NAFSCE recommends that the Department of Education establish an Office of Family and Community Engagement which can support State and Local Education Agencies in the implementation of FSCE within federal programs, coordinate family and community engagement efforts across Department of Education offices and with other federal agencies, and engage stakeholders in co-development and advisory capacities, including convening a nationally-representative Family Cabinet advisory body.

Background:

Family, school, and community engagement (“FSCE”) is an essential strategy for child development, student achievement, school improvement, and equity that cuts across all educational programs and services. Much like launching astronauts into space requires a team of scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and technicians, all contributing their own expertise and working together to achieve a common goal, so too does setting children on a pathway to success. It takes their families, teachers, principals, after-school programs, and others, partnering together to support the child in distinct ways. Culturally-responsive family engagement that is built on mutual trust should be present from a child’s birth through young adulthood and should take place everywhere children learn.

Decades of research demonstrates the importance of family engagement in providing all children, regardless of their circumstances, race, or income level, the opportunity to succeed. Effective family, school, and community engagement has been proven to increase school readiness, improve language, literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional skills, and increase the likelihood of high school graduation. Family engagement isn’t just about student outcomes though. Teachers feel more efficacious and satisfied in their roles when they are properly equipped to engage families. Family engagement is also associated with a more positive school climate, and it brings about many benefits for families and communities themselves in terms of leadership, health, safety, and well-being. Family, school, and community engagement is the foundation for family engagement efforts.


engagement benefits all children and families, but can serve as a core strategy for advancing equity, particularly for those who have historically been the most marginalized, including children with disabilities, low-income children, children of color, children who are English Learners, children in immigrant and refugee families, Native American children, children in foster care, migrant children, children experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ+ children, children in the juvenile justice system, and children whose identities/circumstances span two or more of these categories.

As communities navigate through the challenges posed by the pandemic, school closures, distance learning, mitigation of financial hardships, a laser focus on addressing racial equity, and above all, maintaining the health and safety of children, their families and educators, establishing strong communication, decision-making, cooperation, and trusting relationships between families, schools, and community partners has become even more critical.

Yet, despite its importance, family and community engagement is often an afterthought in education or is relegated to good public relations. The same has historically been true at the U.S. Department of Education (“the Department”). Families and community-based organizations have not been engaged in meaningful partnerships and their voices have not been part of decision-making. Often, there has been little or no coordination at the Department, internally or across the agencies, in the administration of federal education programs that engage families and communities. The administration of federal programs serving families has been siloed, without serious intergovernmental collaboration. Frequently it has been low income, special education, ESL, the tribal and the territories where parents and communities have been least engaged. Very little technical assistance has been provided for state and local school districts as well for parents and communities in how to increase and sustain engagement as an integral part of instructional programs and school decision making processes. The Department’s current website and guidance on family engagement is outdated. Family and community engagement have not been addressed as professional practice priorities for educators or administrators in the Department’s administration of Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act or the Higher Education Act. The Department does not currently have the organizational, personnel, or resource capacity to provide robust family, school, and community engagement leadership or to carry out its statutory responsibility to “monitor parental and public participation . . . and encourage the involvement of parents, students, and the public in the development and implementation of departmental programs.” [20 U.S.C. § 3412(e)(3)].

As the Department leads the country in the safe re-opening of schools and supports recovery efforts, it should establish an FSCE infrastructure with the purpose of providing dedicated staffing and resources, breaking down silos across offices and departments, and enhancing public understanding of the importance of engaging families in their children’s learning and development. NAFSCE’s work with over 20 State Education Agencies (“SEAs”) to strengthen their FSCE policies and practices and build their internal FSCE capacity can inform a federal approach. With NAFSCE’s support, 19 established state FSCE coalitions, over a dozen SEAs developed statewide family engagement frameworks, and seven are partnering with Institutes of Higher Education to strengthen their state’s educator and administrator preparation in family, school, and community engagement.

To position itself to be successful and effective, the Office of Family and Community Engagement should:

**Promote and Practice Family Engagement As An Equity Strategy:** Striving to support growing populations of diverse students and families, SEA’s need to employ family engagement strategies as a tool to promote educational equity. SEA’s would benefit from the leadership and guidance of a federal Office of Family and Community Engagement to support new and innovative approaches to integrate equitable family engagement programs into their education systems, in coordination with the Office of Civil Rights.

The Kansas Parent Information Resource Center supports dedicated personnel by providing training and resources to districts and schools on engaging all families as an equitable practice.

The Massachusetts’ Family Engagement Specialist coordinated the convening of various family and stakeholder affinity groups, including Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC); immigrants and speakers of other languages; families of students with disabilities; LGBTQ students and families; and cultural organizations to address racial equity and the impact of COVID-19 on different communities.

**Be Well-Staffed and Have a Program Budget:** Given the broad scope of programmatic coordination responsibilities, the Office should be well-staffed and have a budget sufficient to support the internal work of the Office and external FSCE grant programs to support the field directly, including increased funds for Statewide Family Engagement Centers to serve every state. In addition to a discrete budget allocation, the Office should be supported by administrative funds for each of the federal programs that includes family, school, and community engagement, since the Office would support each of those federal programs.

The Colorado Office of Family-School-Community Partnerships has a statutory annual appropriation to cover personnel expenses, operating expenses and other costs.

The Kansas Parent Information Resource Center has been fully funded by the Kansas Department of Education as part of its Technical Assistance Support Network since 2006.

**Have Senior-Level Leadership:** The Office should be part of senior leadership discussions about new policy initiatives and the implementation of existing programs. The Office can voice considerations for the impact on families and communities and facilitate the engagement of stakeholders into the planning of initiatives.

The Nevada Office of Parental Involvement and Family Engagement is overseen by a senior Deputy Superintendent for Educator Effectiveness and Family Engagement.

The Colorado Office of Family-School-Community Partnerships Director engages directly with the Commissioner and Associate Commissioner to advance state initiatives.

**Coordinate Across Offices and Departments:** Family and community engagement is part of many programs overseen by the Offices of Elementary and Secondary Education, English Language Acquisition, and Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. It is intricately tied to equity and the Office of Civil Rights. The Office of Post-Secondary Education supports families and students in transition to post-secondary education. Reaching families with new information relates to the Office of Communications and Outreach, as well as White House Initiatives supporting specific populations. The evaluation of family and community engagement is a complex area that could be coordinated with the Institute of Education Sciences and the Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. Structures and protocols should be established to facilitate regular coordination among offices with the Office of FSCE, such as a cross-office FSCE team. In addition, the Office should serve as a liaison to facilitate
inter-agency coordination between the Department of Education, the White House, and other federal agencies directly serving children and families, including the Departments of Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Justice, and Labor.

The Family Engagement Specialist at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education regularly convenes an Internal Family Engagement Workgroup to coordinate efforts around their state family engagement framework composed of representatives from over 8 offices, including Student & Family Support, College, Career & Technical Education, Special Education, English Language Acquisition, Statewide Systems of Support, and the Office of the Commissioner.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education’s Office of Family and Community Engagement is located within the Student Support Division, with a shared Executive Director for Family and Community Engagement and Title IV, Part B - Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The director works closely with various other teams, including presenting information with the joint federal programs team, supporting the state consolidated literacy plan, collaboration with early childhood, and building trauma-informed supports through a cross-agency team focused on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support.

**Regularly Engage Stakeholders:** Engagement of stakeholders in the development and implementation of policies and programs can bring diverse perspectives into the process, help preempt unintended consequences, and be more responsive to the needs of the field. In particular, the voices of families, the staunchest advocates for their children, should be regularly represented in the work of the Department. The Department should establish a nationally-representative Family Cabinet within the Office of Family and Community Engagement to advise the Administration on issues impacting families. The Office can also play a role in supporting outreach and engagement of families, community partners, and other federal agencies in Department initiatives.

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction established the State Superintendent’s Family Engagement Cabinet composed of parents, guardians, caretakers, and other family members of children in grades K-12 from all regions of North Dakota.

The Colorado Office of Family-School-Community Partnerships convenes the statutorily-created Colorado State Advisory Council for Parent Involvement in Education to advise the Colorado Department of Education, State Charter School Institute, Early Childhood Councils, Department of Higher Education, and other entities about increasing parent involvement in public education and promoting family and school partnerships.

**Have Programmatic Responsibilities and Authority:** Just as is the case with schools, family and community engagement is much more than just good public relations. Family and Community Engagement is a core strategy for supporting equity, student success, and school improvement, which is explicitly included in many federal educational programs, including Title I, Title III, Title IV, and 21st Century Community Schools. The Office should have programmatic functions, strengthening the guidance and implementation of FSCE within the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, and other federal educational programs.

The Colorado Department of Education’s Office of Family-School-Community Partnerships has a statutory charge over a range of program areas including incorporating FSCE strategies in improvement planning, school and district accountability committees, and board-adopted policies.

The Nevada Department of Education’s Office of Parental Involvement and Family Engagement is charged with many programmatic duties including prescribing course work on
The Office of Family School and Community Engagement at the U.S. Department of Education should:

- **Advocate for marginalized families and communities**, serving as their voice within the Department and other federal agencies.

- **Oversee the implementation of Statewide Family Engagement Centers** and other federal programs focused on supporting family, school, and community engagement.

- **Recommend policies** to strengthen FSCE to the Department, other federal agencies, the White House, and Congress.

- **Provide technical assistance and guidance** to state education agencies, state offices of family and community engagement, and school districts in implementing effective and meaningful family and community engagement, building partnerships and emphasizing collaboration and collective supports for public school.

- **Coordinate education programs that engage families and communities** across the agencies and departments creating seamless education, feeding and nutrition, counseling, housing, digital, health, juvenile justice, foster care, early learning supports for students and families.

- **Engage diverse stakeholders and bring family and community voice** to shape the Department’s programs, practices, policies and decisions, including convening a Family Cabinet composed of diverse parent and family leaders from across the country.

- **Provide greater access and transparency for families and community stakeholders** to Department officials, programs, communications and decision-making.

- **Regularly communicate with parents, school and community** about the work of the Department through the development of social media networks and blogs, maintenance of a parent and community clearinghouse, and support data collected by the Office of Rights.

- **Coordinate with the Institute for Education Sciences** to conduct and provide research to inform states and local school districts about evidenced-based engagement and best practices.

- **Work with the National Center for Education Statistics** to monitor and evaluate state and school districts implementation of family and community engagement practices and programs, with special focus on engaging historically marginalized communities.

- **Support and strengthen the monitoring of state education agencies and school districts** to ensure effective implementation of family and community engagement, including outreach, communications, planning, decision-making, principal and teacher preparation, direct support to families, as well as their organization to break down silos, move toward a whole school and community education framework, and establish measures to determine state and district impact and accountability for FSCE.