In a seminar last year hosted by the San Bernardino County Superintendent of School's Family Engagement department, Mapp



emphasized that family engagement "can't be an add-on, something we take care of after we've taken care of everything else." She went on to state that effective family engagement has to be systemic, an integrated and integral part of improving not only student achievement, but attendance, student wellness and other outcomes.

This new model of family engagement is echoed in the California Department of Education's Self-Reflection Tool for family engagement.

The CDE asks districts to rate themselves on how they're "developing the capacity of staff (i.e. administrators, teachers and classified staff) to build trusting and respectful relationships with families" and how they're "providing professional learning and support to teachers and principals to improve a school's capacity to partner with families," especially around academics.

Other research shows that helping families to have very focused and specific conversations about academics yields substantial gains in academic achievement.

Overall, it's the systematic building of families' social and educational capital that matters--whether families show up on campus or not.

That's the big shift in family engagement in the last 10-15 years, according to Mapp and others.

Mapp's interview, the CDE Self-Evaluation Tool and other family engagement research can be found at bit.ly/FESP2021.

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