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Offering Everyone a Seat at the Table: Designing Family Engagement That Matters



Kimberly Eichele

Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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Offering Everyone a Seat at the Table: Designing Family Engagement That Matters

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Kim Eichele
Literacy Coach
Port Jervis City School District
Salisbury Mills, New York

Growing up in a large Italian family, we used food to solve almost everything. If someone was sick, food appeared. If there was a celebration, food brought everyone together. If life became difficult, a meal somehow made things feel a little more manageable. Looking back, I realize it was never really about the food. What mattered was what the food represented. It was comfort. It was support. It was belonging.

The meals themselves were simply the vehicle through which those needs were met. Sunday family dinners brought us together in a safe, supportive space where love and self-actualization could grow. While I don't remember the numerical data of exactly how many dinners we've shared around the table, what I do recognize is the sense of connection and support that is fostered for when we all come together. Family engagement does not require bigger budgets or more events.

Often, the most meaningful results come from small, intentional choices that make families feel welcomed, valued, and connected to their child's learning journey. Just as in our homes, genuine engagement in our schools cannot begin with academic demands; it must begin by recognizing and meeting the fundamental needs of our community.

Engagement, Not Involvement

As an educator, I've often wondered: What is the difference between involvement and engagement? How do we effectively measure the difference between families that are simply bystanders to their child's educational career, or active participants that help facilitate growth both academically and emotionally? Parents play a central role in their young children's readiness to learn as they control whether and how their children are exposed to opportunities that support their development of foundational cognitive and social-behavioral skills (Bierman et al., 2017; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

Traditional involvement models such as parent-teacher conferences or open houses are stand-alone events that inevitably fail to reach every family or provide a tangible foundation for continued engagement. Other involvement models may include providing transportation for the child to get to school, arriving on time, or reviewing and signing off on important documents and paperwork that come home from school.

While these actions and others are critical to student success, they are only a small piece of what builds strong connections and relationships. Grades, data, and other numbers are important, but none of that can be understood without the foundation of a bipartisan relationship in place. Participation requires a reciprocal relationship, a seesaw of actions resulting in repeated engagements.

So how do we engage our families rather than just involve them?

As with any type of relationship, there first has to be buy-in or a desire to participate for all parties involved. Along with that, the relationship must meet a need.



Like my Italian-American upbringing, a meal prepared with love and understanding gave everyone a seat at the table. From there, esteem grew, connections formed, and communication took on a deeper, central role. What began as simply showing up to eat evolved into planning and preparing the meal side by side. Mixing ingredients grew into joint trips to the market to carefully select what was truly needed, while preparing the space invited everyone to set the table with genuine care and intention. To create opportunities that facilitate genuine interaction, schools must consider the needs and interests of their individual communities. Planning and preparation should center on the people and places within the communities served. This might look like inviting parents, local organizers, and community members into the initial planning stages to co-create goals and ensure school initiatives reflect genuine community needs and priorities. Families can then become shareholders in their children's educational experiences through an investment that is both personal and relevant.

Maslow before Bloom

So what barriers stand in the way of building engagement between families and schools? To answer this question, I am reminded of something a dear colleague once said: "Maslow before Bloom's." Those three simple words carry enormous power and truth. In education, Bloom's Taxonomy represents cognitive processing: analyzing data, applying strategies, and mastering academic tasks. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs represents human motivation; the foundational requirement that physical survival, safety, belonging, and dignity must be secure before higher-level processing can occur. The disconnect occurs when institutions overlook the foundational base of needs. We cannot expect families to embrace Bloom's level of academic support without first securing lower-level Maslow needs. "Addressing students' physiological needs is often the first step in creating a learning environment where academic achievement can flourish" (KOI Education, April, 2024). When applied to school-community partnerships, this changes how we plan, communicate, and facilitate educational experiences.

Parent involvement in a child's education is consistently associated with improved academic performance. (Topor, D. R., Keane, S. P., Shelton, T. L., & Calkins, S. D., 2010). While this observation may seem obvious, it also requires districts to design events through a family's lens and consider capacity. For a working parent or a family experiencing economic stress, the barrier may not be a lack of interest in their child's education; rather, it is a lack of capacity in the ability to be present. Addressing basic needs such as dinner or childcare removes the barrier and creates the psychological safety and trust families need to step into an academic partnership, moving the school from a source of stress to a site of support.



Meeting Families Where They Are

In my experience, engagement from families increased when we provided opportunities and resources that aligned with the needs of our community. I am reminded of this when I think back to planning an annual family engagement night for an elementary school in my former district. While planning with our team, it was decided to offer a free dinner to all attending students and their families.

Having served as an educator in a Title I district for over a decade, I deeply understood the barriers our families faced and what would truly encourage participation. By providing a meal and advertising it intentionally, we achieved a better turnout than the previous year. Most notably, we welcomed families who had never previously attended events like parent-teacher conferences or Back-to-School Night. By welcoming our community with a hot meal and addressing fundamental needs, we removed a burden, built trust, and created a warm entry point for families who may have felt disconnected from our school.

Growing up around my family's table taught me a truth that has guided my entire career as an educator: true connection is never forged through demands, but cultivated through care, hospitality, and quiet nourishment. Long before I ever set foot in a classroom, I learned that setting a place for someone is the ultimate act of welcome.

Just as food was the unspoken language that bound my own family together, honoring the fundamental needs of our school communities unlocks something far greater. When we lead with empathy and meet families where they are, we don't just open our school doors; we pull everyone closer to the heart of a shared home. *Siete tutti i benvenuti qui* (you are all welcome here).



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Kimberly Eichele is a passionate Literacy Coach with ten years of experience supporting academic growth, evaluating student literacy needs and collaborating with colleagues to ensure growth and development. She is well-versed in the Science of Reading and Fundations Structured Literacy Tier 1 instruction. As a classroom teacher, she helped launch the Port Jervis Schools' Girls on the Run program for students in grades 3 through 5, a 10-week program designed to instill self-esteem through physical activity.

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