

# Engaging Families and Caregivers

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Families and caregivers are essential partners in efforts to improve learning outcomes for students. They have access to information about students and learning that are not available to educators in schools and they bring a wealth of experiences, understandings, and assets that can bring new insights to the process of sensemaking. Authentically engaging families and caregivers as partners in data engagements can be an important way to improve learning conditions and outcomes for students.

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## Data That Matter to Families and Caregivers

Each family is unique and brings hopes, needs, expectations, and strengths for the education of their children that reflect their personal, linguistic, cultural, and community experiences. Understanding what kind of information or data about their children’s learning experiences families want, and how they want to engage with data to inform decisions, requires us to ask them. It also requires us to truly listen to and value their responses.

With the uniqueness of each family and community in mind, it is still important to consider some common themes that surface in terms of what families and caregivers want regarding educational data. A recent study by the Center for American Progress (2021) highlighted some key themes that emerged when families and caregivers were asked about educational data that matter to them.

**Families and caregivers consistently want access to information about their own students’ learning experiences and processes that allow them to understand if the school is providing their children a quality education.**

Families and caregivers want:

- meaningful data that provide them specific information about students’ opportunity to learn, including the school climate and culture of their students’ school;
- information about the supports students receive in school, particularly for students with disabilities; and

- accessible data about their individual student’s progress toward the standards, conveyed in plain language utilizing both text and visual information.

**Families and caregivers also want the opportunity to provide insight into how schools are serving students, particularly students like their own.**

Families and caregivers want:

- disaggregated data that show patterns of how well schools are serving different student groups (e.g., race, gender, special education status); and
- the opportunity for their own data about how schools are serving their children to be valued and considered alongside other data.

It is important for school leaders to partner with families to improve student learning experiences and outcomes. Family and caregiver involvement in the education of their children is vital to student success and provides families with the opportunity to both use data to understand the education of their students and to provide their own data to inform decisions about learning (Center for American Progress, 2021).

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## How Leaders Can Engage Families and Caregivers in Data Use

The best way to engage families and caregivers with data should be developed in collaboration with families and caregivers themselves. However, there are some key principles that can inform leaders as they plan data engagements with families and caregivers. The list below is adapted from “Tips for Administrators, Teachers, and Families: How to Share Data Effectively” (Harvard Family Research Project, 2013).

- **Build On, Don’t Eliminate One-Way Communication:** There is a place for more traditional measures that use one-way communication to push out information. Not every family wants to engage deeply with data at every communication point throughout the year. Families and caregivers can still benefit from access to more passive data consumption opportunities (e.g., report cards, short conferences) when they are presented with an open door to go deeper when more information is desired or for families and caregivers to provide their own data to put information in context. However, it is important to recognize that these opportunities for one-way communication experiences are missed opportunities for schools, families, and

students. Therefore, leaders should strive to offer robust opportunities for authentic engagement.

- **Foster a School- and District-Wide Data Sharing Culture:** Teachers and leaders share data with families and caregivers in meaningful ways and look to them as partners when using data effectively as part of business as usual in their professional lives. Building authentic opportunities to engage with families and caregivers around data starts with building a culture of data use in schools and districts. Leaders can do this by establishing a vision, articulating expectations and responsibilities, and investing in building the capacity of educators to use data. For more details about building systemic data use in schools and districts, see Module 16 in this series. Of particular importance when educators share data with families is ensuring that educators are:
  - attending to data privacy;
  - using a broad range of data sources that value the whole child; and
  - using varied and accessible means to represent data including verbal, narrative, and visual representations, examples of student work, as well as different means to communicate with families based on family context and preferences including formal and informal in-person communication, telephone, email, and hard copy communications.
- **Respect and Invest in Family Wisdom:** While families and caregivers are eager to understand the learning experiences and progress of their students, they may need support and background information to put data in context. Leaders can begin data engagements with families and caregivers by embracing the wisdom that families and caregivers bring and valuing the data they can provide equally alongside data that come from the school or district. Leaders can help create an environment where families and caregivers are respectfully oriented to data, where questions are welcomed and time is allocated to ensure that answers are understood, and data are conveyed in accessible, family-friendly language.
- **Ensure that Data are Accurate, Timely, and Relevant to Families and Caregivers:** Families and caregivers have demands on their time and attention that go beyond the education of their children. Leaders can value the time they are willing to contribute to engaging with data by ensuring that families and caregivers have access to data that is meaningful. This requires attention to data quality, including making sure data are clean, have not “passed their shelf life,” and convey information that is important to families.
- **Demonstrate Links Between Data and Action:** Families and caregivers want to see that when data show patterns about the learning of their individual students or how the school is serving students, action is taken to improve instruction and experiences in school. Leaders can demonstrate how the investments that families and caregivers

make in making sense of, and sharing ideas about, data have demonstrable impact on resources and actions. They can also invite families and caregivers to co-construct improvement efforts.

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## References:

Modaffari, J., & Jimenez, L. (2021). *The education data that matter most to parents and school stakeholders*. Center for American Progress.

Harvard Family Research Project. (2013). *Tips for administrators, teachers, and families: How to share data effectively*. Retrieved from: <https://archive.globalfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/tips-for-administrators-teachers-and-families-how-to-share-data-effectively>