

Research shows that students learn better when their families and local community organizations are engaged in schools. Strong family engagement is linked to increased student achievement, reduced absenteeism, and higher graduation rates. In addition, community engagement can help ensure that students' social, emotional, and physical health needs are addressed, while also providing meaningful, real-world learning opportunities. Schools that engage with their communities are also better able to help students solve local problems, contribute to civic life, and respond to a changing economy.

Equitable community engagement—an ongoing, two-way process of building relationships, working collaboratively to support all students, and sharing power—can also result in transformative benefits for schools and school districts:

Equitable Outcomes

When school leaders hear from a broad range of voices, especially those who have been systematically marginalized, schools' instructional, budgetary, and policy priorities—and the actions and results that flow from them—better reflect the needs and goals of everyone they serve. This results in schools that are more responsive to all stakeholders' needs, regardless of their race, income level, dominant language, or other social markers.

Lasting Impact

Schools and districts that are informed and shaped by the needs and contributions of students, families, and community members are better positioned to work toward their goals. They are able to reflect, learn, and grow together. They are more resilient in the face of inevitable changes and challenges, whether prompted by state policy, the local economy, technological developments, global events, or a social or political crisis. In addition, school improvements that result from equitable community engagement are far more likely to persist beyond the tenure of a visionary superintendent, a dynamic parent leader, or a committed school board member.

Innovative Solutions

Bringing a range of voices and experiences together broadens school leaders' perspectives and generates a wider array of ideas to act on opportunities and challenges. Equitable engagement with students, families, and community members—especially those who have been historically disenfranchised—is a critical way for leaders to develop a multi-faceted, thorough understanding of educational issues and generate strategies that are responsive to stakeholders' needs. In fact, it can prepare a whole new set of people to help problem-solve and lead the school system and community through complex and/or unforeseen circumstances.

Community Support

When students, families, teachers, and other members of the school community collaborate with school leaders to develop goals, plans, and decisions, it builds mutual trust. Intentional inclusivity also provides school leaders an opportunity to hear different perspectives and help find common ground. People are more likely to remain involved in the next phases of the work and to stand with the school in the face of pushback or challenges when they have been part of setting the agenda and working together to achieve it.

What Does It Mean to Share Power?

Sharing power means intentionally using resources to engage equitably with all members of the school community when making decisions that affect the community. Sharing power requires that leaders learn what is preventing people's full participation, systematically remove those barriers, and create meaningful opportunities for all community members to have an impact. Whether in one-on-one conversations, in teams, or as an organization, sharing power can happen in formal and informal ways. At its core, it is about ensuring that those who are most affected by discussions, programs, and decisions are the ones shaping them—even if that means leaders must give up some control.

The list below includes examples of what sharing power looks like in practice. Think of these examples as places to start; implementing them effectively over time requires institutional and/or structural changes to your school community:

- Giving marginalized voices more than just a seat at the table; those in power must also raise marginalized voices and involve them in the decision-making process.
- Encouraging all school community members to share their ideas and opinions.
- Talking less and listening more. The goal isn't just to hear but also to understand perspectives other than your own.
- Eliminating linguistic, financial, and other barriers to community engagement. This may involve translation services, childcare, or changing the location or time of school meetings to make them more accessible.
- Recognizing that trust is earned and developed over time. Trust requires relationship-building, empathetic listening, and earnest efforts to engage with other perspectives.
- Communicating with (not to) your school community in a way they can understand. Don't use "edu-speak" or technical jargon when plain language will do.
- Interrogating your own privilege and biases. Know your blind spots and rely on other members of your school community to help you navigate around them.
- Intentionally reaching out to and proactively involving marginalized voices—including communities of color and those who are economically disadvantaged. Go to them instead of expecting them to come to you.
- Never assuming any members of your school community don't care about or don't value education, or that they aren't informed enough to make important decisions.
- Embracing the idea that students' families are their advocates. Work to understand where they are coming from and what they care about.

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