



Facilitating Critical Conversations: A Cross-Institutional Collaboration for (Re)envisioning Family Engagement

Patricia A. Edwards¹, Marliese R. Peltier², Jackie Sweeney³, Heather Reichmuth⁴, Kristen White⁵, Dareth Rice¹, Ann Castle¹

¹Michigan State University

²Ball State University

³Bowie State University

⁴University of Southern Maine

⁵Northern Michigan University

Overview

Mentor teachers and other family-facing professionals within schools play a pivotal role in the development of new educators. They introduce their new colleagues to the rhythm and culture of the classroom and the school, support teaching and learning, and help them reflect on their profession. Yet family-facing professionals, including mentor teachers, often struggle to talk with new teachers about family and community engagement because they themselves often lack training and confidence in how to reach out to families and partner with them.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Faculty and family-facing professionals from university and school partnerships across five different regions of the country representing urban, suburban, and rural contexts participated in the project¹

Michigan State University in partnership with **Lansing Public Schools**

Northern Michigan University in partnership with **Marquette-Area Public Schools**

Ball State University in partnership with **Muncie Community Schools**

University of Southern Maine in partnership with **South Portland School Department**

Bowie State University in partnership with **Prince George's Community Public Schools**

To address this gap, a collaborative of various partners led by Michigan State University sought to facilitate a professional learning group to enhance family-facing professionals' competencies in mentoring pre-service teacher candidates in family and community engagement. Specifically, the goals of the project were to develop family-facing professionals' abilities to critically reflect on how they respect, honor, and value families, connect with families in ways that build trusting relationships, and collaborate with families to craft school-based learning opportunities that integrate families' funds of knowledge and literacy practices.

The Innovation

The innovation featured two main activities:

- **Virtual book club sessions:**

Using the framework presented in the book *Partnering with Families for Student Success*, family-facing professionals engaged in four virtual book club sessions that allowed the participants to interrogate how power, prestige, positioning, and access shape their interactions with families. During their sessions participants discussed 1) how to (re)envision engaging families and/or caregivers within their school contexts, and 2) how to support teacher candidates with envisioning family engagement. The participants ranked discussion topics based on the modules in *Partnering with Families*. The research team then split the participants into five groups according to their identified module interests. See Table 1. Researchers from each university were assigned a group that was composed of participants from multiple states. During the virtual book club series, the research team hosted 20 sessions where the selected nine topic-focused modules were discussed, allowing for deeper conversation amongst the participants.

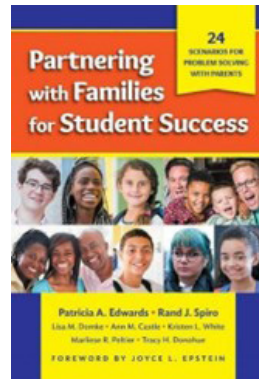


Table 1. Book Club Topics

Book Club Topic	Number of Discussion Groups
Curriculum-Based Versus Event-Based Caretaker Involvement	5
Caregivers Who Do Not Respond	5
Discussing Academic Concerns	2
Caregivers Experiencing Homelessness	2
Caregivers Who Speak Limited or No English	2
Caregiver Empowerment: Making Caregivers Feel Comfortable At School	1
Caregivers With Low Print-Literacy Levels	1
What To Do When You Have Tried It All	1
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Caregivers	1
Total Topics: 9	Total Number of Sessions: 20



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- **Caregiver storytelling:** To transfer new ideas and knowledge from the virtual book clubs into practice, family-facing professionals could arrange to meet with one of their current students' caregivers and hear their personal story. Six participants elected to meet with a caregiver and collect their stories.

Outcomes

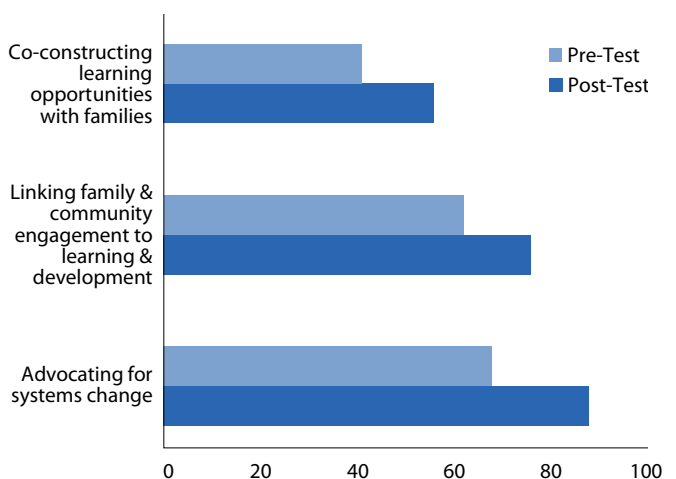
The research team collected survey data from family-facing professionals both before and after the book club sessions. The survey questions were based on the four domains of the Family Engagement Core Competencies: reflect, connect, collaborate and lead alongside families.² They also analyzed recordings of book club sessions, field notes, and caregiver stories. The following results emerged:

Family-facing professionals increased their positive perceptions of how they collaborate and lead with families.

Participants reported increasing the amount of time they collaborated with families and engaged in leadership activities alongside them after participating in the virtual book club.

- At pre-test, on average, 41% of family-facing professionals reported co-constructing learning opportunities with families, a key component of collaboration, at least half the time. At post-test, 56% reported they did this, for a 15% increase.
- At pre-test, on average, 62% of family-facing professionals reported linking family and community engagement to learning and development, a key component of collaboration, at least half the time. At post-test, 76% reported they did this, for a 14% increase.
- At pre-test, on average, 68% of family-facing professionals reported advocating for systems change regarding family and community engagement at least half the time or more. At post-test, 88% reported they did this, for a 20% increase.

Figure 1. Increases in family-facing professionals perceptions of how they collaborate and lead with families





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Family-facing professionals reported reflecting on their work with families and connecting with them at an extremely high rate both before and after the book club series. For this reason, there was little room to change or grow in this area. These results suggest that teachers may perceive the actions involved with reflecting and connecting as part of their schools' culture and their current dispositions.

Inter-professional conversations among family-facing professionals with varying years of experience and different roles and locations offer practicing family-facing professionals a robust picture of the ways to partner with families.

A variety of participants from varying backgrounds and locations participated in the project. This allowed for a rich and full experience as it provided educators with a holistic picture of how varied school personnel work with caregivers. Related to race and ethnicity, participant demographics were 79% White, 15% African American, 3% Asian, and the remaining identifying as multiracial. The overwhelming representation of White participants reinforces the need to provide professional learning opportunities to support teachers to recognize how power, prestige, positioning, and access impact how families engage. Lastly, the depth and breadth of participants' experience is notable. Related to experience, 41% had more than 16 years of experience, 15% had between four and six years experience, 15% had between seven and nine years experience, 14% had between one and three years experience, 6% had 10-12 years experience, and 9% had 13-15 years experience. With 50% of participants being in the profession for 13 years or more, there were continuous opportunities for novice in-service teachers to speak in candid ways about how they might engage families. Likewise, veteran teachers were able to reflect on changes in their practices over time as well as share how they navigated situations and even new contextual factors impacting family engagement.

Family-facing professionals desire more opportunities to learn and grow their family and community engagement practices, but local and school mandates can create challenges.

Participants who remained involved beyond the first virtual book club expressed interest in continuing to participate in additional family engagement professional development opportunities past the completion of the project (n=32). Despite expressed continued interest, only a few participants collected caregiver stories (only 17%). Participants reported that this task was difficult to complete due to additional school responsibilities and their own family commitments. Some areas had district-level policies and mandates limiting teachers' interactions with caregivers. For example, several participants are not able to interact with caregivers within school settings since caregivers are not allowed to enter the school building. These district-level policies required participants to engage with families during out-of-school hours, which family-facing professionals did not have the capacity to do. Participants noted this as a challenge in helping prepare young educators for this work. Further corroborating these data, on the pre-post survey, family-facing professionals reported decreasing the amount of time they spent in lifelong learning about family engagement. On the pre-test 97% reported taking part in lifelong learning at least half the time or more but on the post-test this decreased to 88%; with a full 12% on the post-test reporting they sometimes or never had these opportunities. Participants may have (re)defined this type of professional development because of the book club series—distinguishing now between opportunities that focus on how to disseminate information to families and opportunities that teach how to engage families in respectful and honoring ways.



Concluding Thoughts

Collectively, this project demonstrates the positive difference virtual book clubs can have on the collaborative and leadership skills of family-facing professionals in their interactions with families. Data also highlight the potential of inter-professional conversations among family-facing professionals as a promising avenue to support their continuous growth in knowledge and skills.

Looking ahead, the team is initiating the development of professional learning pathways to aid both pre-service and in-service teachers in family and community engagement. In this trajectory, pre-service teacher candidates reflect on their experiences and interactions with families. Over time, university personnel guide pre-service teacher candidates in learning how to establish meaningful connections with families as candidates assume roles and responsibilities associated with the teaching profession. As pre-service teacher candidates transition into the role of in-service teachers, their engagement with families extends into collaborating and leading with families. Beyond their initial years in the classroom, the scope and sequence places emphasis on in-service teachers leading alongside families, actively contributing to systemic changes within their communities. The progression continues as in-service veteran teachers eventually assume mentoring roles for pre-service teacher candidates and novice teachers, fostering a sustainable cycle of knowledge transfer and professional development.

¹In total, 34 family-facing professionals participated in the project and seven teacher educators at the five affiliated universities. School-based family-facing professionals included 15 elementary teachers, 10 student support staff (e.g. student supports include behavior specialists, reading specialists/interventionists, nurse, school counselor), six secondary teachers, two special education teachers, and one principal. Thus, the generated data highlights how professional preparation programs in collaboration with various educational partners might prepare candidates with the necessary practices and dispositions to work with diverse families across various settings. The participants were fairly evenly distributed across the projects with five from the lower peninsula of Michigan, 11 from upper peninsula of Michigan, eight from Indiana, three from Prince George's County, and seven from Maine.

²National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE] (2022). Family engagement core competencies: A body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for family-facing professionals. <https://nafsce.org/page/CoreCompetencies>

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The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) is the first membership association focused solely on advancing family, school, and community engagement. Our mission is advancing high-impact policies and practices for family, school, and community engagement to promote child development and improve student achievement. This research-to-practice brief was developed as part of NAFSCE's Family Engagement and Educator Preparation Impact Project, the goal of which is to fund local innovations in testing components of the Educator Preparation Framework for Family and Community Engagement. We wish to acknowledge Dr. Margaret Caspe and Elia Hilda Bueno for their research and writing support. You can learn more about NAFSCE's work at: www.nafsce.org/edprep.