



**Harvard Family
Research Project**

**Successful Family Engagement in the Classroom:
What teachers need to know and be able to do to engage families in
raising student achievement**

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**For questions or comments about this paper,
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There is widespread agreement that family engagement leads to increased student achievement, reduced drop-out rates, and a host of other positive outcomes for kids. But family engagement can mean very different things to different people—from volunteering or chaperoning field trips to fundraising, organizing class parties, or attending parent-teacher conferences. Flamboyant Foundation believes that teachers play a crucial role in the types of family engagement that lead to improved student achievement. In fact, a longitudinal evaluation of classroom practices in Title I schools found that teachers who reached out to parents through initiating face-to-face meetings, making phone calls, and sending information home about how to support student learning had higher student test scores than teachers who did not conduct this outreach.ⁱ Yet teachers are rarely trained or supported in engaging families, and, according to the 2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, find family engagement to be their biggest challenge.ⁱⁱ There is a growing need to provide concrete examples of teacher beliefs about and practices for engaging families that will contribute to their primary goal: helping students succeed.

As a first step to meet this need, Flamboyant Foundation has reviewed the research and identified case examples of teachers who do an excellent job of engaging families in their children's learning. From this work emerged a classroom rubric that breaks family engagement into three interdependent pieces: 1) teacher beliefs and mindsets, 2) relationships and communication, and 3) investing families in student goals and helping them monitor progress and support learning.

About Flamboyant Foundation

Flamboyant Foundation is a private, family foundation that invests strategically to improve the quality of pre-K-12 public education in Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico. We have chosen to target our work in the district on two specific focus areas: family engagement and education advocacy.

We define family engagement as collaboration between families and schools that drives student achievement. The goals of this collaboration are to help families guide, support, and advocate for their children's learning; to encourage families and educators to foster high expectations for children; and to enable families and schools to share decision-making and leadership to improve school quality.

Cutting across our work are the beliefs that:

- Every child deserves an excellent education and can achieve at high levels.
- All families care about and want the best for their children.
- Families are assets in supporting student learning.
- Teachers are very important and have a tremendous influence on children's outcomes.

These pieces build on each other. Teachers' beliefs and mindsets and their relationships with families build a strong foundation that supports the ultimate goal: engaging families in the core instructional program to support student achievement.

- *Beliefs and mindsets.* Teachers' perceptions about families shape their family engagement efforts.ⁱⁱⁱ The first set of objectives in the rubric focuses on the beliefs that teachers have about families and what the role of the teacher should be in facilitating family engagement. Specifically, the teacher should:
 - Value and respect families and see them as assets in supporting student learning.
 - See engaging families as part of the teacher's core role and responsibility.
 - Be culturally knowledgeable and sensitive.

- *Relationships and communication systems.* In Chicago, researchers found that trust among school staff and parents is an important predictor of school performance.^{iv} In order to engage parents in learning, teachers need trusting, mutually respectful relationships with families that are reinforced by consistent, two-way communication systems. To build these relationships, the teacher should:
 - Treat families in respectful and culturally sensitive ways and welcome their engagement in the classroom.
 - Establish a meaningful, differentiated home–school communication system.
 - Be able to reach all families and be reached by all families in a timely way.
 - Communicate with all families in a way that is accessible and easy to understand.
 - Problem-solve with families in positive ways.
 - Learn from and about families to improve learning in the classroom.

- *Core instructional program.* Research about the impact of various family engagement strategies shows that the ways in which families demonstrate the importance of education to their children is the largest predictor of student achievement.^v These practices, called academic socialization, encompass parents' having high expectations for their child, discussing aspirations for the future with their child, fostering their child's accountability

for learning, and talking about the value of education. To enable families to do these things, the teacher must work with families to set ambitious goals and monitor and support progress toward those goals. This includes:

- Working collaboratively with families to set goals and foster high expectations for student achievement.
- Showing families what children are learning, and demystifying grade-level standards and assessments.
- Using data to show families how their children are doing.
- Helping families support learning at home.

This rubric is intended to guide the work of the Flamboyan Foundation and other educational stakeholders in building the capacity of teachers for effective family engagement. Following are a number of ways in which the classroom rubric can support the work of the field.

A Clear Vision for Educators: This rubric provides districts, school leaders, and teachers with a clear picture of what effective family engagement looks like in the classroom. A concrete description of how teachers demonstrate strong family engagement through their conversations and daily practice gives these stakeholders a vision of success to guide their work.

Teacher Planning and Time Management: Demands on teachers and schools are greater now than ever. For educators to be able to engage families in support of student learning, they need a tool to help them think about the trade-offs associated with various family engagement approaches and to help them adapt (rather than re-create) the systems they use in the classroom. This rubric is intended to provide this guidance by articulating stages of increasingly effective family engagement practices to respond to the various stages of teachers' work with families.

Professional Development for Teachers: Curriculum developers can create tools and resources for in-service and pre-service teacher training around the specific skills or knowledge teachers need in order to move along the stages of the rubric.

Assessment and Continuous Improvement: This rubric also helps teachers—and those who train them—analyze and assess their current beliefs and practices in engaging families. In order

to consistently maximize the impact of their practice on student achievement, teachers can use this tool to reflect on what they do well and what they need to improve upon, and seek the appropriate support and training.

As Flamboyan uses this rubric in Washington, D.C., with our partners, we welcome others in the field to use it and share their feedback and lessons learned with us so that we can continue to refine and improve it.

To learn more about the rubric or share your feedback on the tool, contact: Lela Spielberg, Manager of Professional Development Partnerships, at lspielberg@flamboyanfoundation.org.

ⁱ Westat & Policy Studies Associates. (2001). *The Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance (LESCP) in Title I Schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Available at http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lescp_highlights.html

ⁱⁱ Markow, D., & Martin, S. (2005). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher, 2004–2005: Transitions and the role of supportive relationships*. New York: MetLife, Inc. Available at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED488837.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hoover-Dempsey, K., Walker, J., Jones, P., & Reed, R. (2002). Teachers Involving Parents (TIP): Results of an in-service teacher education program for enhancing parental involvement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18(7), 843–847

^{iv} Payne, C., & Kaba, M. (2001). *So much reform, so little change: Building-level obstacles to urban school reform* (IPR Working Paper 98-26). Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. Available at <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/workingpapers/wpabstracts98/wp9826.html>

^v Hill, N., & Tyson, D. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3), 730–763; Jeynes, W. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Urban Education*, 42(1), 82–110; and Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(1), 1–22.