



# MindPeace

A MindPeace Resource



## 6 Strategies for Increasing Family Engagement in Schools

**"Families are co-producers and co-creators of effective school systems."**

- Dr. Karen Mapp, Ed.D., Professor of Practice at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Family engagement is a critical driver of student academic success, social-emotional development, and overall well-being. Research shows that **meaningful family engagement**, especially when it centers student voice, is associated with higher motivation, stronger attendance, improved school climate, and better academic and mental health outcomes.

When **schools partner with families** in flexible, inclusive, and empathetic ways that elevate student voice, they strengthen trust, reduce barriers, and create conditions that support student success and well-being. The strategies that follow offer practical, research-informed approaches to strengthening family engagement.

## 6 Strategies for Increased Family Engagement:

### 1. Center Student Voice

Engage students as active and equal participants in the school's family engagement practices. When students feel heard and empowered, families are more likely to feel connected and invested.

- ▶ **Intentionally center student voice**, engagement, and leadership within your family engagement strategy. [\(See research brief\)](#)
- ▶ **Consider a [multi-tiered approach](#)**, similar to academic or mental health supports. Family engagement is not one-size-fits-all!
- ▶ **Wondering how students feel about family engagement?** Take a [listen](#) (2:23) to what this group of students has to share.



### 2. Assume the Best of Intentions of Parents and Caregivers

Approach family engagement with empathy, curiosity, and respect. Parents can feel the difference. When we're quick to judge others, it erodes trust - a foundational principle of healthy school-family relationships.

- ▶ **Assume parents and caregivers care** and want what is best for their children. As vulnerability researcher and leadership consultant, Brene Brown shares, *"My life is better when I assume that people are doing their best. It keeps me out of judgment and lets me focus on what is, and not what should or could be."*
- ▶ **Stay curious** about family needs, experiences, strengths, and barriers rather than making assumptions.
- ▶ **Acknowledge and normalize parenting challenges** and complexities. When caregivers feel intense shame, often their bodies, minds, and nervous systems enter one of two states - either a sympathetic state of high-alert typically characterized by fight or flight or a dorsal vagus state of shut down often characterized by a freeze or fawn response.

In contrast, when parents learn that their challenges are normal, it tempers their fears of intense judgement and shame and makes them more likely to enter into (or remain within) a regulated, parasympathetic nervous system state of rest and repair. Here caregivers are better able to listen, collaborate, and consider creative solutions.

Want to learn more about the impact of shame on our bodies? Check out this [reel](#) from Sarah Herstich, LCSW on Instagram for a quick overview.

- *Pro Tip: When appropriate, share your own parenting struggles with families as a pathway to building trust and connection.*

### 3. Meet Families Where They Are

One way to remove logistical barriers to family engagement is to think outside the box on how you can meet them at a time and place convenient and comfortable for them. Instead of adding more events to already busy schedules, look for opportunities to connect with families in the spaces and moments where they already plan to be.

- ▶ **Offer flexible scheduling:** Survey families about preferred times and locations; offer multiple meeting times (daytime, evening, weekends) and location options. (at school, at their home, in the community, over Zoom)
- ▶ **Reduce participation barriers:** Provide child care, food, and/ or engaging formats to encourage attendance.
  - **Sample Idea:** *Drop-off Café* – offer coffee or light refreshments during drop-off or pick-up times to create informal engagement and connection opportunities.
- ▶ **Extend engagement beyond the school campus:** Host meetings in community-based locations or trusted spaces when appropriate.
  - **Sample Idea:** *Neighborhood Cookout or Back-to-School Ice Cream Social* – host summer "Get to Know Your Team" events in neighborhoods where parent engagement may be low.  
*Pro Tip: Partner with one or two families from the neighborhood to help plan and promote the event so it feels welcoming, relevant, and community-driven.*

#### 4. Address Barriers to Family Involvement

Proactively identify and address barriers that prevent families from engaging. These barriers might be logistical, cultural, or systemic. Certain populations of families may have more engagement barriers to overcome than others. They include:

▶ **Parents with complicated school histories** - Creating a welcoming environment where caregivers feel safe to engage with school teachers and staff isn't always easy, especially when some caregivers may have experienced negative interactions with school environments in the past. Below are a few ways to help these families feel safe, welcomed and empowered to engage:

- **Make it personal** - Personal outreach to disengaged families can make a real difference. This can be as simple as a quick phone call, a text, or an intentional conversation at pick-up or in the morning carpool line. Be sure your intent is to not just share information, but also to genuinely ask the caregiver how they're doing and be prepared to listen.

- **Amplify parent voice** - Regularly seek family input to identify what gets in the way of involvement and what supports would make participation easier. Those with lived experience have a great deal of expertise to offer.

**MindPeace Network Bright Spot!** We're fortunate to have a great example of empowering parent and caregiver voices right here in our region with Cincinnati Public School's (CPS) Community Learning Center (CLC) model. This [video](#) from Partnership for the Future of Learning offers a look into this important framework for fostering a strong community-school engagement.

- **Understand, appreciate, and expand the key roles** parents and caregivers play in the family-school dynamic. For ideas, see pgs 5-6 in this [resource](#) from the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at The Ohio State University.

**Hint: Parents are capable of much more than being information 'receivers'!** 😊



#### Did you know?

Around the same time Cincinnati Public Schools was establishing their Community Learning Center model, MindPeace was founded. As such, the CLC model has been foundational to the manner in which the MindPeace Network approaches our work - with family, student and community voices at the center of all we do.

- ▶ **Families living in poverty** - [Watch](#) how one school supports its families through their Two-Generation Approach by equipping parents with tools to support their child's education at home.
- ▶ **Families of English second language (ESL) students** - Language and cultural barriers between parents and schools can be one of the toughest barriers to the school-family partnership. Below are three suggestions for navigating these unique challenges:

**1. Take a genuine interest** - Families of various backgrounds can add a great deal to our school communities. Encouraging teachers and staff to take a genuine interest in a family's culture and language can go a long way to welcoming parents who may otherwise be intimidated to engage with their child's school.

**2. Enlist community partners** - Local cultural centers, churches and nonprofits can be quite helpful in offering supplemental cultural education and engagement. Look beyond the school walls to which organizations within the community may be able to support classroom enrichment activities and special school programming. Consider which organizations your families are already engaging with. As an added bonus, when families see their community groups collaborating with school leaders, it goes a long way to building family trust and thus, future engagement.

**3. "Now you're speaking my language"** - Where and when might it be helpful to proactively engage translation services to bridge the communication barrier? While many schools hire translators for special education meetings, what about enlisting their help on a proactive basis with Open Houses, for translation of important school communications, and more? **A few ideas:**

- **I spy with my little eye...** Consider hanging a welcome sign at the entrance of the school or within the classroom which highlights 'Hello' or 'Welcome' translated into all of the languages spoken by your students. When ESL families see school signage written in their native language, it sends the message - "We're so glad you're here!"
- **Classroom Moments** - Occasionally encourage teachers to invite students to share the translation of a certain word or phrase in their native language as part of their classroom studies. As students are invited to share their native tongue and cultural history with peers, they can become more enthusiastic about school and more comfortable inviting their families to get involved.
- **Parent Peer Support** - Enlist bilingual parents to support families struggling with communication barriers. This is great for general school announcements, news updates, and for fostering parent peer-to-peer relationships.

*Special Note: Any communications around specific student academics and behavior should be facilitated by professional translators and staff out of respect for the family and to remain in compliance with student privacy laws.*

### Did you know?

Encouraging families to maintain their home language with their child, is beneficial to the child academically, socially and emotionally. Often immigrant families feel the need to speak English with their children. However, research says the opposite! Here's a [resource](#) from NAEYC (with English and Spanish versions) which explains why encouraging bilingual habits supports a student's wellness and growth.

- ▶ **Families of students with academic and behavioral challenges** - For students in need of additional support, prioritize early, personalized outreach to families. Share strengths, positive behaviors, and successes before concerns arise to build trust and partnership. And, once that window has closed because a student has experienced a particular struggle, continue to stay tuned into what that student is doing well, so you can update families not just on the challenges, but on the students' strengths and progress made as well.
- ▶ **Families of older students: Middle School & High School** - Research shows that family engagement tends to decrease as students move from elementary school to middle and high school. This brief [video](#) (3:00) by Edutopia offers three proactive suggestions for keeping families engaged as children and teens grow...
  - **"Survey says"...** Consider starting off the year with family surveys to help teachers get to better know their students and families. This can be especially helpful in high school as teacher-student caseloads grow. These surveys need not be long. Even simply asking parents to share a few words about the teen's strengths, their family values, important family traditions, and the dreams they hold for their teen's future can be impactful.
  - **Rethink your Parent Open House formats** - Think higher social engagement and less talking heads. Prioritize connection over information (which can often be shared later as a follow-up communication).
  - **Invest in student home visits/ family meet-ups** as part of your school's culture, especially for families of vulnerable student populations who tend to have increased barriers to engagement.



## 5. Empower Families through Proactive Supports

Curating targeted educational tools, resources, and guidance for families can reinforce a parent's foundational role as their child's/ teen's first and most important teacher! Often parents want to support their children's learning and well-being, but may lack the skills, experience, and tools to do so effectively.

- ▶ **Offer accessible resources that foster learning, motivation, and emotional health at home.** Here are a couple to get you started:
  - For student motivation - This ["How to Help Your Child Get Motivated in School"](#) video from the Child Mind Institute offers practical advice and tips for parents.



- For student emotional health resources, check out our MindPeace [website](#) which offers curated resources for families. Our [Virtual MindPeace Rooms](#) are another great resource for families. Encourage families to visit an age-appropriate virtual room alongside their child for interactive fun and education on important topics such as mindfulness, movement, refocusing, and understanding your feelings.

- ▶ **Share materials in multiple formats** (short videos, tip sheets, multilingual resources) whenever possible. Just as students learn in different ways, the same goes for the caregivers who support them.

## 6. Breakdown and Decode the Educational System's "Alphabet Soup"

This can be especially helpful for families of students with special needs as they encounter complex school systems, educational 'speak' and academic processes that feel unclear and overwhelming.

- ▶ **Break down common acronyms**, jargon, and educational terminology into plain language. Consider creating a quick reference guide for families. Unsure where to start? Check out this helpful [sample](#) from our friends at Lakota Local Schools.
- ▶ **Provide clear explanations** of school processes, meetings, and decision-making structures.
- ▶ **Offer families guidance and support** in navigating intimidating educational meetings (e.g., IEPs, 504 meetings, or even parent-teacher conferences).
- ▶ **Promote educational advocates** such as [Family Café](#) to help families of students with disabilities build confidence navigating special education systems and meetings.

### Bottom Line

Effective family engagement is a critical component for student well-being and academic success. When engagement strategies center student voice, remove systemic barriers, and are grounded in empathy and partnership, schools are better positioned to build trust, strengthen relationships, and create sustainable supports for students and families.



#### ▶ Looking for more:

Easy-to-implement ideas? Visit [20 Ideas for Increasing Parental Involvement](#).

Training opportunities? [Check out the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at The Ohio State University](#) for additional resources, including their upcoming webinar, Family Engagement that Makes an Impact, scheduled for Friday, February 27, 2026.

Personalized consultation? As always, your [MindPeace consultant](#) is available for further collaboration on strategies and implementation.

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