FAMILY ENGAGEMENT REIMAGINED:

Innovations strengthening family-school connections to help students thrive

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the 2020-21 school year, schools and families learned in particularly dramatic ways that they can't effectively support students without being in partnership with one another. Every family faced its own unique challenges navigating distance learning, and many schools had to create new family communication strategies on the fly. While school-driven efforts have been herculean, results have been uneven at best. As many schools have come to realize, communication doesn't beget connection—to effectively meet the needs of students and their families, two-way engagement far exceeds one-way communication.

For schools committed to creating and sustaining equitable learning environments for students, finding ways to value and cultivate the resources inherent within families is no longer a nice-to-have. Effective family engagement hinges on trust and reciprocity between families and schools, not simply disseminating information.

Fortunately, a host of programs and technology tools are helping schools leverage the untapped potential of families. When integrated within robust family engagement strategies, these programs and tools aim to strengthen the agency of both families and educators as partners in supporting students. These models feature families serving as:

- academic support to drive student learning,
- guidance support to help students navigate out-of-school and postsecondary pathways,
- informal mentors to cultivate and expand students' career options, and
- sources of community for each other to promote student wellbeing.

As they adopt and adapt these emerging approaches, K–12 leaders have a tremendous opportunity to activate the latent social capital within families to improve students' experiences and outcomes. Whether they succeed depends on where and how schools activate family networks, and for what purposes. This paper details five emerging opportunities for leaders to explore:

- Leveraging technology tools to foster connections and build trust with families can dramatically improve the quality of partnership between families and schools.

- Designing family engagement efforts that support families alongside students can deliver long-term social capital gains for students.

- Enlisting families as partners within students' learning ecosystems can open up access to extracurricular, postsecondary, and career pathways that can be difficult to achieve otherwise, particularly for under-resourced students.

- Connecting families to one another can create more accessible, affordable, and flexible options for scaling student support.

- Integrating metrics to gauge the quality of family-school interactions within existing data dashboards can be a game-changer for driving student success.

The innovative tools and models highlighted in this paper reflect the fact that it's networks—not just grades and degrees—that are needed to ensure students' wellbeing, academic growth, and expanded career options. As part of these networks, families are an inherent and requisite resource for schools committed to meeting the complex needs of present and future generations in a rapidly changing world.

INTRODUCTION

According to surveys conducted in 2020 by Learning Heroes, approximately 90% of parents relied on school-provided resources to support their children's learning at home during the pandemic, yet only 33% said they had regular access to their child's teacher.[1] Without regular access to educators, many families struggle to find and use resources to support their children's learning and wellness needs.[2]

This resource gap between what families need from schools and what schools have been able to provide underscores a major missed opportunity for the educators and schools that aren't well-connected to families, believes Heejae Lim, founder of TalkingPoints, a family engagement platform used by K–12 schools. "Every family is capable of taking a role in student learning," said Lim. "This is not just if you're educated and rich. Every family has this potential that hasn't been fully utilized. We say every parent's love for their child is universal. So how do we leverage that?"[3]

Lim founded TalkingPoints in 2015 because she noticed a big disparity in the quality of engagement between some families and educators, particularly among those families who were immigrants, underserved, or marginalized by the school systems they resided in.

"Parents and teachers in under-resourced communities can have misconceptions about each other, coming from different backgrounds—teachers think that parents are not involved because they don't care, and parents who don't hear from schools don't feel welcome," said Lim. TalkingPoints enables regular dialogue and collaboration between schools and families through technology-enabled, two-way communication tailored to each family's preferred language. The purpose is to build the capacity of both teachers and families to partner with each other to support students holistically.

Fast-forward to four months into the pandemic, and the platform had tripled its reach from 500,000 to 1.5 million students.[4] "For TalkingPoints, this isn't just a COVID bump," said Lim. "It's a reminder that while family engagement was on the periphery for schools, it was always front and center for families. Now that schools are connecting with families and understand their assets and strengths, partnering with parents is better for all of us."

The nonprofit's efforts appear to be paying off. In a survey conducted in June 2021 by TalkingPoints, teachers reported a deeper understanding of their students' circumstances, and families reported feeling more connected to their teachers and more confident in supporting their child's learning at home.[5] "There is a huge impact on children's motivation and engagement when parents are actively involved in learning at home," said Lim. Not surprisingly, 93% of teachers have seen positive changes in students' behavior and performance as well.[6]

What's unique to TalkingPoints' success story is that the tool invests in far more than opening and increasing lines of communication between families and teachers. It also nurtures trusting relationships, which are the seeds that grow into robust, equitable involvement of all families in their children's schooling. The tool's success is also indicative of a nationwide pandemic lesson many schools won't soon forget: Merely communicating information to families won't move the needle toward student achievement. Instead, schools must build trusting, reciprocal relationships with *all* families to both build and leverage these often-ignored social capital resources.

What is social capital?

Social capital describes access to, and ability to mobilize, relationships that help further an individual's potential and goals. Just like skills and knowledge, relationships offer resources that drive access to opportunity.

Seizing the moment for reimagining family-school relationships

Since long before COVID-19, the critical role of families in students' wellbeing and academic success has been thoroughly documented: Students do better in school and in life when their families are involved in their learning and development. Decades of research show that family involvement—including supporting at-home learning, participating in school activities, and monitoring academic and social activities—pays dividends across the developmental continuum, and is particularly beneficial for lower-income students for whom school may be one of many competing demands on their family's time.[7] Recognizing how much family involvement matters, K–12 schools are expected to offer opportunities for families to be informed and involved. But all too often for time- and resource-constrained schools, these engagement efforts can amount to merely conveying information to families, rather than building authentic relationships with them.[8]

Leading researchers, like Harvard University professor Karen Mapp, have called for more collaboration between families and schools that go beyond the one-way communication families receive at curriculum nights and limited in-person school events. "The heart of this work [of engaging families] involves treating families as true partners," said Mapp. She advises schools and organizations to purposefully shift the role of parents from "spectators" of the work of schools to co-designers of students' learning and wellness anchored in shared power with families. The essential conditions of these approaches—coined by Dr. Mapp as the "dual-capacity framework"—

include two-way communication grounded in being culturally-responsive, collaborative, and interactive. As part of this framework, schools must view every family through an asset-based lens, acknowledging that every family has strengths and resources to offer, while maintaining mindfulness of the social and structural barriers to engagement.[9] At their core, these effective family engagement approaches hinge on trust and reciprocity toward relationship building.

Such relationship-centric approaches to family engagement are more critical now than ever. COVID-19 has exposed failures and shortcomings in family-school relationships and laid bare how little effort has been expended in building these relationships. Yet research is increasingly showing that this untapped reservoir of latent resources—the social capital of students' families—may be the linchpin of students' success in the years to come.[10]

Going forward, schools should build their relationship muscles by developing trusting, reciprocal relationships with families in new ways. "Families...are looking to next year as an opportunity to engage even more deeply with their children's teachers and schools," Bibb Hubbard, founder and president of Learning Heroes, said in a statement. "This is a moment to establish clear expectations for parent-teacher relationships grounded in trust and a shared understanding of the child's progress and academic achievement."[11]

Already, some school district leaders are seizing the moment and taking strategic steps towards relationship-centered family engagement. "We have a choice about this crisis. As educators, we can make our 'new normal' better than the old, engaging parents as the partners they are. Or we can wait for parents to lose whatever faith in us remains. They cannot unsee what they have witnessed so vividly in their own living rooms," Sonja Santelises, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, wrote in a piece for *Education Week*.[12]

But educators hoping to build a better "new normal" will need tools and models that nurture authentic family-school relationships by offering both better visibility into how students are faring and more frequent, tailored experiences with their families to help them succeed. In this paper, we highlight emerging innovations doing just that across four categories. We then describe distinct innovation opportunities and constraints for schools to consider as they rethink how to mobilize and engage families.

> Schools must acknowledge that every family has strengths and resources to offer, while maintaining mindfulness of the social and structural barriers to engagement.

THE MARKET AT A GLANCE: EMERGING INNOVATIONS MOBILIZING FAMILY-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

A host of innovative K–12 tools and program models are emerging to harness the dormant potential of families' social capital in new ways. These early innovators are asking families what they want and informing families about strategies that work to support their children at home. The market map outlined in Figure 1 represents four key functions that families are playing in these innovative models, and indicate a fundamental shift toward families and schools partnering equally to support students' learning and wellness.[13]
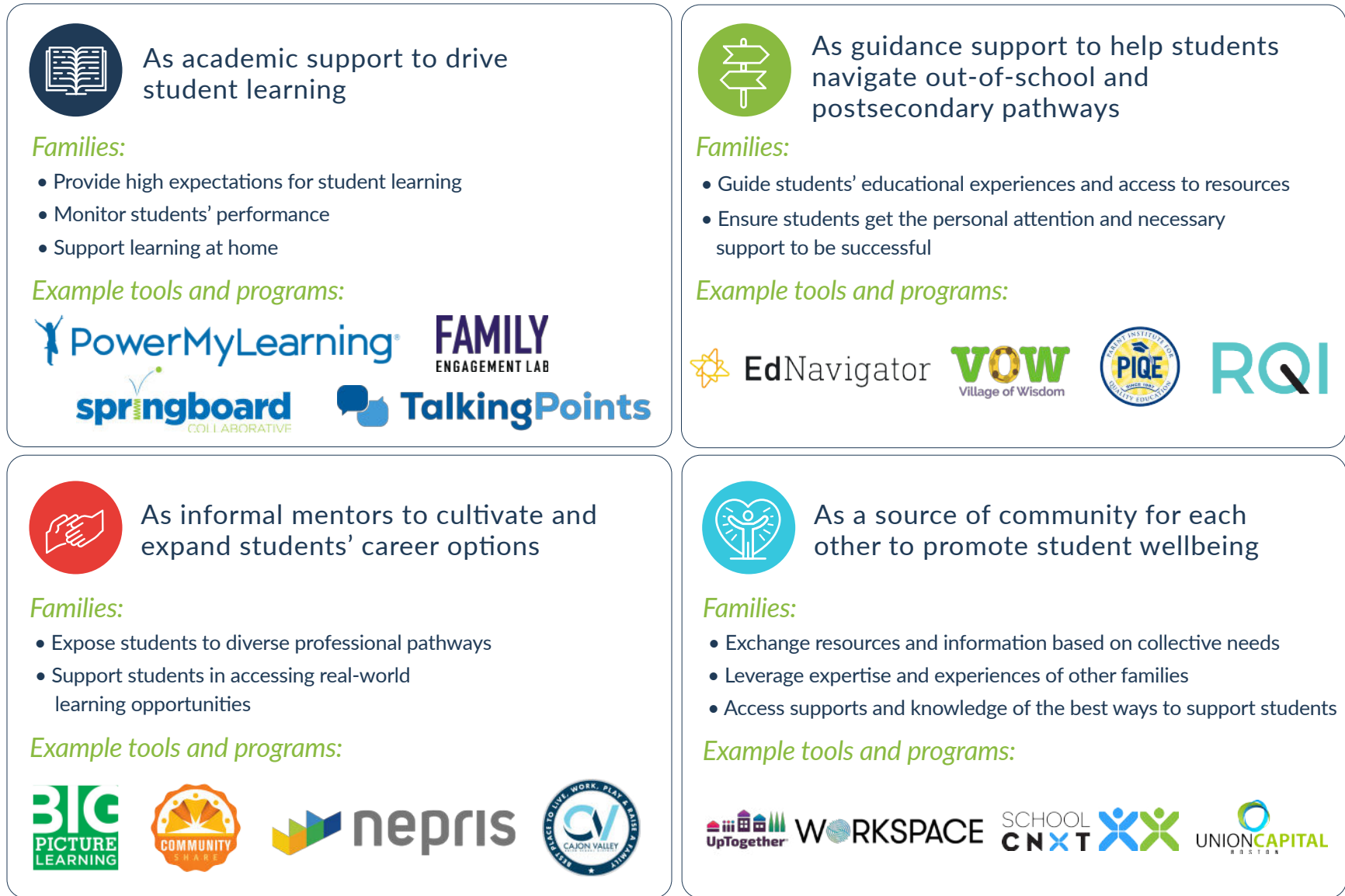
Families as academic support to drive student learning

A host of models aim to enlist families in directly improving their children's learning outcomes. Doing so often involves tools that provide family members greater visibility into their children's aptitude, level of academic mastery, and learning needs so they can better monitor and provide academic support. Promising models include Family Engagement Lab, PowerMyLearning, Springboard Collaborative, and TalkingPoints.

One critical way for families to support their child's academic progress is to help students reflect on their learning after they leave class. Family Engagement Lab, for example, is a program with a dual focus on empowering historically underserved families to support student learning while also modeling inclusive and equitable family engagement for educators. The program offers its signature tool, FASTalk, for teachers to share engaging weekly at-home activities via text message in each family's home language. These text prompts reinforce classroom learning and curriculum. "Parents are taking the small prompts and expanding the [classroom] conversation at home," explained Elisabeth O'Bryon, co-founder and chief impact officer at Family Engagement Lab.

Families can also deepen learning at home by asking students to teach what they've newly learned. "Parents don't have to be content experts to support their child's learning. We build students' capacity to teach content back to their parents so they are getting stronger in what they need to know," noted Elisabeth Stock, CEO and co-founder of PowerMyLearning. Family Playlists, one of PowerMyLearning's products, build on research showing that learning is enhanced when students teach and elaborate on their learning to others.[14] Using homework assignments that prompt a student to teach a family member a particular concept, PowerMyLearning strengthens the "triangle of learning relationships" between the student, teacher, and family. The nonprofit also offers programs for teachers and families covering social-emotional learning, culturally responsive education, and learning recovery to help districts and schools strengthen the triangle. "We did not start with the triangle," Stock confessed. "We figured this out as we went along. We were trying to change the mental model in schools that if parents don't show up at the school building they don't care. When educators can activate all sides of the triangle and bring families into student learning, you get a force multiplier effect that boosts student achievement and social-emotional learning skills."

Figure 1. Four valuable roles families can play

As academic support to drive student learning

Families:

- Provide high expectations for student learning
- Monitor students' performance
- Support learning at home

Example tools and programs:

PowerMyLearning | FAMILY ENGAGEMENT LAB | springboard COLLABORATIVE | TalkingPoints

As guidance support to help students navigate out-of-school and postsecondary pathways

Families:

- Guide students' educational experiences and access to resources
- Ensure students get the personal attention and necessary support to be successful

Example tools and programs:

EdNavigator | VOW Village of Wisdom | PIQE | RQI

As informal mentors to cultivate and expand students' career options

Families:

- Expose students to diverse professional pathways
- Support students in accessing real-world learning opportunities

Example tools and programs:

BIG PICTURE LEARNING | COMMUNITY SHARE | nepris | CV CAJON VALLEY

As a source of community for each other to promote student wellbeing

Families:

- Exchange resources and information based on collective needs
- Leverage expertise and experiences of other families
- Access supports and knowledge of the best ways to support students

Example tools and programs:

UpTogether WORKSPACE | SCHOOL CNXT | XX | UNIONCAPITAL BOSTON

Note: The tools and programs represented here are only a subset of those we feature in the sections below. Many of these tools and programs leverage families across multiple roles, despite being highlighted in only one category.

Similarly, families can build up a simple set of skills to effectively coach their children academically, without needing to be trained teachers. For example, Springboard Collaborative, a nonprofit working to close the literacy gap by closing the gap between home and school, coaches teachers to deliver high-quality literacy instruction and trains parents as literacy coaches. "Teachers and parents have a goal in common—students' educational success—and they need each other to accomplish it," asserted Alejandro Gibes de Gac, founder and CEO of Springboard Collaborative. "Teachers are the experts on instruction. Parents are the experts on their children, accumulating a wealth of knowledge about their children as learners," he said. "Parents have the unique opportunity to read with children in a one-on-one setting. There is no smaller classroom than a family's living room." The model also includes home visits and family workshops designed to empower families to create a game plan for achieving literacy goals set for their child. As a result, parents are able to support their child's reading at home even after the program has concluded.[15] Springboard Collaborative's training also yields important relationship outcomes: "These competencies form the basis for sustainable parent-teacher collaboration," said Gibes de Gac.

The pandemic has pushed students out of physical classrooms and into a larger ecosystem of at-home learning that must be navigated to support their continued success and engagement. Without ensuring that students have access to both family support and crucial learning resources, the best laid academic plans may fall short.

Families as guidance support to help students navigate out-of-school and postsecondary pathways

Other tools and programs leverage families as guidance support to help direct students along their academic and personal journeys. Examples of organizations innovating in this space include the Right Question Institute, Village of Wisdom, Parent Institute for Quality Education, and EdNavigator. Rather than offer guidance to students alone, schools that support families to strengthen their own capacity as stewards of their children's education can multiply the benefits students receive over the long term.[16]

Some models do this by first helping families ask questions aligned with their contexts. Building this strength can translate to better guidance for the family and student. The Right Question Institute (RQI), for instance, focuses on sharpening families' abilities to generate questions and enhancing their ability to support, monitor, and advocate for their children.[17] Through its question formulation technique, RQI supports families in building their capacity to ask questions (e.g., trade-offs of open-ended versus closed-ended questions, no question is too simple, ask as many questions as you can, etc.).[18] In turn, families are empowered to recognize their own expertise and amplify their capacity to engage meaningfully with teachers. Similarly, Village of Wisdom exists to liberate and protect

the intellectual curiosity and positive racial self-concept of Black Children by co-creating culturally affirmative learning environments. The national organization works with Black families to build their capacity to navigate and cope with racial bias and build community connections and advocacy skills. They host Family Learning Villages and Family Reunion Teach-Ins to equip families to advocate and access the resources inside and outside of schools that they believe their children need to thrive.[19]

Other models provide training for parents to ensure they develop agency to engage with their schools as equal partners and their children get the personal attention and support needed in the classroom. The Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), a national social justice-focused nonprofit that helps enable parents' capacity to engage in their children's education and strengthen parent-school collaboration, has led the way in this regard. In partnership with 128 school districts in California and 380 schools across the nation, PIQE provides families with information and skills they need to advocate for their children through scores of hands-on workshops and seminars.[20] "Who has access to education options is predicated by your income and zip code level, and your ability to speak English in a way that is proficient enough to advocate for more choices," said Gloria Corral, president and CEO of PIQE, during a webinar hosted by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.[21] "We need to think about multiple strategies to engage families in a way that is human to human. The takeaway? Focus on developing trusting relationships."

Academic pathways are one key aspect of students' educational experiences that families often need help navigating. EdNavigator, a nonprofit that provides guidance and advice to families to maneuver school options, afterschool programs, postsecondary preparation, as well as their own education pathways, pairs each family with a "navigator" who works with them to "create a clear plan, provide ongoing guidance, and offer hands-on support."[22] As Timothy Daly, CEO of EdNavigator, explained in a blog, "[A] full recovery from the pandemic requires that families feel able, willing, and confident to guide their children beyond the crisis. ...Neglecting parents could have massive social and economic costs that go far beyond missed academic learning for students."[23]

For families navigating the uncertainty brought on by the pandemic, guidance and support for both the family and student are no longer a nice-to-have. By equipping and activating families as a resource for their children, schools ensure all students receive the out-of-school and postsecondary support they need to thrive.

> Family engagement can expose students to professional pathways they may not perceive as possible for them and connect students to mentors who spark new interests.

Families as informal mentors to cultivate and expand students' career options

In addition to providing students' academic support and guidance, some tools and programs call on families to offer students real-world learning opportunities and, in turn, expose them to diverse professional pathways. Examples of these innovations include Nepris, Cajon Valley Union School District, CommunityShare, and Big Picture Learning. These endeavors show that family engagement can expose students to professional pathways they may not perceive as possible for them and connect students to mentors who spark new interests.

Models like these embrace the expertise inherent in parents' and caregivers' own professional journeys. "As a parent, you can engage with a classroom of students and apply your skills and knowledge to really inspire them," noted Sabari Raja, CEO of Nepris, an online platform that connects learners with a network of industry professionals. "[Parents] now feel a sort of

ownership because they're engaged with the school in a very different manner. Instead of being a recipient of information, they are the giver of information." The virtual environment enables the company to pull in a range of working parents able to connect online but not necessarily in-person. Operating virtually means that Nepris helps schools harness local family connections while also affording access to myriad global connections beyond students' inherited networks.[24]

Building platforms to share expertise, however, doesn't necessarily result in equitable participation from families. Cajon Valley Union School District, a public school district in California and Nepris partner, invites parents to attend the World of Work Parent University to identify their own career personality traits. Through this process, parents often become more aware of their own career expertise and strengths and are better positioned to support their own children.[25]

Creating pathways for the local community to offer students an expanded menu of experiences and relationships on their home turf can help address barriers that many educators face in identifying and engaging potential informal mentors with their students. CommunityShare provides regional organizations with an online platform that reveals and connects the social, intellectual, creative, and cultural capital of families, business partners, nonprofits, and community leaders with educators and students.[26] "The knowledge, skills, and lived experiences of parents are one of the most untapped resources that can expand educators' and students' access to social capital and caring adults," said Josh Schachter, director and founder of CommunityShare.

Engaging families is a promising on-ramp for schools increasingly focused on exposing students to career pathways. For schools that function as a community, the power of families can be activated not just for their own children, but for the entire school ecosystem.

Families as a source of community for each other to promote student wellbeing

A fourth category of tools and models strengthen the family-school connection by inviting families to share their expertise and experiences directly with one another in order to equip and empower each to actively engage with their own schools in meaningful and relevant ways. Examples of organizations innovating in this space include SchoolCNXT, UpTogether, Union Capital Boston, and Workspace. These models are building stronger connections between families and schools not by intervening between the school and individual families, but by building a robust and cooperative network of families.

For example, SchoolCNXT, a family engagement app designed to build community for families and remove barriers to engagement with schools, facilitates two-way communication among families, as well as between families and schools. "Before we talk about the classroom, we need to make

sure the kids are fed, have shelter, and are safe. This isn't a new concept," said Paul Caliandro, founder and CEO of SchoolCNXT. "There are all these resources in the community, but the mechanism to connect all those isn't very effective." Through the app, families can build powerful relationships with each other and school staff through the exchange of community-based resources unique to their needs.

When families are connected together, resources can flow more easily through the relationships they create. "We know that cash alone without community is going to have a very different effect than cash with networks," suggested Bronwyn Clarke, user experience researcher at UpTogether (previously Family Independence Initiative). Founded in 2001, UpTogether reveals, accelerates and invests in the exchange of social capital among communities living with low incomes by providing an online platform where they can receive direct cash investments coupled with peer support. Families can track their progress against goals they've set for themselves. "Parents are setting their own goals. Sometimes this includes goals about supporting their children with their education or pursuing their own advanced education, " described Clarke. "Whatever their goals are, we provide access to unrestricted capital to accelerate their own initiatives. Through social and financial capital investments in their communities, families are leading the way to boost their own long-term social and economic mobility."

While creating a community for families to share and exchange resources is one avenue to promote student wellbeing, another approach entails partnering directly with schools to leverage latent resources within families. For instance, Union Capital Boston (UCB) is a community development model that encourages civic engagement and increases access to employment among under-resourced Boston residents in need of help through a platform that financially rewards member participation in community events. Since 2014, UCB has nurtured a partnership with KIPP schools in Massachusetts (KIPP MA) to build and sustain a high level of engagement and ownership among families in their children's education journeys. "UCB equips KIPP MA families with the skills and confidence to lead. In turn, our families feel valued and have a reliable resource for continuing civic engagement and advocacy in and outside of KIPP's buildings," said Nikki Barnes, executive director of KIPP MA. Through this partnership, families attend networking nights and discuss topics ranging from ways to better understand school report cards, to parent de-stressing strategies, to advocating for increased education funding for all Boston students. Barnes further reflected, "Families have exchanged thousands of dollars worth of goods and favors with each other to include helping with childcare, tutoring, furniture exchanges, and mental health support."

To benefit from the resources that flow through communities, not all families necessarily need their students to attend the same schools. For example, Workspace is a virtual community for families that share a purpose for learning, living, and working beyond the four walls of school. Its founder, Catherine Fraise, has observed that creating multi-generational, community-based ecosystems through which parents and their children can access online and offline content and conversations enables them to draw upon each other's collective cultural and social strengths. In turn, families can confidently support their child's learning and each other. "When you have families interacting, it becomes natural for parents to offer their networks to the children who are around," she reflected. "Education is too transactional. Parents are our greatest asset. We are trying to create a place for them to first build community and know they can access education anywhere. That is what's going to help them develop the relationships [they need] and [those] relationships will propel them into the directions they need to go."

By ensuring families exchange social and financial capital, and receive emotional support and insights on the best ways to support their children academically, many of these models demonstrate the power of an ecosystem approach to supporting the whole child.

ANALYSIS: FIVE INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES THAT RETHINK FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TO IMPROVE STUDENT WELLBEING AND ACCESS TO DIVERSE EDUCATION PATHWAYS

As schools continue to grapple with competing priorities and budget constraints, what should engagement with families look like to equitably benefit all students? Will the lessons learned from the past 18 months be sufficient to sharpen approaches to school-family engagement going forward? Will promising tools and models scale?

The answer depends on the extent to which schools build trusting relationships with families and include them as authentic partners in their student support strategies. Here are five opportunities leaders should explore—and cautions to keep in mind—as they pursue these new avenues of relationship building.

1. Leveraging technology tools for fostering connection—not just streamlining communication—can unlock the next frontier

Being in communication with families is not the same as being in a relationship with them. This has been a hard lesson for schools who have worked tirelessly to increase the frequency of their communication to families only to find parents frustrated with the guidance received from schools. "Frequency of communication matters, but the quality of the interaction will determine whether trusting relationships are built," said Heather Dooley, head of marketing at TalkingPoints. With parents receiving different messages through a variety of channels this past year, many were left feeling overwhelmed, undersupported, and under-engaged.[27]

Technologies aimed at streamlining home-school communication have scaled quickly in recent years.[28] But schools adopting technologies for engaging families should make sure they're put to work in service of building authentic connections with families. Rather than overwhelming families, schools must ensure families are empowered partners equipped to sustain and support student learning at home.

Many of the tools and models described in this paper are designed to foster connection and, in turn, trust between families and schools. Trust is a prerequisite for some families to overcome their own doubts about their ability to best support their children. "We also see parents' self-efficacy as a huge barrier to their engagement with the school and their willingness to support their child at home," said Lim of TalkingPoints. "Communicating in the family's home language is one step towards addressing that barrier. The second step is to communicate in ways that parents prefer. For most families, especially those that are hardest to reach, that means via text messages."

Done right, the power of these communication tools lies in their ability to not only strengthen online relationships between families and teachers, but also offline relationships between families and their children. For example, PowerMyLearning's teacher-student-family triangle brings learning to life

> Being in communication with families is not the same as being in relationship with them. This has been a hard lesson for schools.

in living rooms as students teach content back to their family members. These family playlists put families in the role of teammate and supporter—a relationship that continues to strengthen between the child and family member long after the lesson is complete.

With so many new family engagement tools gaining traction, there's a risk of oversaturating families with technology when the goal—relationships—is a distinctly human one. Stock of PowerMyLearning pointed out, "There's a lot of tech products that say they are involving families, but when you pull back the curtain on what that means, you see they are only giving parents information. If you have a balance of positive interactions with parents in which both sides are giving and taking feedback, you can really strengthen the relationships."

Schools considering leveraging or expanding the reach of the technology tools used to engage families would benefit from articulating a relationship-building strategy rather than a typical communication strategy. This plan can then guide the selection of the best-fit tools for the student populations they serve. For example, given the growing evidence of FASTalk's ability to help teachers gain families' trust through frequent communication and capacity-building support for parents, the Louisiana Department of Education developed a Family Literacy Engagement Strategic Plan to ensure student literacy efforts are anchored in authentic relationships with the families they serve.[29]

2. Implementing two-generation (2Gen) approaches that support families alongside students can yield long-term academic, social, and economic benefits

For some schools, leveraging families' social capital to support students' academic journey will require first equipping families with relevant skills. Springboard Collaborative, for example, sees the benefits of this firsthand in the literacy gains shown by its students. Through weekly family workshops, parents learn to be effective one-on-one literacy coaches at home and build habits that outlast Springboard's programming. "For every hour that a teacher leads a workshop, parents are equipped to deliver 25 hours of instruction at home," said Gibes de Gac of Springboard. As a result, 91% of families report learning strategies they can use to support their child outside of school.

At the same time, family engagement models can also yield social and economic benefits for the entire family. Decades of research show that family circumstances remain the strongest predictors of student achievement.[30] As a result, some models and tools go beyond the goal of supporting students' academic achievement and work to break the cycle of poverty through two-generation (2Gen) approaches.[31]

What is a 2Gen approach?

A 2Gen approach recognizes the family as the unit of change. By working with families to solve problems, access new resources, and sharpen existing talents and skills, the 2Gen approach creates experiences and opportunities for all families to reach their full potential and for communities to thrive economically and socially. One key component of 2Gen approaches is leveraging, strengthening, and increasing the family's social capital.

Similarly, SchoolCNXT recognizes that far too many families don't have a roadmap to successfully support their children. In response, the two-way communication platform incorporates community-based organizations into the families' network on its technology platform. This allows parents to not only access academic resources, but also resources to meet basic needs such as food and shelter.

By integrating the needs of the family into schools' support structures, these models exemplify the exponential benefit that schools can reap for their students. Indeed, community schools have long acted on this realization, often functioning as an anchor institution within a broader community, providing amenities that families use on a regular basis.[32] However, many schools may champion financial or operational efficiency and opt for modular systems in which students and families seek support through a series of disconnected programs not tailored to their circumstances. For those seeking to maximize a 2Gen approach, shifting to an integrated system can shed light for both parties on what students and families need to thrive, acting as a key lever for driving both student and family learning gains.

Although 2Gen models are predicated on supporting both students and families alike, schools implementing them should be careful not to assume all families need to improve skills or lack certain skills. This can inadvertently minimize the impact of school improvement efforts, but also lead to mistrust among families. At First Teacher, a Boston-based community led by parents where they learn, teach, and connect with each other to help their children become school- and world-ready, families drive resource exchange based on needs communicated to each other. "If parents feel supported, safe, not judged, and connected, then we already know they're going to be able to give the kids what they need," said Dinah Shepherd, co-founder and co-director of First Teacher.

As these models illustrate, the resources inherent within families are an asset that students will rely on long after they graduate. Schools should, therefore, invest in 2Gen supports that help ensure students' shorter-term academic success and their longer-term economic mobility.

3. Enlisting families as participants in learning ecosystems can support anytime, anywhere learning

The pandemic has forced schools and families alike to recognize the power of students' relationships outside the school building to support their learning and access to opportunities. Harnessing families' social capital can power a far more networked and distributed package of K–12 learning experiences. Schools alone will struggle to coordinate and scale opportunities for experiential learning and individualized learning pathways without including parents and families as key resources and partners.

Hints of this more networked learning ecosystem can be found among schools and programs that provide students real-world opportunities in service of expanding postsecondary options. For example, LEAP Innovations, a Chicago-based nonprofit focused on providing tailored experiences for every student, has been advocating and designing for a "learner connected" experience as part of its framework for many years.[33] Through this lens, student learning transcends location, with families recognized as one of many relationships within students' ecosystems.

Schools focused on scaling real-world, career-connected experiences will especially benefit from an approach that leverages social capital between families. This is exactly what Big Picture Learning, a national nonprofit that supports internship-based learning in high schools, is successfully doing.[34] Through a technology tool called ImBlaze, they help schools manage work-based learning contacts and opportunities that occur outside the school building.[35] At the start of the semester, Big Picture students are encouraged to upload their existing and new contacts, particularly those they have through their families, communities, and networks, and make those contacts visible to the entire school community. This way, students benefit from the ecosystem of relationships accessible to them through their school, and not just their own inherited networks.

Building robust and equitable learning ecosystems is resource-intensive, especially if schools neglect to tap into the resources within their existing communities. While initially costlier, integrating across boundaries of school, home, and community will pay off long term for schools that are focused on delivering hard-to-achieve outcomes beyond test scores and graduation rates. These programs and tools recognize that success in the classroom is only one facet of the student success equation. Harnessing parents' social capital can open up extracurricular, postsecondary, and career pathways that can be difficult to achieve otherwise for under-resourced students.

4. Connecting families to one another can scale students' access to supports

An often overlooked lever for scaling authentic connections—for both students and families—is to nurture relationships between families. Recent research shows the promise of families connecting to one another leading to greater parental self-efficacy, access to resources, and positive changes both in the way families interact with one another and in influencing the schools attended by their children.[36] By building these relationships, parents are, in turn, expanding their networks and building social capital that translates to a wider net of support and resources available to their children long term.[37]

Traditional models of family engagement include inviting parents to slot into pre-specified roles to serve at the schools during specific times. By default, these approaches easily accommodate families with pre-existing time and resources, and reinforce the values and mindsets of the dominant majority. Many of these strategies failed families during the 2020-21 school year and will continue to do so given the unpredictability of the current school year experience. In fact, a fall 2020 survey shows that parents' awareness of options, access to resources and alternative learning models, and ability to afford alternatives remain an issue, particularly for lower-income families.[38] A decentralized

approach—where parents aren't limited to engaging with their schools at predetermined times or locations—can create more accessible, affordable, and flexible options for families to connect and get the support they need. For example, Families and Schools Together (FAST), an afterschool program that involves families in group activities designed to foster connection between parents, provides families with frequent opportunities to engage with the school outside of traditional structures.[39] This flexibility is particularly beneficial for under-resourced, minority families who may feel disconnected from their school PTA.[40] In short, while attending PTA meetings, student performances, and even occasional parent-teacher conferences may get families into the school building, these events rarely allow for the kind of interaction that facilitates building trust.[41]

During COVID, the value of family-powered spaces for exchanging resources—outside of school-managed channels—became particularly clear, as evidenced by families' engagement in learning hubs and pods.[42] In June 2020, for example, and in direct response to COVID, The Oakland REACH, a parent-run, parent-led group committed to empowering families from underserved communities to demand high-quality schools for children, launched the Hub. This virtual model was created in direct response to the urgent cry among families for supports and resources aligned to their needs and the disproportionate risk for COVID within their communities. "We have done a poor job of showing families what different opportunities look like. The reason they may be regressing is because we have spent so much time talking and not showing people what is possible," said Lakisha Young, CEO and co-founder of The Oakland REACH. The Hub model—which is only virtual given the safety constraints of the pandemic—empowers families to exchange knowledge and resources around five components: high-quality academic instruction, social and emotional enrichment, community support, technology training, and economic development.

Given the deep credibility and trust built among the families served by The Oakland REACH, expanding its impact to families served by the local public school system seems like a natural next step. This fall, in a partnership with The Oakland Unified School District, The Oakland REACH is able to make their Hub Family Liaisons available to support and coach every K-8 family in the virtual academy.[43] "The national data doesn't represent our families,"

said Young. "We listened to them and built solutions around that." As a result of models like The Oakland REACH, schools begin to benefit from the cultural wealth that comes from within the communities of families they serve.

Although connecting families to each other is not a new phenomenon, facilitating opportunities for families to build trust with each other can help scale the exchange of experiences and resources that benefit the student community at-large. Schools should be cautious, however, about ensuring that these opportunities aren't just leveraged by socially dominant families, but facilitated in organic and structured ways to ensure families across all demographics benefit.

> During COVID, the value of family-powered spaces for exchanging resources became clear, as evidenced by families' engagement in learning hubs and pods.

5. Investing in new metrics for family engagement can be a game-changer in driving student success

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) updated the term "parental involvement" to "family engagement."[44] While this was a step forward in federal policy, the lack of metrics to enable schools to assess, and in turn, improve upon, the quality of their relationship with families was a limitation for those committed to harnessing the power of authentic family engagement. "Far too often, we see policy wins but implementation fails. We can only make sure systems are student-centered if we measure the quality of their family's experience with the school and obtain that feedback directly from the families we're serving," said Young of The Oakland REACH.

Without new measures, schools may witness growing rhetoric around "innovation" or "new" approaches, but the reality will default to traditional approaches that optimize for engagement metrics rooted in compliance or one-way communication.[45]

Measures for authentic family engagement are still nascent. Those that do exist, however, point to several key strategies that show promise in providing schools meaningful and actionable feedback on their relationships with families.

One relatively simple strategy is to integrate metrics for family-school relationship quality within schools' existing school climate surveys. The NetEduProject tool, for example, aims to weave social and professional capital from students' ecosystems into their learning experiences. Its SchoolWeaver tool offers school leaders an actionable way to diagnose and strengthen their relational strategies with families and measure the level of trust experienced by teachers, families, and students.[46] Integrating the tool within school climate measures can ensure families and teachers are cultivating a shared purpose and trust to drive the support their students need.

The Flamboyan Foundation offers another case in point. Based in Washington, D.C., Flamboyan recognizes that communication doesn't beget connection and that traditional parent surveys aren't enough. For the approximately 60 schools it serves in the D.C. area, Flamboyan offers training for school leaders to capture both survey data and conduct qualitative interviews to ensure families are served equitably. Through its school-level dashboards, educators can view data, such as the percentage of families who report having a trusting relationship with the school. This data then drives school-level decisions on where to best focus time and energy in service of building two-way, trusting relationships with families.

Regular reflection on family engagement data is essential to building a school-level strategy that reflects the context and demographics of families. "We offer teachers a survey to assess their relationship with families," said Justin Jones of the Flamboyan Foundation. "We also encourage deep listening to ensure teachers are capturing perspectives of all families and use that information to guide school- and classroom-level strategies." To support its partner schools, the foundation offers a "Beginning of the Year Relationship Building Toolkit" to ensure relationship assets don't go undetected and gaps undiagnosed. As a follow-up, many of its partner schools also benefit from leveraging the "School Leader Tool" that includes prompts to foster asset-based beliefs about families and drive sustainable family engagement practices.

Even if schools identify and have access to a supportive family member for each student, barriers to family engagement can still occur. For some families, these barriers may be physical, such as health safety concerns or lack of transportation. For others, they may be cognitive, such as poor self-efficacy or negative previous experiences with schools. Panorama's Family-School Relationship Survey is one resource that can help identify potential roadblocks early on.[47] Particularly in high-poverty schools, educators need to understand students' and families' circumstances in order to systematically address barriers to learning that may already be present or may arise. And the better a school system knows every student and their family, the better-equipped teachers will be to tailor academic support in even more personalized ways.

Moving forward, schools will need to measure reciprocity to ensure measurements for two-way relationships are benefiting both the school's goals and the family's goals. When used to provide formative data, these tools can both drive critical interventions and enable schools to pivot when families' needs are not being met. Researchers, developers, funders, and investors have a key role to play in creating implementation-ready templates and tools for schools to adopt. Currently, the market is dominated by tools that manage no more than communication or attendance at family-oriented events. If the edtech community does not direct attention, investment, and brainpower toward measuring and tracking the nature of schools' relationships with families, educational leaders will be hamstrung in their abilities to truly prioritize developing those relationships.

CONCLUSION

The innovative tools and models highlighted in this paper reflect the fact that it's networks—not just grades and degrees—that are needed to ensure students' wellbeing, academic growth, and expanded career options.

Within these networks, families are a requisite resource for schools committed to meeting the complex needs of present and future generations in a rapidly changing world. By weaving families' aspirations and assets into students' learning—inside and outside the classroom—schools can shift from one-way communication to two-way, authentic family engagement.

Families are ready for a bold change. If and how these innovation opportunities unfold will require shifting the traditional power dynamics between schools and families *and* building the capacity of both to leverage each other as partners. By building trusting relationships with families, schools can activate the latent social capital that is critical to moving students through their education pathways and helping them grow both the skills and networks they need to thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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About the Institute

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through Disruptive Innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach.

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