



Serving Special Populations: Family Engagement

INFORMATION SHEET

This information sheet examines parent and family engagement related to Title IV, Part A activities by highlighting challenges and sharing considerations and best practices for State coordinators interested in supporting special populations of students and their families.

Introduction

Equity is increasingly discussed across a range of fields, including medicine, housing, the judicial system, and — most relevant to Title IV, Part A (Title IV-A) audiences — education. The Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment program, a subpart of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is designed to increase the capacity of State education agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to support all students in equitably accessing high-quality learning experiences. The statute emphasizes the need to support subgroups of students and families that are underrepresented in or who may have limited access to enriching educational experiences. For the purposes of this resource, these subgroups are referred to as *special populations*.

Definitions of Key Terms

Parent: A legal guardian or other person standing in loco parentis (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child's welfare; Section 8101(38)).

Parent and Family Engagement: The participation of parents and other caregivers in “regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (Section 8101(39)).

Special Populations: Subgroups of students and families that are underrepresented in or that may have limited access to enriching educational experiences (note that these terms are not defined by statute).



Specifically, the Title IV-A statute states that SEAs should support LEAs in providing programs and activities that “offer a well-rounded educational experience to all students...including female students, minority students, English learners, children with disabilities, and low-income students who are often underrepresented” (see Section 4104(b)(A)). This information sheet focuses on parent engagement and involvement, which is supported by statute (see Section 4108(3) and Section 1114(b)(2)). Effective parent

engagement has the potential to support equitable experiences and outcomes for these special populations and their families who face barriers within education. Addressing issues around parent and family engagement is critical to shaping equitable learning environments. To aid SCs in supporting educational agencies, this information sheet describes challenges, shares considerations and best practices, discusses how to support LEA efforts in these areas, and highlights related resources.

Challenges to Parent and Family Engagement

Parents and families generally have intimate and first-hand knowledge about their children's skills, interests, motivators, and challenges. Prioritizing parent and family engagement in education can leverage that expertise and help forge a partnership between families and schools to support student success more effectively. In fact, research shows that parent and family engagement is associated with positive student outcomes, such as school readiness, achievement and educational attainment, and social and emotional development.¹ To this end, states, districts, and schools can strengthen and innovate efforts around more effective and equitable family engagement.

When considering challenges that special populations may encounter as barriers to authentic parent and family engagement, it is important to recognize that each special population, student, and family is unique. SEAs and LEAs should seek to understand the communities, students, and families they serve to have a better understanding of the challenges in their local contexts. As a starting point, three broad categories of challenges are described below. Please note that this list is

not exhaustive and may not fully represent the experiences of individuals.

- **School Climate and Values.** The climate within a school can be seen as unwelcoming, and schools may inadvertently convey to families who are marginalized that they are less valued, heard, and prioritized.
- **Biases and Assumptions.** Staff may hold misconceptions about families, such as families' desire or ability to be involved in their students' education. These biases and assumptions may lead to lower expectations and less effort to engage families, leverage their expertise, or support their children.²
- **Educator Training and Awareness.** Educators may also lack training and awareness, which can lead to unintentionally exclusive policies and practices.³ Such policies and practices can hinder the staff's ability to respond to the realities that may limit engagement of special populations.

These types of challenges can leave students and their families feeling discouraged, inadequate, or unwelcome in schools. The following section shares considerations and best practices for addressing these issues to support children's learning, facilitate better family engagement, and provide a foundation for fostering trusting and equitable family-school partnerships.

Considerations and Best Practices

Strengthening equitable practices centers on strategic planning, removing barriers, and partnering with parents and families. Effectively engaging all parents and families strengthens the home-school partnership and bolsters supports that can help students thrive academically. Best practice strategies to improve parent and family engagement can be summarized in three ways. Schools and districts can (1) include parents and families in

strategic planning, (2) remove school barriers to family engagement, and (3) authentically partner with parents and families. These three strategies are explained in more detail below, and SCs can encourage their LEAs to implement these practices either through providing detailed feedback during application reviews or via training and technical assistance efforts throughout the school year.

Strategy 1: Include Parents and Families in Strategic Planning. School and district leaders can include parents and families in strategic planning in a variety of ways. While crafting strategic plans, educators can ensure there is shared power in decision-making that involves families in conceptualizing, shaping, and executing plans and activities.⁴ Developing roles for parents to serve as leaders or advocates, for example, can foster more authentic engagement.⁵

Education leaders can also provide a structure for assessing current practices, strengths, and needs and can identify programs, frameworks, or strategies that meet the unique needs of the school community. This structure can help educators better understand the demographics of the school and surrounding community to offer and leverage needed supports. It is important to gather data from families on an ongoing basis to understand experiences and perceptions, and to allocate time and resources to support family engagement activities that integrate family engagement and student learning goals. Any data collected from parents and families should be disaggregated by subgroup to understand commonalities and differences.⁶

Plans for educator training and professional development should also be informed by this understanding of students and families.⁷ Training, such as culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches, may be especially helpful, and Title IV-A supports



this use of funds (Section 4108(5)(D)(ii)). Such trainings can also help shift educators' perspectives from viewing students and families from a deficit perspective (i.e., focusing on what is lacking within the home) to a strengths-based view (i.e., focusing on what is present and working and what to build upon).⁸ The statute addresses professional development on engagement and effectively working with parents and families (Section 8101(22)(B), Section 8101(42)(B)(xiv)).

Strategy 2: Remove School Barriers to Family Engagement. Oftentimes, barriers exist that keep families from fully engaging in their students' education. There are several ways schools and districts can remove these barriers. Schools and districts can start by ensuring flexibility for family engagement and outreach. Specifically, educators should consider timing (e.g., hours not traditionally offered for parent and family engagement activities), locations (e.g., within the communities and neighborhoods where families live), approaches (e.g., multiple methods of communication, interactive

meetings/sessions, home visits), and accommodations (e.g., transportation, childcare, meals during special events) for family engagement and outreach events.⁹ To foster more inclusive activities and events, schools and districts can make appropriate accommodations for students, parents, and other family members with disabilities or home languages other than English.¹⁰

Additionally, families often have pressing needs that schools can address by providing support such as mental health resources, technological resources (e.g., laptops, internet), and food security (e.g., meal programs, meals during events, groceries, food pantry pickup). Community partnerships can aid in the provision of wrap-around services to mitigate such barriers to family engagement.¹¹ It is important to note that Title IV-A supports partnerships and coordination with community-based organizations by encouraging SEAs to eliminate barriers to collaboration for LEAs (Section 4104(b)(2)), consulting with these organizations on the contents of LEA applications (Section 4106(c)(1)), and allowing funds to be used for programs that are conducted in partnership with community-based organizations or services (Section 4107(a)(1 & 2), Section 4108(1 & 5(H)(i)).

Strategy 3: Partner With Parents and Families. Communication is vital to developing strong parent and family partnerships. Schools and districts can expand regular, two-way, and meaningful communication to include parents and caregivers as partners in their child's education (Section 8101(39)).¹² In practice, this might look like sharing and receiving information around students' learning, progress, interests, and challenges, as well as co-planning to address students' educational needs moving forward.¹³ Such family-school partnerships can also serve to strengthen parents' and families' sense of

efficacy to support their children's education. Title IV-A supports the use of funds for programs and activities that will enhance students' learning skills for school readiness and academic success such as "providing integrated systems of student and family supports" (Section 4108(5)(C)(vii)).

Educators can also seek to understand and value families' cultural backgrounds, wealth of knowledge, and different approaches to educational involvement,¹⁴ and foster support by creating physical or virtual space for families with shared experiences to connect.¹⁵ Building such communities can help parents and families feel safe, empower them to voice concerns, and encourage them to be engaged.

Practical Applications to the Role of SCs

SCs play an important role in helping LEAs address disparities in family engagement for special populations. SCs have the benefit of being exposed to a range of LEA needs, challenges, plans, and proposed strategies (as articulated in LEAs' Title IV-A applications) and can leverage this exposure to support efforts to promote effective, equitable parent and family engagement across their SEAs.

Training & Technical Assistance (T/TA) or Professional Development (PD)

In addition to the specific strategies mentioned in earlier sections, SCs can support LEAs by providing T/TA, PD, and related resources (e.g., publications, toolkits) in the following broad areas and subtopics:

Staff Competencies

- Basic communication skills
- Culturally responsive approaches
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Implicit and explicit bias
- Strengths-based approaches

Partnering With Families

- Two-way sharing of meaningful data or information and resources
- Inviting/integrating parent and family input
- Identifying community hubs for information sharing

Planning Supports for Students and Families

- Tracking and supporting engagement efforts
- Identifying stakeholders within the school or broader community to serve as cultural liaisons or role models
- Developing community partnerships to provide wrap-around services and collaborate on meeting families' and students non-academic needs

Funding Coordination

- Leveraging various funding mechanisms, such as braided or blended funding; sources might include
 - The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (supports students and families experiencing homelessness)
 - Title I (supports family engagement through transportation childcare, in-person visits, trained parent peers, parent-family advisory council)
 - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funds (used to improve family engagement practices or address disparities at the intersection of race/ethnicity and disability status)
- Collaborating with SEA officials or other Title program coordinators

Application Reviews

In addition to T/TA and PD, SCs can offer feedback on LEA applications and schoolwide plans. Feedback can focus on the extent to which LEAs address the following key

indicators of effective and equitable parent and family engagement:

- Overall and targeted strategies for academic program planning and implementation and evaluating success of efforts (Section 4106(e)(1)(E))
- Distribution of funds to schools with the greatest need (Section (4016)(e)(2)(A)(i))
- Provisions to strengthen parent and family engagement (Section 4108(3))
- Consultation with parents, families, and other stakeholders in planning uses of funds (Section 1114(b)(2), Section 4106(c)(1))

Conclusion

Ensuring that all students can benefit from effective parent and family engagement requires attention to issues of inequity in engagement practices. The highlighted challenges, considerations, and best practices require intentional and targeted efforts on the part of SEAs and LEAs to better support students and families who face challenges within the education system. By encouraging a culture of equitable engagement, all students are better equipped to learn and achieve.



Parent and Family Resources

The following table includes relevant guidance, resources, or tools related to parent and family engagement.

Resource	Description
Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement	This resource, developed by the State Support Network technical assistance center within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, offers evidence-based strategies and real-world examples related to equitably engaging families.
Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education	This toolkit was developed by the Regional Educational Laboratories with the support of ED. The four-part toolkit shares research, promising practices, and tools to strengthen family and community partnerships around areas of engagement, cultural bridges, communication, and data conversations.
Family Engagement Toolkit: Continuous Improvement Through an Equity Lens	This toolkit was developed through a collaboration among six California education entities, including California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, California Department of Education, and four California county offices of education (Alameda, Nevada, Riverside, and Sacramento). The toolkit emphasizes a dual capacity-building framework, integration of family engagement with district learning goals, and equity at every phase.
Family Engagement Within Trauma-Informed Schools Toolkits: Middle/High School Staff and Elementary School Staff	These toolkits, developed by the Ohio State University Statewide Family Engagement Center, provide support and resources to school staff around supporting families when children have experienced trauma.
ESSA Requirements: Family and Parent Engagement	This document generated by the District of Columbia provides information about requirements for how LEAs can engage parents and families under Titles I, II, III, and IV under ESSA.
Supporting the Parent Centers Who Serve Families of Children with Disabilities	The Center for Parent Information and Resources, sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs , offers a hub of information and materials for Parent Centers , which serve families of children with disabilities. The hub also allows Parent Centers to connect, exchange resources, and coordinate parent training efforts.
Reframing Family, School, and Community Engagement	This toolkit offers guidance on how to communicate about family, school, and community engagement, including importance, benefits, and opportunities. The toolkit aims to address challenges with perceptions, assumptions, and messaging that can hinder engagement efforts.

Endnotes

- ¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017). *Family Engagement Inventory*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/FEI/benefits/>
- ² Garcia, M.E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C.B., Flores, N., & Miller, K.B. (2016). *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1: Building and understanding of family and community engagement*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509>
- ³ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1*.
- ⁴ Garcia, M.E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C.B., Flores, N., & Miller, K.B. (2016). *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 2: Building a cultural bridge*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509>; National Parent Teacher Association. (n.d.). *National standards for family-school partnerships*. <https://www.pta.org/home/run-your-pta/National-Standards-for-Family-School-Partnerships>
- ⁵ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 2*; Mapp, K.L., & Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a new normal: Toward a more liberatory approach to family engagement*. <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/embracing-new-normal-toward-more-liberatory-approach-family-engagement/>
- ⁶ Mapp & Bergman, *Embracing a new normal*; Richard Miler, H., Cunningham, H.B., Murray, I.E., & Alvarez, A. (2017). Supporting students living below the poverty line. *National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Journal*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2017.020204>; California Department of Education. (2017). *Family Engagement Toolkit: Continuous Improvement Through an Equity Lens*. Sacramento, CA: <https://www.wested.org/resources/family-engagement-toolkit/>
- ⁷ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1*; Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center. (2019). *Family engagement within trauma-informed schools: Toolkits for middle/high school staff*. <https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/resources/family-engagement-within-trauma-informed-schools-toolkits-for-middle-high-school-staff/>
- ⁸ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 2*.
- ⁹ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1*; Garcia, M. E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C. B., Flores, N., & Miller, K. B. (2016). *Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 3: Building trusting relationships with families and the community through effective communication*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509>
- ¹⁰ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1*.
- ¹¹ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 2*; Jacques, C., & Villegas, A. (2018). *Strategies for equitable family engagement*. <https://oese.ed.gov/resources/oese-technical-assistance-centers/state-support-network/resources/strategies-equitable-family-engagement/>
- ¹² Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 3*; Garcia, M. E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C. B., Flores, N., & Miller, K. B. (2016). *Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 4: Engaging all in data conversations*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509>
- ¹³ California Department of Education, *Family Engagement Toolkit*.
- ¹⁴ Garcia et al., *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1*.
- ¹⁵ California Department of Education, *Family Engagement Toolkit*.



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