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### Equity Through Partnership: Overcoming Barriers to Family-School Partnership in K-12 School Settings

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**Equity Through Partnership: Overcoming Barriers to Family-School Partnership in K-12**

**School Settings**

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2023

EQUITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

CAPSTONE SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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IN

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AUTHOR: Keely L. McCaskie

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**Abstract**

Over the last few decades, it has become widely accepted that family-school partnership is an essential strategy to support the success of all students in K-12 school settings. However, despite this fact, policies and practices within the realm of family-school partnership remain largely undeveloped and inconsistent across the U.S, particularly in schools serving students from non-dominant backgrounds. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that theoretical frameworks in the field have remained limited in scope, and that there is a demonstrated lack of training for educators in the domain of family-school partnership. Nevertheless, there now exist some promising frameworks and exemplars across the U.S that can serve as valuable guideposts for both policymakers and practitioners who strive to foster truly effective, sustained partnerships between families and educators in K-12 schools nationwide.

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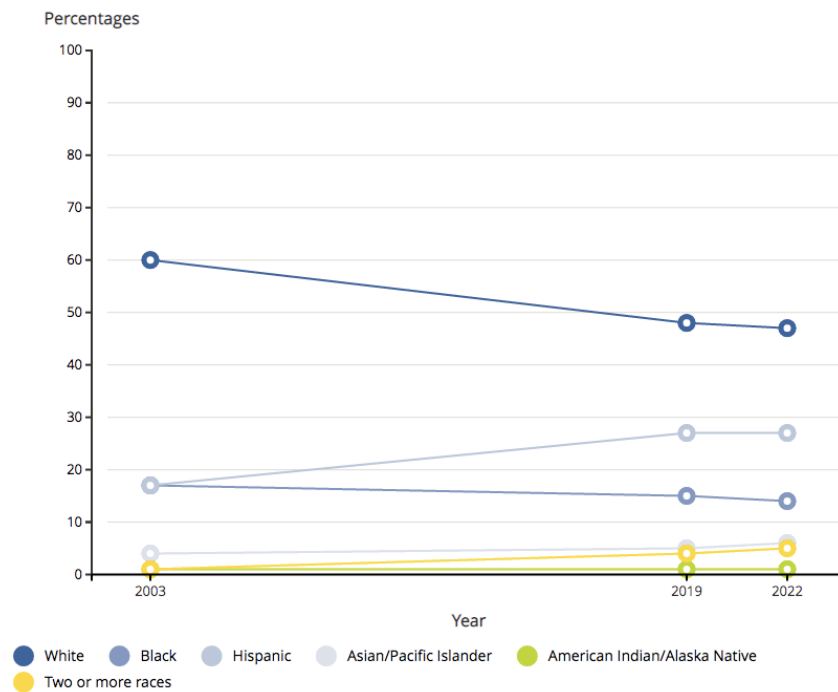
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**Problem Statement**

There is a long history of educational inequity in the United States. For decades, we have witnessed white, middle-to-upper class students academically outpace their historically marginalized peers, and for decades, policymakers and educators have sought to eliminate these disparities and enable the highest outcomes for all students. Despite these efforts, to this day, disproportionate gaps persist between the educational outcomes of students from dominant and nondominant backgrounds (Yull et al., 2014; LaRocque, 2013; Olivos, 2004; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). For example, as evident in Figure 1, although racial/ethnic gaps in reading achievement have decreased since 2003, we continue to see stratified differences between the reading achievement of students of color and their white counterparts. In Figure 2, we see that these gaps persist across racial/ethnic lines regardless of socioeconomic status.

**Figure 1**

*Grade 4 Reading Proficiency by Race/Ethnicity, 2003-2022*

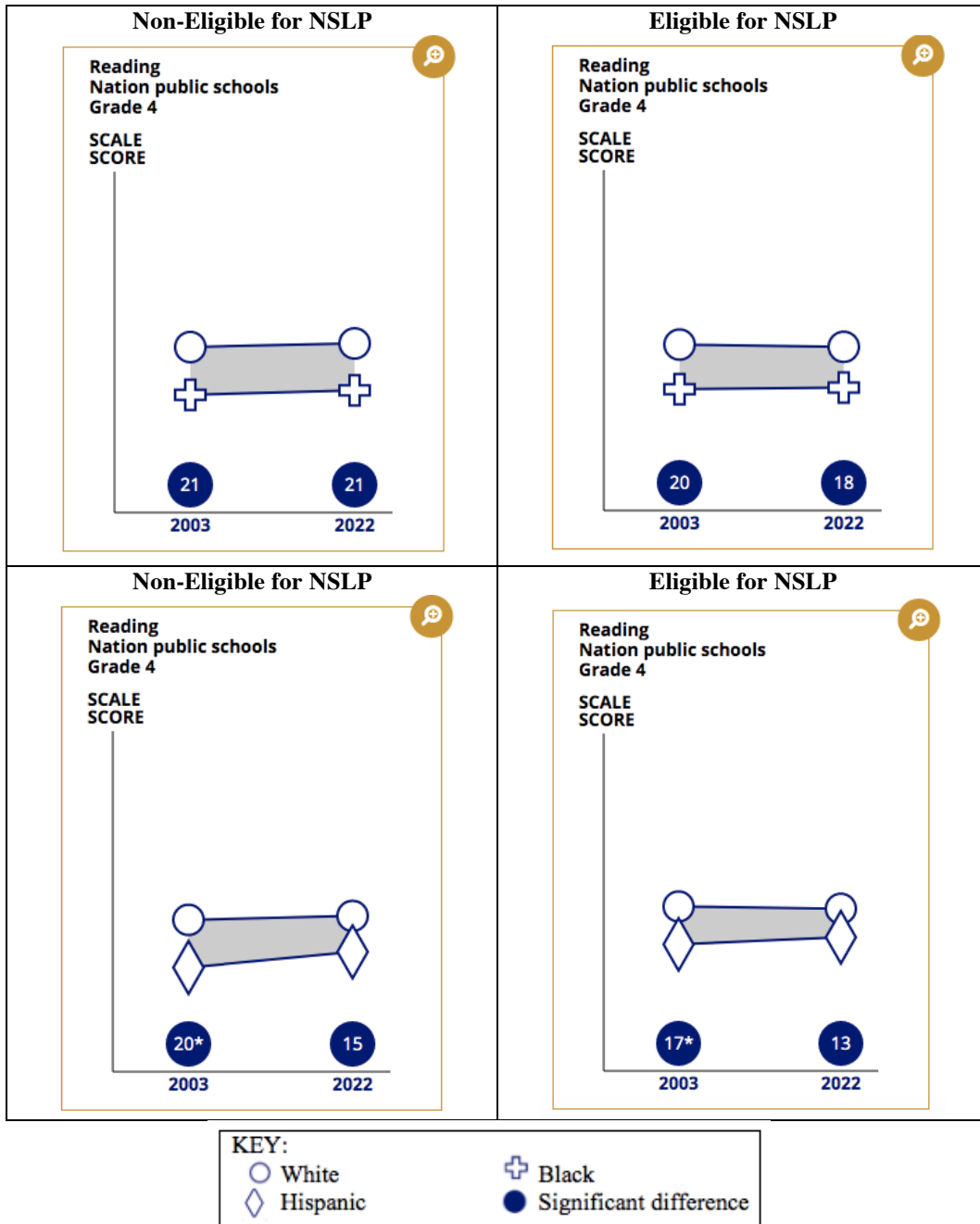


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

**Figure 2**

*Reading Achievement by Race/Ethnicity and by Eligibility for National School Lunch Program*

*(NSLP), 2003-2022*



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.



So, what are we missing? Researchers over the last several decades have compiled overwhelming evidence that partnership with students' families is one overlooked yet critical factor that can help level the playing field for students. It is now widely accepted that the more families and schools communicate and collaborate, the more likely students of all backgrounds are to succeed in both academic and nonacademic realms (Jeynes, 2005; Daniel, 2011; Epstein, 1995; Keller et al., 2021; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Haines et al., 2015). When schools effectively engage families, students are more likely to earn higher grades, enroll in higher-level courses, attend school more regularly, adapt better within the school environment, graduate, and pursue postsecondary options (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Furthermore, studies have shown that increased family-school partnership supports healthier general attitudes about school, positive self-concept, and improved mental health in children (Keller et al., 2021).

Family-school partnership also benefits both guardians and educators. These relationships allow parents to more closely monitor their children (Keller et al., 2021) and develop leadership skills (Yamauchi et al., 2017). At the same time, closer collaboration with families allows teachers to become more effective in the classroom (Epstein, 1995) and experience greater job satisfaction (as evidenced in Figure 3), likely leading to higher teacher retention (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

Schools and districts across the nation have largely come to a consensus around the importance of family engagement, and as such, have adopted associated rhetoric. However, despite this fact, it is still relatively difficult to find schools that do family engagement well (Davies, 2002). Although most educators would like to improve partnership with their students' families, knowing how to build and incorporate strong partnerships with families continues to elude most schools and educators across the U.S., especially for those serving historically

marginalized populations (Yamauchi et al., 2017; Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995). This suggests that our policies and practices in education have not caught up with existing research that demonstrates the critical importance of family-school partnership.

Furthermore, while it is well established that parents of all backgrounds care about their children, value education, and want their children to be successful in school and in life (Keller et al., 2021; Daniel, 2011; Epstein, 1995), schools tend to have more positive engagement with white, middle-to-upper class families than with families of color and low-income families (Keller et al., 2021; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 1995), further explaining and exacerbating educational inequities for students from nondominant backgrounds. Given the demonstrated importance of family-school partnership for enabling strong educational outcomes, family-school partnership must be recognized as a key strategy to create more equitable conditions for historically marginalized students, families, and communities (Auerbach, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Haines et al., 2015; Yull et al., 2014; Bryk, 2010).

If schools and districts across the U.S. are unable to make vast shifts that center family engagement in K-12 education, and if policies are unable to help them to do so, we can expect to see educational disparities remain. The following sections will attempt to shed light on the barriers that have prevented widespread family-school partnership thus far and on potential solutions to advance family-school partnership for the benefit of students that need it the most, so that we can work towards eliminating educational inequities once and for all.

## Literature Review

### Definitions of Family-School Partnership

Phrases such as “parent involvement,” “family engagement,” and “family-school partnership” have often been used interchangeably, attached to a variety of contexts and connotations. As research has evolved, scholars most recently favor the term “family” versus “parent” to recognize that extended family members—not just parents—play an important role in children’s development (Yamauchi et al., 2017). Furthermore, the phrase “family-school partnerships” conveys that meeting the needs of students is a relational and dialogical process between families and school staff (Daniel, 2011). The Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework defines family-school partnership as:

*Collaborative relationships and activities involving school staff, parents, and other family members of students at a school. Effective partnerships are based on mutual trust and respect, and shared responsibility for the education of the children and young people at school. (DEEWR, 2008, as cited in Daniel, 2011)*

Similarly, the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center defines family-school partnership as follows:

*Trusting family-school partnerships, contributing to positive student outcomes, occur when (a) family members and school staff have respectful, mutually beneficial relationships with shared responsibility for student learning; (b) family members have options for meaningful involvement in their children’s education and in the life of the school; and (c) the school responds to family interests and involvement in a culturally responsive manner. (www.swiftschools.org, as cited in Haines et al., 2015)*

To build off this last point – that schools must respond in a culturally responsive manner – it is critical to understand that families often have different understandings of what parental involvement should look like based on their own cultural and socioeconomic background, as well as their experience of their own schooling (Keller et al., 2021). The implications of this will be explored at length in subsequent sections.

It may also be useful to mention that the term “family-school-community partnership” is increasingly used to acknowledge the importance not just of partnerships between schools and families, but also between schools and their communities at large. Given that the scope of this paper will focus specifically on dynamics between schools and families, however, this paper will prioritize use of the term “family-school partnership.”

### **Relevant Theories**

To begin to understand why meaningful family-school partnership is largely under-realized in many schools across the U.S., it is helpful to first consider several theoretical frameworks that are relevant to the realm of family-school partnership – some of which have been commonly referenced by early researchers in the field and others which have been less commonly applied.

#### *Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence*

Historically, the work of Joyce Epstein has been one of the principal informants of early practices in parent involvement and participation (Daniel, 2011). Epstein’s (1987) theory of overlapping spheres (see Figure 3) suggests that a child’s development depends on three major contexts that surround the child (school, home, and community) and that the more these three spheres are drawn together, the greater the benefit to the child’s development (Daniel, 2011; Epstein, 1995). In the context of family-school partnership, this theory implies that schools and

families must form relationships to work together and meet the needs of children, essentially creating more “overlap” between the three spheres of influence in a child’s life. While the model recognizes that students are ultimately the main agents of their own success, it views family-school-community partnership as a means to guide and motivate students to create that success for themselves (Epstein, 1995). As another way to look at it, when spheres are optimally aligned, school personnel create more “family-like” schools, and parents and guardians create more “school-like” families, thereby providing a more consistent, supportive, and comprehensive web of support for children (Epstein, 1995).

### Figure 3

#### *Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence*

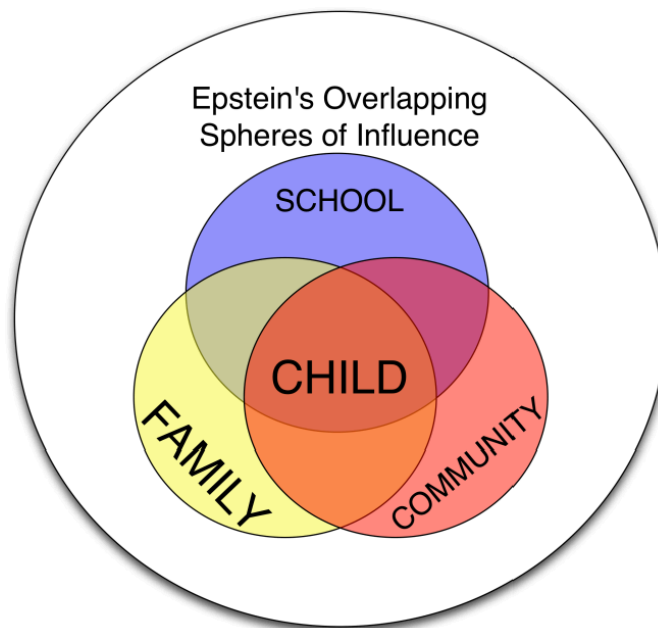


Image source: Calvert-Bertrand, 2013

#### *Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model*

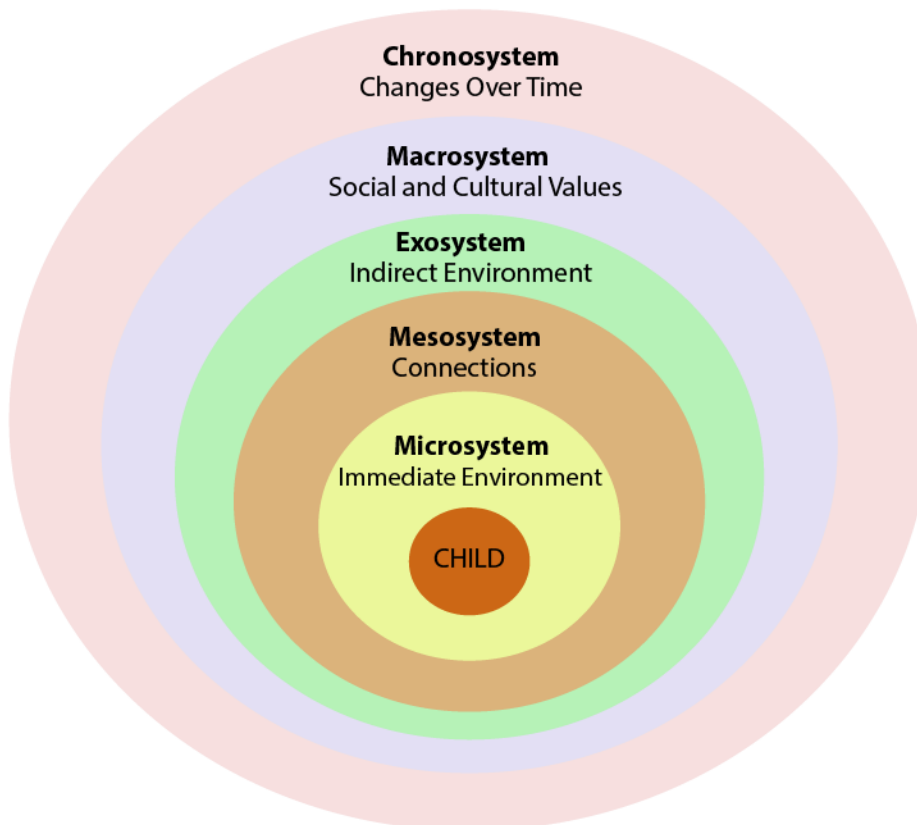
Similarly, Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological systems model (see Figure 4) places a child at the center of a series of concentric circles representing progressively broader systems in

society, starting with the microsystem of family members and individuals with which a child interacts daily, all the way to the macrosystem—national and global influences on the context in which a child is raised (Daniel, 2011). Of relevance to our discussion of family-school partnership is the mesosystem – the network of connections that exist between members of the microsystem, e.g., between family members and educators. According to this theory, forging effective family-school partnership creates greater connectivity within the mesosystem, which provides a richer context for a child’s development and a protective buffer against the risks and threats that exist within broader levels of society (Keller et al., 2021).

#### Figure 4

*Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model*

#### Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory



*Arnstein's Ladder of Participation*

In 1969, Sherry R. Arnstein theorized that citizen participation is synonymous with citizen power and developed a typology of eight levels of participation (see Figure 5) to demonstrate the various gradations of participation, on a scale from the lowest to the highest amount of power being shared (Arnstein, 1969). On the lowest rungs of the ladder (“therapy” and “manipulation”), participants are problematized and denied all power. On the middle rungs (“informing,” “consulting,” and “placation”), participants may be given voice, but there is no assurance that their views will influence outcomes. On the highest rungs of the ladder (“partnership,” “delegated power,” and “citizen control”), participants effectively influence or control decision-making processes (Arnstein, 1969). From the lens of family-school partnership, this theory can help practitioners better define concepts such as “participation” and “partnership,” and identify metrics for initiatives that will effectively empower families.

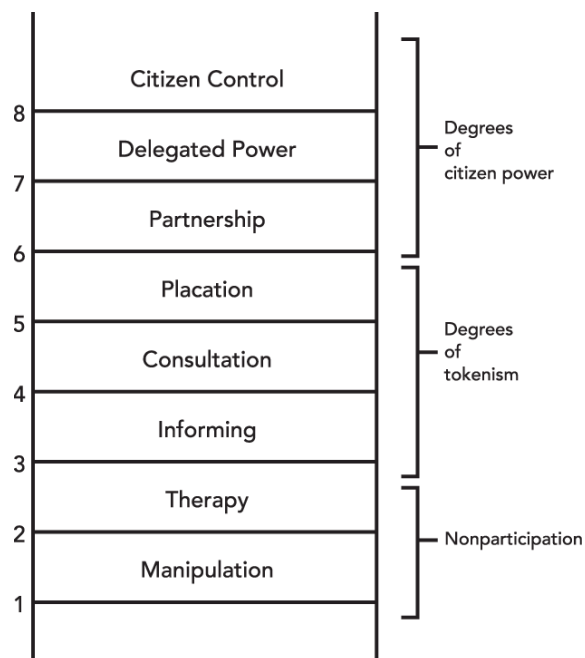
**Figure 5***Arnstein's Ladder of Participation*

Image source: Arnstein, 1969

*Critical Race Theory*

In the 1970's, Critical Race Theory (CRT) grew out of the work of legal scholars, including Derrick Bell, and has since found useful application in educational settings as well. CRT is based on a number of core assumptions, including: (1) race and racism are fundamental to and pervasive in every aspect and at all levels of US society; (2) white supremacy and other dominant ideologies must be rejected in favor of the pursuit of social justice; and (3) the lived experiences of people of color are a privileged source of knowledge needed to disrupt the status quo (Marchand et al., 2019). With regards to family-school partnership, CRT holds promise for examining the ways in which oppressive structures, practices, and interactions have contributed to inequitable outcomes for both students and families of color and prevent the formation of trust between parents of color and majority-White school personnel.

*Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement*

Epstein's (1995) six types of parent involvement has perhaps been the most popular framework used to outline roles that families can play to support their children's education (Yamauchi et al., 2017). These six types of involvement consist of: (1) parenting (i.e. childrearing and creating positive home conditions for development and learning); (2) communication (i.e. two-way information sharing between school and home regarding a child's progress); (3) volunteering (i.e. families contributing time either at school or at home to assist in educational programming); (4) learning at home (i.e. activities at home to promote or make decisions regarding their child's education); (5) decision making (i.e. participating in formal school decision-making processes; and (6) community collaborations (i.e. utilizing community resources and services to support a child) (Epstein, 1995). Although this framework has provided concrete examples for educators to facilitate family involvement, there are a number of



limitations to this framework and other conventional approaches, which will be explored in the following section.

### **Barriers to Family-School Partnership**

One reason that strong family-school partnership is largely unrealized in most K-12 schools across the US is because the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that have been traditionally used to conceptualize this engagement have been narrow and biased in their scope (Daniel, 2011; Keller et al., 2021; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Yamauchi et al., 2017; Marchand et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2018). Researchers who have conducted meta-analyses of research on family engagement have found that theoretical foundations of the field are underdeveloped, and research is largely incomplete (Daniel, 2011; Yamauchi et al., 2017). A study that analyzed 215 journal articles published over a five year period on the topic of family-school partnership found that theoretical frameworks were applied only half of the time, and when they were, researchers tended to reuse only a handful of frameworks in their analysis, most notably Joyce Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres and framework for six types of parent involvement, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Yamauchi et al., 2017). Researchers that fail to use theory to guide their research are more likely to generate findings of limited value (Yamauchi et al., 2017). A lack of robust, comprehensive theoretical foundations is also a handicap for practitioners in the field given that well-informed, critical conceptual frameworks are essential for the development of effective policies and practices (Daniel, 2011).

Perhaps the largest issue is not just that theorization within the field has been narrow, but that it has also been biased in favor of the perspectives, experiences, and values of white and middle-to-upper class families (Yamauchi et al., 2017; Keller et al., 2021; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Marchand et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Yull et al., 2014). In fact, early research in the

field focused almost exclusively on White, middle-class families, and particularly mothers (Yamauchi et al., 2017). As a result, traditional models of family engagement are not as relevant to or honoring of the ways that ethnically and economically diverse families tend to engage and support their children's education (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Keller et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2018). For example, numerous scholars have criticized Joyce Epstein's theories and frameworks given that they center on the agenda of schools and position families to be complacent or else blamed for being "uninvolved" if they don't take advantage of prescribed opportunities to participate (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Yamauchi et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2018). However, the six types of involvement outlined are more reflective of the ways parents of dominant socio-cultural backgrounds tend to engage – i.e., through direct, school-based involvement – and discount considerations of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the ways parents engage at home (Daniel, 2011; Marchand et al. 2019). Furthermore, Epstein's six types of parent involvement frames partnership as a means only to benefit children rather than framing it as something that benefits all involved, including family members and educators (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

The reality is that families of all ethnic and economic backgrounds work to support their children's education, whether or not it is immediately apparent to school staff. Apart from school-based involvement (e.g., volunteering, participating in school governance), there are many forms of home-based involvement (e.g., setting academic expectations for school, practicing cognitive routines) and forms of involvement within the context of the parent-child relationship (e.g., having discussions about school) (Hill et al., 2018). While school-based forms of involvement are more often recognized and celebrated by school staff, research has shown that home-based and relationship-based forms of engagement – such as communicating academic expectations and the value of education – are not only well-utilized by non-dominant

families but can also be more impactful than overt school-based participation, particularly in the context of adolescence and secondary schooling (Hill et al., 2018; Marchand et al., 2019).

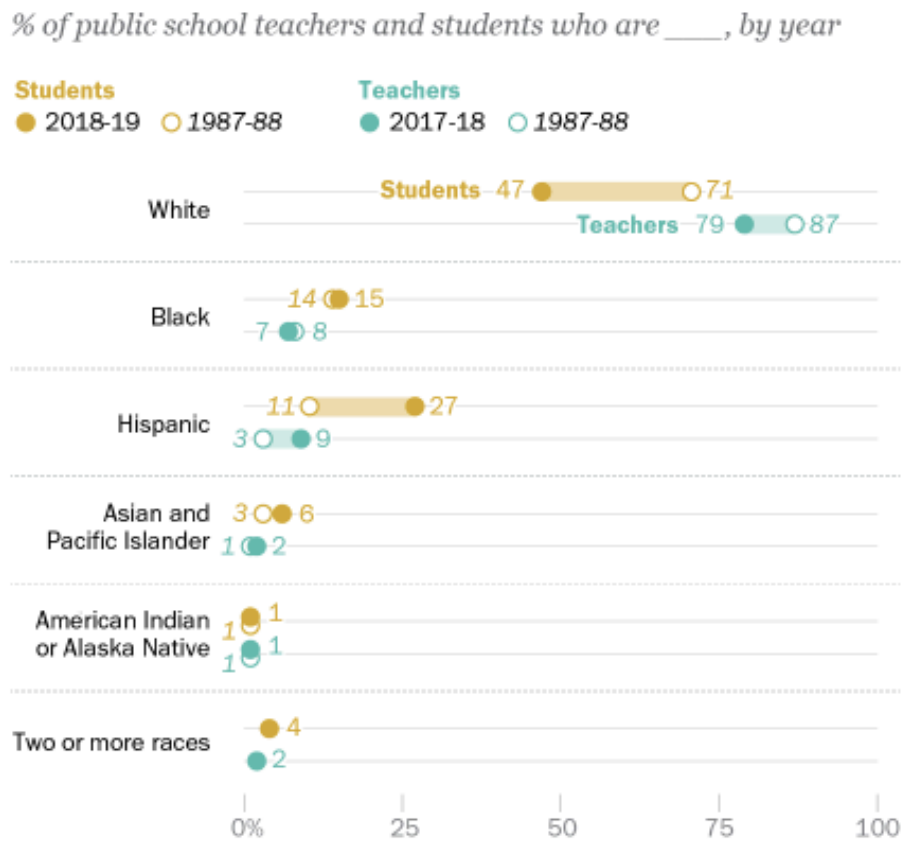
Furthermore, there is a large body of evidence demonstrating how parents of color advocate for their children's education, for example by organizing protests and spaces to improve educational standards (Marchand et al., 2019). Given that students of color are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, and teachers tend to hold lower standards for students of color, families of color tend to be less satisfied with their schools, which can help explain higher levels of engagement at home (Hill et al., 2018). Therefore, parents of color or low-income backgrounds may tend to have different motivations for becoming directly involved at school, such as advocating for improvements (Hill et al., 2018). However, such forms of engagement are seldom valued by schools and are more often judged as a negative, threatening, or overly aggressive (Marchand et al., 2019). This phenomenon – when teachers' behaviors and beliefs about engagement are incongruous with families' beliefs and behaviors – can be referred to as “cultural dissonance” and can easily result in the dismissal of families' insights, mutual mistrust, and the hampering of effective partnership (LaRocque, 2013).

It should be noted that the likelihood of cultural dissonance between educators and families is increasing in the U.S. As demonstrated in Figure 6, the racial/ethnic makeup of teachers and their students are becoming more and more dissimilar over time. While the percentage of teachers of color has increased over the last few decades, it has not increased nearly as much as the percentage of students of color. There continues to be a disproportionately high percentage of white educators relative to their students, which suggests that more and more educators and families are prone to experience a sense of cultural dissonance related to their expectations around family-school partnership.

In all, conventional conceptualizations of family engagement have tended to view families of non-dominant backgrounds through a deficit lens which constructs them as lacking while ignoring social inequities and discrediting the ways these families effectively support their children’s education (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Marchand et al., 2019; Yull et al., 2014).

**Figure 6**

*Racial and Ethnic Makeup of U.S. Public School Teachers and Students Over Time*



Note: All races are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Data for those of two or more races not collected in earlier years. Pacific Islander and Asian students were categorized together in the 1987-88 school year. For direct comparison with 1987-88, Asians and Pacific Islanders are grouped together in later years. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

In addition to the harm caused by bias in conventional conceptualizations of family-school partnership, there are also many ways in which low-income families and families of color

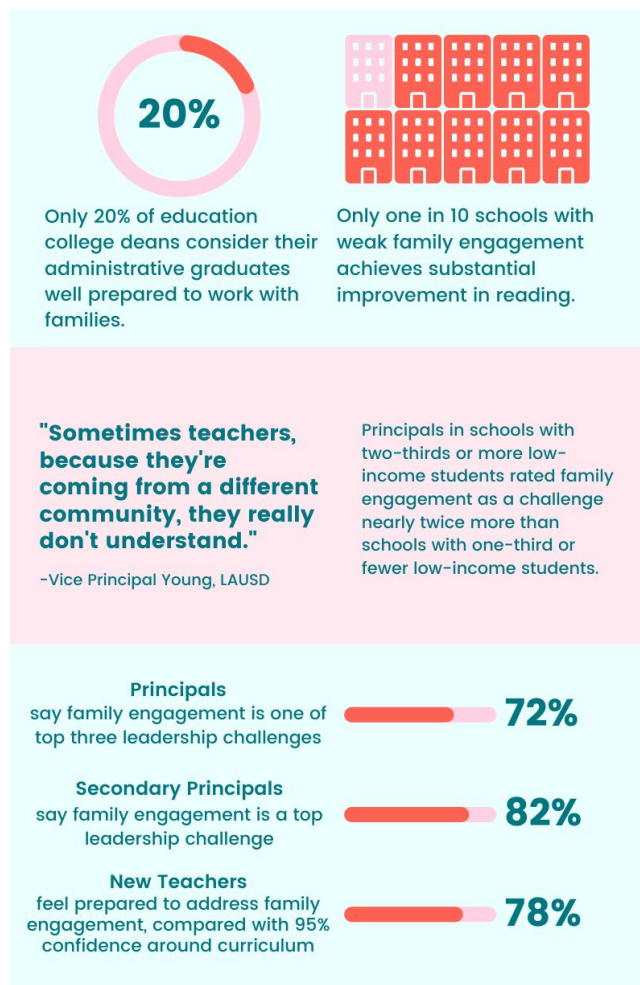
are blatantly discriminated against in their day-to-day interactions with schools, causing further impediment to the creation of trusting family-school partnerships. Studies have shown that educators may intentionally avoid interacting with families, feeling that they are a burden or judging them to have limited understanding or capacity, causing parents to feel ignored and underappreciated (LaRocque, 2013). In addition, studies that have specifically sought the perspectives of African American families have found that these families reported lack of cultural enrichment for their children, feelings of isolation, experiences of colorblind racism, lack of cultural competency of staff, stereotyping, racial disproportionality in school discipline, and other forms of race-related stress when interacting with school staff (Yull et al., 2014). It is not uncommon for Black families to feel silenced and marginalized within conventional attempts at family partnership (Yull et al., 2014). Similarly, a study that sought the voices of Latinx families found that these families felt unable to access information regarding their children's education or their rights, and therefore felt powerless to get involved at their children's schools (Olivos, 2004). When these parents began to grow in their knowledge of their rights and made greater demands of their schools, however, they were met with pushback from school staff that were accustomed to a more deferential Latinx parent population (Olivos, 2004). If not critically examined, these forms of blatant discrimination can seriously damage trust and the chance of establishing strong partnerships (LaRocque, 2013).

Given the bias that is evident within conventional conceptualizations of family engagement and the mistreatment of non-dominant families in schools, it is perhaps no surprise that, in general, educators and administrators are not adequately prepared to work with families. Educators and school leaders commonly report feeling unsure of how to develop stronger partnerships with families, despite their desire to do so (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Indeed, scholars

have determined that perhaps the single largest barrier to effective family-school partnership is the lack of quality professional training that school staff receive in the realm of family engagement (Daniel, 2011; Yamauchi et al., 2017). Research that has gathered the perspectives of teachers on their professional preparation has shown that training around family engagement is sparse and, when it is provided, tends to focus primarily on communication with families or managing difficult parents (de Bruïne et al., 2014; LaRoque, 2013). Research shows that family-school partnership is insufficiently addressed in training for administrators as well (Auerbach, 2009).

**Figure 7**

*Are Educators Prepared to Engage Families?*



Due to this lack of comprehensive training for educators and administrators, the quality of family partnerships in schools is often dependent on the inclinations and tenacity of individual teachers, leading to inconsistent outcomes and experiences for families (de Bruïne et al., 2014). Another part of the issue is that when plans for family engagement are developed at the school level, teachers usually have little opportunity to inform and influence these plans, even though they are often their primary executors (Davies, 2002). This is hardly conducive to staff buy-in, which is essential for an effective, sustained, and whole-school approach to family-school partnership.

In all, when one considers the implicit bias within conventional understandings and approaches to family-school partnership, and the lack of training for educators, it is perhaps not surprising as to why, despite the fact that educators and schools across the nation voice its importance, very few schools manage to implement truly effective family-school partnerships with their families.

### **Solutions for Family-School Partnership**

#### *The Dual Capacity Building Framework*

What guidance is there for schools and decision-makers that strive in earnest to create comprehensive and culturally responsive programs for family-school partnership? As stated previously, effective policies and practices must be built on the foundations of robust, well-informed theoretical and conceptual frameworks. One of the most recent conceptual frameworks that attempts to resolve the shortcomings of outdated models is the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

**Figure 8**

*The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*



This framework recognizes that the failure of engagement efforts is not the sole responsibility of educators or families, but rather can be attributed to the limited capacity of both staff and families to work together to improve student outcomes (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).



Inherent in the model are the assumptions that initiatives must be: linked to learning and aligned with achievement goals for students; centered on building trusting relationships between educators and families; focused on building the intellectual, social, and human capital of all stakeholders involved; based in collective action and the building of networks; and embedded into school-wide structures such as training and professional development (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). According to this model, the desired long-term outcomes for staff are to honor families' existing knowledge and assets; create welcoming school cultures that promote family engagement; and develop initiatives that are linked to student learning and development (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The desired long-term outcomes for families are to be able to engage in diverse ways, such as: supporters of learning; encouragers of achievement and identity; monitors of children's time; models of lifelong learning; activists for improved learning opportunities; choosers of educational options for their family; and collaborators with school staff (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). This framework provides a much-needed expansion on conventional models, such as Epstein's six types of parent involvement, by detailing the roles of staff and encompassing a much more diverse array of engagement strategies to build the capacity of both families and educators.

### *Proven Practices*

This framework is well supported by the findings of researchers who have analyzed common traits amongst schools with successful partnership programs. Researchers have demonstrated that successful family-school partnership efforts are, first and foremost, relational. That is, efforts should be focused on developing trusting relationships with families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), given that an educator's ability to be supportive of families is likely more important than any one strategy (Hill et al., 2018). To generate this trust, it is essential to create a

welcoming, inclusive environment where families feel there is an “open door policy” that allows them to easily access teachers and administration (Haines et al., 2015). It is also important to meet families where they are and to be responsive to personal challenges that might discourage families from engaging. For example, many families have historically been excluded and shamed within educational settings; educators should be mindful of this and work to rebuild trust slowly and through regular positive interactions (LaRocque, 2013). Parents who themselves completed lower levels of education may also feel under-confident in their ability to support their child’s academics; educators can build trust by acknowledging families’ expertise regarding their own child and reassuring them that they need not understand specific content to truly support their child’s education (LaRocque, 2013). Language barriers should also be removed to create an inclusive environment; information should be provided in “plain English” with as little professional jargon as possible, and trusted interpreters should always be provided for families to communicate in their preferred language (LaRocque, 2013). Another way to build trust is to recruit and train parents as liaisons that can approach other families to give information and answer questions, in addition to providing any relevant referrals to health or social service agencies to alleviate other personal challenges families might be facing (Davies, 2002).

As alluded to previously, the latest research has also demonstrated that another critical solution is to provide high quality training for teachers and school leaders in the realm of family-school partnership (Davies, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bryk, 2010; Haines et al., 2015; Auerbach, 2009). As part of this development, educators should learn how collaboration with families and community members will enhance their own effectiveness as educators; both teachers and administrators must be significantly involved in planning partnership efforts; and incentives and support for staff must be provided as efforts are implemented (Davies, 2002).

Other studies have shown that successful family-school partnership initiatives truly start with the administrator (Haines et al., 2015; Auerbach, 2009), so the explicit training and capacity building of administrators must not be overlooked. Studies have shown that principals play a particularly crucial role in nurturing the formation of trust amongst all stakeholders in a school, which is essential for the development of strong family-school partnerships (Bryk, 2010). Administrators must be supported in developing a clear and positive vision for family-school partnership at their school (Haines et al., 2015) and positioned to play a direct, proactive role in implementing this vision at their school (Auerbach, 2009).

Furthermore, researchers agree that it is important to not only respect but to also encourage parent and community organizing and activism (Davies, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Studies have shown that intentional efforts to build the advocacy skills of historically marginalized family groups lead to improved quality of school facilities, leadership, teaching, and after-school programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For schools, this can look like partnering with independent grassroots organizations that can provide capacity-building opportunities for families and are not biased in favor of a school's agenda (Davies, 2002).

Lastly, studies have found that successful family-school partnership programs offer a wide range of options for families to engage (Haines et al., 2015), whether it is sharing family wisdom, reinforcing strong academic expectations at home, or volunteering in person at school. And for families that do wish to engage in school-based forms of involvement, such as attending school events, it is important to help families overcome physical barriers to participation. For example, educators can offer a variety of meeting times that accommodate families' work schedules; provide childcare; host meetings in convenient, community-based locations; support with transportation to and from events; and offer the option to participate virtually from home

(LaRocque, 2013), so that as many families as possible can access these opportunities. Examples of innovative, multidimensional, responsive programs will be illustrated in the next section, as well as examples of highly effective, partnership-driven school leaders and family leadership programs.

### *Exemplary Programs and Leadership in Family-School Partnership*

By examining specific schools that have managed to implement highly effective family-school partnership programs, we can see how aforementioned principles and practices can come to life. For example, O’Hearn Elementary School in Boston, MA, achieved a rate of 90% family engagement after the school leader created a family involvement committee, a school site council where family members could help shape and strategize around school decisions, and a family center with information and resources for families (Mapp, 2003).

At Stanton Elementary School in Washington D.C., principal Carolyn John managed to turn around what was once the lowest performing elementary school in its district, largely due to the implementation of two key family engagement initiatives: a Parent-Teacher Home Visit Program and Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, an alternative approach to parent-teacher conferences (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). In one year, school staff completed 231 home visits – the focus of which is to learn families’ hopes and dreams for their child, as well as their perspective on their child’s strengths and areas of growth – and both staff and families reported a drastic improvement in the school culture and relationships with families; family participation in school-based events increased dramatically, and staff reported feeling greater empathy and understanding, having realized that they had previously held biased misperceptions of families (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). After these home visits were completed, the school replaced traditional parent-teacher conferences with Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, in which, prior to meeting

individually with their child's teacher, families met as a group with the teacher to learn ways to support their student's academic skill development and to form relationships with other families (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The case of Stanton Elementary demonstrates the effectiveness of strategies that are relational in nature, linked to student academics, and integrated throughout the entire school.

In Los Angeles Unified School District, Mr. Franco, an elementary school principal, also launched a novel approach to parent-teacher meetings (Auerbach, 2009). Inspired by a strategy used by a community organization, One LA, Franco launched "house meetings" to create a regular, intimate setting for teachers and families to get to know one another through the practice of personal storytelling (Auerbach, 2009). Teachers – rather than a third party – were trained to lead these meetings so that they could form direct relationships with families; in these meetings, families were able to share their life stories and explain on their own terms why education was important to them (Auerbach, 2009). Mr. Franco found that both families and teachers reported feeling much more comfortable with one another and inclined to partner after these house meetings (Auerbach, 2009). This program was effective due to its focus on building relationships and because it built staff capacity to lead and sustain the program.

Other schools in Los Angeles Unified School District have embraced parent activism and sought to build the leadership capacity of families by partnering with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) to host 12-week parent leadership programs for families. These programs, facilitated in Spanish, teach Latinx families about their rights and responsibilities in relation to schools, the workings of the school system, college and financial aid application processes, and leadership skills (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2010). A study conducted on the outcomes of these trainings at two elementary schools found that graduates of the program

were more likely to voice their opinions and take collective action to push for improvements, as facilitated by the relational trust and networks built amongst families; some graduates of the program even established their own organizations (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010). This program was successful in its focus on building the capacity of families to serve as advocates and collaborators to support their children's academic success.

One of the schools that had partnered with MALDEF was led by Principal Zavala, who was brought into this low-achieving school to change the school culture (Auerbach, 2009). The MALDEF training program had developed a core group of active parents who were key planners in the school's annual Parent Colloquium, a highly successful one-day event for families that brought together speakers, workshops, and information from community partners (Auerbach, 2009). Each Parent Colloquium was the result of months of collective planning between families and teachers; attendance grew from 15 to 270 participants in its second year and was also attended by the vast majority of the school's teachers, who facilitated the workshops (Auerbach, 2009). This event demonstrates a successful alternative to traditional school events in that families drove its agenda, workshop content was linked to students' learning, and teachers took an active role in both its planning and execution.

Positive examples exist not only at the school level, but at the district level as well. In Boston Public Schools, the Office of Family and Student Engagement (OFSE) has done much to create a systemic, district-wide approach to family partnership that is integrated in academics and based on building the capacity of staff (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Among their achievements, they created school-based Family and Community Outreach Coordinator positions to facilitate improvements at the school-level, and they launched a successful Parent University program that builds the capacity of families to engage with the school system (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). In

order to support teachers' capacity to engage with families, the OFSE also created a 12-hour professional development series and Family Guides to Learning, which teachers could use during conferences to talk with families about the skills their children should be learning and ways they can support that skill-development (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The OFSE also partnered with schools to develop school improvement plans that targeted specific grade levels and subject areas for improvement and detailed specific roles families could play in those efforts; in doing so, the OFSE drew an important distinction that, while they would support staff capacity, family-school partnership outcomes were ultimately the responsibility of each school (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The OFSE of Boston Public Schools provides an example of successful family-school partnership initiatives developed and supported at the district level and focused on building the capacity of staff and schools to drive effective family engagement efforts. Examples such as these can help other leaders, schools, and districts to imagine innovative approaches to their own partnership efforts that are informed by the latest research and best practices.

### **Family-School Partnership at the Policy-Level**

Research has suggested that the federal and state policies that have historically aimed to foster family-school partnership have not been very beneficial (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Daniel, 2011; LaRocque, 2013). In fact, some of the earliest federal policies in the US that addressed students' families include the Home Teacher Act of 1915, which was born out of a desire to "Americanize" Mexican immigrants by sending teachers into homes to instruct parents on everything from hygiene to the principles of American government (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). In 1956, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was created, in part to address the perceived deficiencies of families of color, and with it, national Head Start and Title I programs (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). Title 1 Part A program funding was created to help

schools deliver high quality education if they serve a certain number of low-income families. In 2001, the ESEA was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act, which brought “parental involvement” more to the forefront (LaRocque, 2013). Most recently, in 2015 the No Child Left Behind Act was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which places less emphasis on national testing standards, adds additional emphasis on the importance of family partnership, and gives associated guidance and decision-making power to state- and local-level policymakers.

Section 1010, Parent and Family Engagement, of ESSA requires local educational agencies (LEAs) (e.g., boards of education, school districts) to meet certain requirements related to parent and family engagement (PFE) to receive Title 1 funding (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). These requirements include conducting outreach to all parents and families; planning and implementing programs that consult with and involve parents as equal partners; and soliciting and incorporating family feedback. In addition, each LEA must develop a policy outlining the LEA’s expectations and goals for PFE in collaboration with families. This policy must be supported by technical assistance and regular evaluation in partnership with families. Furthermore, if a LEA receives greater than \$500,000 in Title 1 funding per year, it must allocate at least 1 percent of that to be used for PFE activities, such as professional development, home-based programs, communications, and partnerships with community organizations (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

At the same time, ESSA sets additional requirements at the individual school-level. Each Title 1 school must create its own family engagement policy in collaboration with families, hold annual meetings to inform Title 1 families of program requirements and their rights, create a



school-parent compact and develop a system for two-way communication between families and staff (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

As of 2008, the US Department of Education found that family engagement was the weakest area of compliance by states (Henderson & Mapp, 2013), and a report in 2013 demonstrated that less than one third of states follow Title I program requirements around family engagement (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). Given that ESSA was passed only recently in 2015, there is still limited information available regarding the extent to which it has been applied or has yielded tangible improvements in family engagement practices across the nation. Because ESSA transferred greater decision-making power and autonomy to the state- and local-levels, the adoption process has been irregular, with some school districts outpacing others. In all, while ESSA does provide greater opportunity for local autonomy and innovation, there is insufficient information available to demonstrate its effectiveness thus far in ensuring adherence and accountability to these mandates at state and local levels.

## **Recommendations**

In the preceding sections, we have illustrated the well-documented benefits of family-school partnerships, several of the most significant barriers that have impeded effective family-school partnerships in K-12 schools across the US, and some of the most promising frameworks, practices, and exemplars available today that can help guide educators and schools to overcome those barriers. But it is not enough to only provide guidance to school leaders and educators. Given the tremendous impact that education policy has on the choices and resources available to educators, we must also advocate for solutions within the broader arena of education policy at national, state, and local levels. The purpose of this section is to now outline recommended next steps for both policymakers and practitioners who wish to foster highly effective family-school partnership in K-12 school settings within their various realms of influence. We will start by examining recommendations for policymakers at federal, state, and local levels.

### **For Policymakers**

#### *Federal-Level*

As illustrated in the previous section (which provided a brief history of national policies related to family engagement over the last many decades in the US) our federal policies have largely failed to set schools up for success in partnering with students' families. While the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – our preeminent federal policy on education in the US – does outline multiple requirements for schools to engage families to receive Title 1 funding, decision-making power is largely handed over to state- and local policymakers. As a result, federal education policy remains largely underdeveloped and ineffectual. That is, there is limited information available to help us measure the impact of policies like ESSA and ensure compliance and accountability at the state- and local levels. Therefore, the first, and perhaps

most important step in bolstering family-school partnership nationwide must be to strengthen the foundations and effectiveness of Section 1010 (“Parent and Family Engagement”) of the Every Student Succeeds Act. This could entail the following: (1) establishing a national framework for family-school partnership; (2) fostering greater collaboration and investment of capital amongst states; and (3) improving data collection and accountability mechanisms for states. The following table includes specific actions that federal policymakers can take to achieve these priorities.

<b>Federal-Level Recommendations</b>	
<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>1) Establish a national framework for family-school partnership.</b>	
Develop national framework for excellence in family-school partnership based on current research and theoretical frameworks.	To create a well-informed roadmap for practitioners of family-school partnership across the nation.
<b>2) Foster collaboration and investment of capital amongst states.</b>	
Create national commission comprised of educators, policymakers, community members, and other stakeholders invested in family-school partnership.	To facilitate collaboration and calibration amongst states and stakeholders to increase effectiveness and support alignment with proven practices.
Expand grant programs that fund new initiatives in family-school partnerships.	To foster innovation in the realm of family-school partnership across states.
Allocate additional funds for family-school partnership.	To ensure the availability of adequate resources at the state level.
<b>3) Improve data collection and accountability mechanisms for states.</b>	
Mandate states to incorporate national framework for excellence in family-school partnership in statewide school performance frameworks and professional standards for educators as a requirement to receive Title 1 funding.	To ensure that states and educators are equipped to uphold themselves to best practices in the realm of family-school partnership.
Collect nationwide data on state-level compliance with ESSA family-school partnership requirements.	To inform efforts geared towards increasing adherence and accountability at the state- and local-levels.
Collect nationwide data on the allocation and usage of funding for ESSA family-school	To assess and inform decision-makers of the resources necessary to create sustained family-

partnership requirements.	school partnership programs.
Add family-school-community partnership metrics to national school, teacher, and family surveys.	To provide sources of data to monitor, evaluate, and improve practices in family-school partnership across the nation.

### *State-Level*

As mentioned previously, most decision-making power related to education policy lies with state governments. This creates a great deal of opportunity for states to respond to the unique needs within their jurisdiction, but it also creates the potential for wide discrepancies and lack of accountability regarding policies surrounding family-school partnership. That is, while some states invest significant resources to prioritize and support family-school partnership in their schools, others do not, and students and families are left to pay the price in states that do not comply. In order to ensure that all families across the US have equitable access to high quality partnership with their children's schools, states must be held accountable to federal standards. To achieve this result, recommendations leveled at state policymakers should mirror efforts at the national level; states should: (1) adopt and integrate a national framework for family-school partnership into state-wide professional teaching standards and district performance frameworks; (2) foster greater collaboration and investment of capital amongst local districts and stakeholders; and (3) improve data collection to ensure compliance and effectiveness amongst local educational agencies (LEAs).

<b>State-Level Recommendations</b>	
<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>1) Adopt and integrate national framework for family-school partnership.</b>	
Integrate national framework for excellence in family-school partnership into professional standards for teaching excellence.	To ensure that educators are equipped to uphold themselves to best practices in the realm of family-school partnership.
Mandate professional development in family-school partnership in all accredited teacher	To ensure that educators are equipped to uphold themselves to best practices in the

preparation programs.	realm of family-school partnership.
Integrate family-school partnership metrics on district performance frameworks.	To ensure that districts are held accountable to best practices in the realm of family-school partnership.
<b>2) Foster collaboration and investment of capital amongst LEAs.</b>	
Create statewide commissions comprised of educators, policymakers, community members, and other stakeholders invested in family-school partnership.	To facilitate collaboration and calibration amongst LEAs and stakeholders to increase effectiveness and support alignment with proven practices.
Pursue and create grant programs that fund new initiatives in family-school partnership.	To foster innovation in the realm of family-school partnership across districts.
Allocate additional funds for family-school partnership.	To ensure the availability of adequate resources at the local level.
<b>3) Improve data collection amongst LEAs.</b>	
Collect statewide data on local-level compliance with ESSA family-school partnership requirements.	To inform efforts geared towards increasing adherence and accountability at the local-levels.
Add family-school-community partnership metrics to statewide school, teacher, and family surveys.	To provide sources of data to monitor, evaluate, and improve practices in family-school partnership across states.

### *Local-Level*

At the local-level, local lawmakers and district personnel serve as the final intermediaries between federal policy mandates, and the school leaders and educators who are responsible for implementing family-school partnerships in schools. Due to the many layers of education policy, decision-makers and practitioners at the district- and school-levels are often not fully aware of or held accountable to policy standards for family-school partnership. Therefore, the foremost recommendation for local lawmakers and district leaders is to orient to and prioritize federal standards and state mandates mentioned previously. It is also wise for these leaders to invest additional personnel and capital into the work of family-school partnership, and to ensure strong data collection systems that allow school districts to measure the effectiveness of their family-school partnership initiatives. The following table summarizes these action steps.

Local-Level Recommendations	
Recommendation	Purpose
<b>1) Prioritize federal and state mandates surrounding family-school partnership.</b>	
<b>2) Foster collaboration and investment of capital amongst schools.</b>	
Employ collaborative network of full-time family-school partnership managers and liaisons within every district and school.	To build capacity of staff at the district- and school-levels to implement innovative and proven practices in family-school partnership in alignment with national and state mandates.
Allocate additional funds for family-school partnership.	To ensure the availability of adequate resources at the school level.
<b>3) Improve data collection within schools.</b>	
Include family-school partnership metrics in district-wide family and staff surveys.	To provide data to monitor, evaluate, and improve practices in family-school partnership across districts and schools.

### For Practitioners

These policy recommendations would help create optimal conditions for family-school partnership to flourish in schools nationwide by ensuring that schools and educators have the information, guidance, and resources they need to effectively do this work. It is also surely inevitable that creating these shifts in the realm of policy would entail a multi-year process. That does not mean, however, that practitioners must wait until these conditions are in place to act. As outlined in one of the previous sections, “Solutions for Family-School Partnership,” there are many tools and proven strategies that teachers and administrators can start implementing today to build trust and partnership with students’ families. For example:

- Educators can take direct inspiration and guidance from the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), the most well informed conceptual framework on family-school partnership available to us today.
- School leaders can set the tone for partnership by prioritizing the creation of a welcoming, inclusive environment for all families and by providing multiple, flexible

opportunities for families to communicate and collaborate with school staff and other families.

- School leaders can hold staff accountable for the quality of their interactions with families and encourage staff to check judgments around which forms of family engagement are more or less valuable.
- School leaders can integrate professional development around anti-bias training and culturally responsive practices with families throughout the school year.
- Both administrators and teachers can consistently seek ways to bring in family wisdom and expertise to enhance student learning and ensure that families are being availed of opportunities to understand their child's academic data.
- All school staff can make an intentional effort to understand the barriers to engagement that families might be facing – such as past negative experiences with schools, language barriers, time constraints, or lack of familiarity with how to navigate the school system – and commit to respond to their needs and build trust with these families slowly and consistently over time.
- School leaders and educators can investigate the variety of innovative, effective practices utilized in schools across the US – including academic parent-teacher teams, home visit programs, and family leadership trainings – and experiment with which strategies work best within their school community.

### **Conclusion**

The research is clear: family-school partnership is an essential yet underdeveloped field of practice that has the potential to help eliminate educational inequity within schools across the U.S. So long as we continue to see disproportionate gaps between the academic outcomes of students from dominant and non-dominant backgrounds, it is imperative that both policymakers and practitioners place central importance on the improvement of family-school partnership efforts in K-12 schools across the nation. There is reason to hope that, through the concerted efforts of researchers, policymakers, school leaders, and educators, we will see a widespread proliferation of highly effective family-school partnership programs that ensure the highest educational outcomes for all students across the U.S.



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