In downtown New Bedford, Massachusetts, the three-story central office of the city’s school district serves as a gateway for families enrolling their kids in one of the district’s twenty-six schools. Upon entering the building, new enrollees engage with the aptly-named Family Welcome Center—a place dedicated to creating clear pathways to education for all students.

New Bedford has long welcomed waves of immigrants—from the Irish in the early 19th century to the Portuguese and Polish in the 20th century. Once again, New Bedford Public Schools is in the midst of a demographic shift. Many of the newest arrivals hail from Central America: Since 2000, the Latino population has grown by 59 percent.

Although the rich diversity of backgrounds and experiences benefit the city in many ways, New Bedford Public Schools has struggled to accommodate and support its changing population. Julie Mador, registrar at the Family Welcome Center, says that in the recent past her office would do its best to welcome and accclimate families to the school system and the city, but that services like translation often didn’t extend into the schools.

“When the Family Welcome Center opened, they set the bar and would spend several hours working with our new families—and building relationships—to get all the paperwork, immunizations, appointments, and records needed for entrance into school. Parents would return and report back that it wasn’t as inviting at the school level,” she says.
A recent district survey supports Mador’s perspective that many families and students feel—and are being treated—like outsiders. According to data collected in 2015, only 16% of families responded favorably to questions on the topic of parent engagement. (As of 2018, that number has jumped to 51%.) With an ongoing influx of diverse families, leaders of New Bedford Public Schools knew they faced significant challenges—and opportunities—to build stronger home and school connections to improve student outcomes, as research demonstrates that students learn better when their families and local community organizations are engaged in schools. This is in addition to positive links between community engagement and increased student achievement, reduced absenteeism, and higher graduation rates.

Thanks to an award from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the Great Schools Partnership and Everyday Democracy provided New Bedford Public Schools with thought partnership and coaching support for a three-year period ending in the summer of 2019.

District Wraparound Service Director Jariel Vergne admits that transformative change was not always easy. In the first year of the initiative, Vergne says there was a lack of clear vision. What did the district hope to gain from participation?

Erin Duarte, Vergne’s colleague and a Lead Wraparound Coordinator, confirms the early hurdles. “Three years ago, there were not any systems in place on how to do the work to engage families, so this was new to everyone. With change comes resistance, but that is to be expected; change begins to take place, but change is also transformative and a good thing. We have had our share of trial and error, but we have learned from those mistakes and it has lead us to the position we are in today. Engaging families in a more meaningful way is being embraced in our schools.”

The creation of a Family Engagement Leadership Team (FELT) in the spring of 2017 proved to be a catalyst to more effectively implement district and school-focused work. The team is comprised of teachers, community partners, administrators, student support personnel, and parent support specialists. “FELT has been the driving force behind every single thing” we’ve done, Vergne says of the group, which meets quarterly. Instead of varying approaches to family engagement throughout the schools, the opportunity for more systematic adoption of effective practices was now possible.
The Three E’s

During the 2017-2018 school year, the FELT team established a framework map of family engagement work. They came up with the Three E’s to guide family engagement practices:

1. **Engage:** Build trust with families through creating activities with universal access for students, parents, and families.

2. **Educate:** Build family and community capacity through targeted education opportunities.

3. **Empower:** Ensure that parents and families have the access and tools to be active in the school communities.

Vergne says the framework has helped the FELT team envision how to scaffold toward impactful family engagement. “If we are going to reach the goal of empowering diverse students and families, what are the access points that help reach that goal?” Vergne asks, adding that it’s difficult to define family empowerment because it looks vastly different from one family to the next. But depending on the needs at schools, “we can build access points for that to happen.”

By the end of the 2017-2018 academic year, FELT members also focused on creating and delivering professional learning opportunities structured around the Three E’s. The reception was positive: “And as soon as we started having it, the feedback from all the teachers and administrators was ‘more please’ because this is something they hadn’t been asked to do,” says Vergne.

One of New Bedford Public Schools’ most successful “access points” for empowering families highlights the potential of the work. The Family Institute for Student Success (FISS), a 9-week class for parents, was hosted by Gomes Elementary School during the winter and spring of 2019. District facilitators helped parents learn to better navigate the school system through a series of modules, such as understanding the basics of standardized testing and crafting quality, open-ended questions for parent-teacher conferences. FISS is also offered in three languages: English, Spanish, and Creole. Building on the positive results from Gomes Elementary School, FISS will migrate to another school host site in the fall of 2019.
According to Shyla Gaylor, a 2019 parent participant, the FISS experience was well worth it. Gaylor has four children attending school in New Bedford, including La’Kyah, a kindergartner at Gomes. “It has enlightened me and challenged me to better use information” available to us parents, she says, adding that interacting with fellow parents allows for valuable learning to occur not only from the facilitators, but from each other. “You get to see how other parents interact with and discipline their kids,” Gaylor says. “And it gives us a chance to learn if we’re on the right path.”

Mador has observed similar community networking. “I’ve seen parents exchanging numbers to offer support in other areas like babysitting,” she says. “Now they have other parents that they’re connected to, and they’re starting to really build a community within the school. That is so exciting to see.”

New Bedford Public Schools are also in the midst of planning for the launch of eight new Family Engagement Centers during the 2019-2020 school year. These centers will be staffed by bilingual and, in some cases, trilingual parent support specialists with the goal of serving as a school hub for strengthening authentic home, school, and community relationships.

In Mador’s words: “New Bedford Public Schools has evolved from a place where families went to the children’s school only when called to a partnership [in] which families and schools work together to ensure student success and wellbeing.”

The Road Ahead

The summer of 2019 marks the end of the three-year grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. However, the sustainability question has been answered, at least in part, by a financial commitment from the district to continue the work.

Even though strides have been made amongst faculty and staff with regards to better understanding and connecting with families, there’s still a long way to go before many district educators feel comfortable communicating with diverse families, says Amanda Gonzales, Assistant Principal at Pulaski Elementary School. “I think still we’re finding that a lot of staff are nervous to make calls home to parents, and are worried about if they’ll make a mistake while on the phone.”

It all comes down to elevating the importance of relationships, Vergne adds, who is optimistic about the new directions the New Bedford Public Schools is taking to support families. “In two years, we’ve really solidified this work, and the community response has been overwhelmingly positive. They are asking for more. People can feel the momentum of all the coordination” and programming that has emerged, he says.

This case study was written by Paul Barnwell.

For more information and resources about equitable community engagement, please visit www.greatschoolspartnership.org