

Ultimate Guide to Family Engagement in K-12 Schools

FEATURING

3 WAYS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, NURTURE TRUST AND INVOLVE PARENTS IN THE ACADEMIC LIVES OF CHILDREN



It's no secret:

When families are engaged in the academic lives of their children, students almost always perform better. They're also more motivated, better behaved, and tend to set higher goals for themselves after graduation.

The research is hard to ignore.

Studies from the [National Institutes of Health](#), the [American Psychological Association](#), and the [Johns Hopkins University Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships](#) all back this up.

Just how big of an impact are we talking?



The National Association of State Boards of Education cites [research](#) from famed sociologist and educator John Hattie:

Parental engagement in a child's education has a consistent effect size of 0.50 on student achievement. This effect represents more than a year's worth of growth and more impact than time on task, tutoring systems, study skills, or even early-years interventions.

Dr. Steve Constantino is the co-author of *Engage Every Family*. Constantino, and writing partner Dr. Peggie Constantino, have emerged as two of the world’s leading experts on the art (and science) of family engagement in K-12 schools.

Constantino’s Five Simple Principles (see image) have sought to create a logic model for thinking about and activating family engagement as a strategic initiative in schools.

5 Simple Principles to Engage Every Family

A logic model for K-12 family engagement



“When we can successfully and authentically engage families in the academic lives of their children, those children begin to improve in whatever it is we’re trying to improve,” explains Constantino as part of a new video-based course on family engagement from RocketPD ([see trailer](#)). “Whether that be learning, achievement, attendance, behavior, it really does cut through all of those important areas.”

In addition to student achievement, Constantino, a former instrumental music teacher turned administrator, now college professor and author, says a intentional family engagement strategy can also be used to improve:

- ✓ **Student attitude**
- ✓ **Student attendance**
- ✓ **Student motivation**
- ✓ **Student confidence**
- ✓ **Parent involvement**
- ✓ **Likelihood of attending a two- or four-year college**



While the benefits of a strong family engagement strategy have been known for years, experts like Constantino and others say the pandemic served to underscore the inherent value of families and their role in their childrens' education.

Karen Mapp, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), writes about this phenomenon with her co-authors in the book, Everyone Wins! The Evidence for Family-School Partnerships & Implications for Practice.

"A lot of educators want to know more about how to engage families because of the lessons that they learned during COVID," Mapp said during a HGSE-sponsored virtual event on the topic.

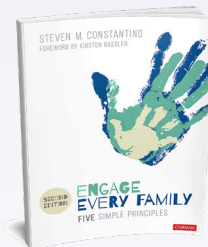
While it's fairly easy to espouse the theoretical virtues of family engagement in the form of a three- or five-year strategic plan, Constantino says the hard work, at least for schools, lies in their ability to put these ideals into meaningful practice on a daily basis.

"At the root of this is an organizational culture issue," explains Constantino. "These kinds of issues are not fixed overnight. But, if we can keep family engagement at the forefront of our mind and if we can keep our mind open to family engagement being integral and essential, we have a shot at achieving success."

"It's about garnering and cultivating the necessary trust and relationships with every family so that we can promote their self efficacy and engage them in the academic lives of their children."



Dr. Steven Constantino,
author, Engage Every Family



If you're an administrator, school leader, instructional coach or teacher, the research and resources in this guide are intended to help you further explore the link between family engagement and academic success – and to provide actionable steps that you can take to turn familiar family engagement talking points into real results for students and families.

READ-ON TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why K-12 family engagement matters
- 2 The difference between engagement & communication
- 3 How to measure ROI with *your* family engagement strategy

Ready to get started? Let's get into it.

1 Why K-12 family engagement matters

If you were to sit down and read 10 different K-12 strategic plans, chances are at least nine of them would list family engagement as a primary objective.

Family engagement is easy to talk about. Every family wants to believe that their children’s school is going to engage them. And every school or district wants to highlight family engagement as a priority, especially when currying favor with taxpayers for big-ticket items like bonds and/or millages.

But putting engagement to work in schools requires more than just lip-service to its benefits.

The good news? Research suggests the juice is worth the squeeze on this point.

9 WAYS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WORKS

But a good family engagement strategy matters – for so many reasons. The nonprofit [Flamboyant Foundation](#) describes the following research-backed benefits of family engagement in schools:

- 1 Reduced drop-out rates.** In one study, 71% of students who dropped out of school said better communication between the school and parents might have prevented them from leaving.
- 2 Increased achievement.** A meta-analysis of more than 40 combined studies, several mentioned in this report, found a strong correlation between family engagement and academic achievement.
- 3 Reduced absenteeism.** A study conducted at 18 schools found interventions like home visits and other interventions reduced instances of both chronic and occasional absenteeism among at-risk students.
- 4 Better attitudes toward learning.** Federal Head Start program research found that at-risk families stay more connected and engaged in school when exposed to intentional family engagement strategies.
- 5 Improved social skills.** Fewer discipline issues. Evaluations from randomized trials found that students whose families participated in the federal FAST program had less anxiety, were less aggressive and had better social skills.
- 6 Higher expectations.** Several studies have found that teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities are at least somewhat influenced by the quality of the relationships that teachers perceive to have with their parents.
- 7 Stronger, healthier student-teacher relationships.** When at-risk families are involved in school from a young age, research suggests that the relationships students have with their teachers are improved.
- 8 Improved trust in schools.** A study of some 60 Chicago-based schools found higher performing schools demonstrated more trust and respect “with one another and with parents.”
- 9 More cultural competence.** Teachers display more cultural and community awareness when they have relationships with a wider cross-section of parents in the community – and this has been linked to higher reading and math scores.

Source: [Flamboyant Foundation](#), 2021

1 Why K-12 family engagement matters (cont'd)



In his work with schools, Constantino boils the importance of family engagement down to three key points:



Circumstances are changing. Families are more activated, as a result they have higher expectations of their schools.



Families have more options. Public schools aren't "the only game in town." Families can vote with their feet.



New processes have emerged. More change and choice has created new ideas about what it takes to educate our kids.

"I don't think it's lost on any educator that the more a family is engaged with their child's experiences in school, the likelihood that child will do better."

Dr. Steven Constantino,
author, Engage Every Family

"I don't think it's lost on any educator that the more a family is engaged with their child's experiences in school, the likelihood that child will do better," says Constantino. "But I think it's important to recognize that things have changed. We see as a result of what has happened over the last few years an activation in parents. Parents' expectations have grown. They're higher. They want more information. Instead of looking at this as a problem or a barrier, I think it would be in our best interest to look at it as an opportunity."

2 The difference between engagement & communication

It's easy to conflate family engagement with communication. But, while communication plays a clear role in engagement, Constantino and others are quick to point out that strong communications plans, or one-off events like parent meetings, do not make for a comprehensive family engagement strategy.



Where communication is about being clear in what we say and plan to do, engagement comes down to investigating the reasons why families are disengaged, then meeting those reasons head on.

To hear Constantino and other researchers tell it, there are a number of reasons why families appear disengaged. These reasons are often the result of unfair assumptions on the part of schools:

Take low parent meeting attendance as an example. The following must be considered before you can reasonably assume apathy on the part of parents:

- Mom or dad works at night and can't always attend events
- Mom or dad never received the message
- Mom or dad didn't understand the message
- Mom or dad don't know the reason for the event
- Mom or dad don't understand its impact on their child

7 'Big ideas' of Family Engagement

1. **Families are the first and most influential teachers of their children.** Student success starts and ends with families – period. Full stop.
2. **Most schools are adept at engaging the already engaged.** Some parents are engaged – no matter what. These aren't the families we need to focus on.
3. **Family engagement is not about doing more, but doing what we already do, differently.** Family engagement isn't an add on. Success requires making space by changing behavior.
4. **Family engagement is a process, not an event.** Success cannot be measured by event attendance. Focus on student outcomes.
5. **Relationships with families that are disengaged must lead to increased family efficacy.** It comes down to building trust, especially with at-risk students and families.
6. **There is a direct correlation between underserved students & disengaged families.** The students who need the most, often come from families who need the most engagement.
7. **Without a process to build staff capacity the process cannot be sustained over time.** This stuff is learned – which is why family engagement needs to be part of your PD strategy.

Source: Dr. Steve Constantino, 7 Big Ideas of Family Engagement

3 How to measure ROI with your family engagement strategy

Of course, this all sounds good. But getting teachers and staff to change behaviors and mindsets is never easy, especially when their plates are already full with mandates.

Says Constantino: "I try to make the point that family engagement is not about more, it's about doing what we already do differently – and then, how do we measure that, whatever our goals are. Is it absenteeism, or test scores or behaviors, and so on?"

**"An important question to ask yourself is do you wish that every family were engaged?
Another question might be: Do you believe that every family wants to be engaged?"**

Dr. Steven Constantino, author, Engage Every Family

MEASURABLE FACTORS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In a collaboration with Mapp and the HGSE, school research firm Panorama Education lists the following factors when considering the impact of family engagement.

School fit

a family's perceptions of how a school meets their child's needs



Family efficacy

a family's confidence in supporting a child's needs at home



School climate

a family's overall perceptions of social and learning environments



Barriers to engagement

factors that hinder a family's engagement with a school



Source: Panorama Education, 2024

Why is measurement so important?



For one, we want to know what works, says Constantino. When you think of family engagement in terms of a series of activities, we're also asking educators and staff to give their time. It's important that schools make an effort to demonstrate how and why that is time well spent.

"Sometimes I get labeled an event basher," quips Constantino. "But, if we're going to ask teachers to give up a great deal of their time, their energy and their resources to do these things, it stands to reason that we ought to figure out a way in which we can see some kind of result. If we can do that, then maybe these things become a part of a bigger plan. Again, we're not asking people to do more. We're simply rethinking this whole idea of family engagement with a focus on what works."

Ready to turn K-12 family engagement theory to practice in your schools?

Catch Dr. Steve Constantino on The RocketPD Podcast

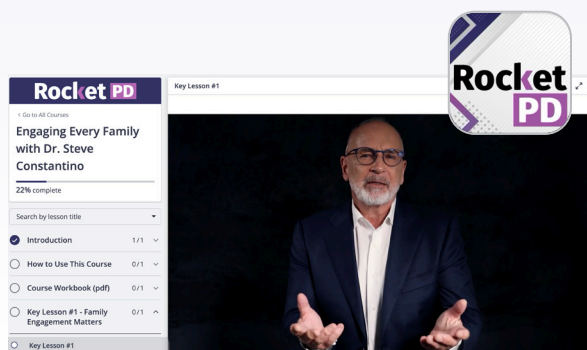
Catch [Corey Murray's interview with Dr. Steve Constantino](#) on K-12 family engagement as a solution to systemic challenges.

Subscribe to RocketPD on YouTube, or download wherever your favorite pods are found!



Take Steve's 60-min. Course on Engaging Every Family

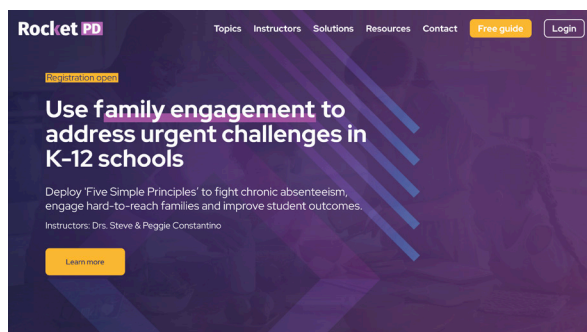
Download the RocketPD app and join Dr. Constantino over [5 short video lessons](#) with practical job-embedded outcomes. Video-based course includes a downloadable workbook and a Certificate of Completion.



Register for Drs. Steve & Peggie Constantino's Live-Virtual Cohort

Don't miss your chance to collaborate with Drs. Steve & Peggie Constantino and other educators from around the world for a collaborative learning experience, [Use family engagement to address urgent challenges in K-12 schools](#). Spots are limited. Discounts available for teams.

Visit RocketPD.com or email info@rocketpd.com to learn more.



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