

# *Improving learning through* **FAMILY** --- **SCHOOL** *partnerships*

The key to long-term success with the LCAP process is evaluating what is working well and what needs still exist, and then constantly striving to strengthen your efforts.

California's new Local Control Funding Formula law offers a historic opportunity for school administrators throughout the state to help usher in a new era of parent and family engagement in our schools. It's an exciting time – a moment parents and educators must seize together to help all children succeed.

Now that we have all navigated the previously uncharted waters of the LCFF and Local Control and Accountability Plans for the first time in our districts, it's also a good time to reflect on the initial implementation process – what worked, what can be improved – so we can continue to strengthen our efforts moving forward, recognizing that the LCAP is not a one-time state plan, but rather an ongoing, new way of operating in all of California's 1,000 school districts.

School and district administrators as well as teachers play a pivotal role in leading this process by facilitating family engagement in meaningful ways that will fulfill the promise of LCFF and improve outcomes for all students. When families, schools and commu-

nities work as partners, student achievement is boosted and children are better prepared to lead happy and productive lives.

Informing and educating all parents about LCFF is a top priority for California State PTA. As a grass roots association with more than a century of experience in connecting families and schools and helping parents develop leadership, communications and advocacy skills, we have been developing and sharing a range of information, training and resources to support parents, schools and districts.

## **Raising awareness: Tips for school leaders**

Based on our work, we've developed a list of important tips and strategies for school leaders to keep in mind as you continue to assess and strengthen your local plans, build community capacity, and embrace the potential of LCFF and your parents and families to improve learning.

A poll conducted last fall by EdSource

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*By Colleen A.R. You and Paul Richman*

showed 57 percent of parents with children in public schools were not yet aware of the new LCFF. While this percentage has certainly improved – thanks to outreach efforts by school leaders, PTAs and other community groups – it’s still a major call to action. For LCFF to succeed, all parents should be aware of the new law and the importance of participating in the LCAP.

In March, PTA partnered with Education Trust West on a more detailed survey of our members. This research further showed that once parents learned more about the LCFF and LCAP, their support increased for its stated objectives, and – significantly – they indicated a greater willingness to be part of the process.

We are careful to remind all education stakeholders and the public that simply adding a new requirement in state law for more parent engagement is not enough. We can’t simply pull a switch and cause greater levels of engagement. It takes hard work – and that work starts with getting the word out to make all parents aware of the new opportunity and the importance of the LCFF and LCAP.

### **Family engagement is an investment**

There are no shortcuts to raising student achievement or to building successful parent engagement. Each takes an investment of time and resources and ongoing commitment by school districts, educators, parents and community partners working together.

Authentic engagement is much more than a one-time check-box on a form. It’s about building a culture at every school where parents and family members feel welcomed, respected and appreciated – a culture where information is freely shared, and input is sought and genuinely considered.

Remember, too, that investments in parent engagement are highly cost effective. Creating parent resource centers, hiring parent liaisons, providing interpreters and translation, offering parent leadership training such as through PTA’s School Smarts parent engagement program – most of these activities cost very little and make a huge positive impact.

Many school districts are already doing excellent work to engage parents.

For instance, Pomona Unified School District in Los Angeles County took a model approach to engaging parents and community members by hosting a mix of traditional stakeholder educational workshops as well as sessions where school administrators, district staff, principals and teachers learned *alongside* parents about the new LCFF and LCAP.

Pomona USD partnered with the state and council PTA to engage more than 70 parent



leaders in “learning conversations” that focused on understanding the effectiveness of existing district programs, understanding the LCAP through different issue lenses such as student health and achievement and arts education, and most of all, focusing on the power of relationships and understanding each other’s roles through open dialogue and feedback.

Many districts have similarly held dozens of meetings, shared information in multiple languages at school sites across the district, promoted multiple ways for parents to engage, and been responsive to parent and community input in their initial plans. But there is also much more that all districts can do to make this the standard of practice across the state.

### **Parent and family engagement is local**

A vital premise of the new LCFF is that decisions affecting student success are best made by those closest to the classroom. The PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Assessment Guide (see sidebar, page 14) provides an excellent, research-

### **Parent and family engagement for student success starts at home**

**E**ngaged parents make a difference in ensuring that their children enjoy overall success in school. More than 30 years of research indicates as much. It tells us that students with involved parents are more likely to attend school regularly, perform better in school, earn higher grades, pass their classes, develop better social skills and go on to post-secondary education.

This successful strategy is based on a shared understanding in the school community that parents are a child’s first teachers and key resources in their child’s education and growth. As important stakeholders, engaged parents are involved in all aspects of their child’s education. Whether it’s reading together, monitoring homework at the kitchen table, talking to teachers about their child’s progress or taking an active part in school governance and decision-making, parents make a difference.

Administrators play a lead role in making information, training and support available to all parents to help them support their children at home.

based framework to guide every school district’s LCAP. We recommend that every plan seek to address each of the standards and that the various indicators help all stakeholders in the district to better understand the standards.

What is the best way to measure progress toward the standards? In the spirit of local control, we encourage that question to be part of every district’s conversation around the LCAP. As part of local plans, each district, with parent input, should determine how it will build stronger family-school partnerships and measure progress toward each of the standards and indicators based on the priorities and needs of its community.

The success of collaborative efforts often hinges on how early discussions begin among parents and school leaders. The ear-

## PTA guide outlines six standards for family-school partnerships



The PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Assessment Guide ([www.pta.org/files/national\\_standards\\_assessment\\_guide.pdf](http://www.pta.org/files/national_standards_assessment_guide.pdf)) describes indicators for each of the six accepted standards for family-school partnerships.

The guide is based on extensive research over the past 20 years, and was developed with the guidance and support of prominent education leaders and practitioners in the field of family involvement across the country. Serving as the foundation of the

PTA Standards and Assessment Guide is the work in identifying six types of parent involvement by Joyce L. Epstein of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.

The guide is also informed by the research of other experts on family-school partnerships, including Anne T. Henderson, senior consultant, Community Organizing and Engagement, Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Karen L. Mapp, lecturer, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

lier you engage parents in the discussions and enable them to help shape processes – being especially sensitive to the learning needs and inclusive engagement across all sites, including those that may be experiencing principal turnover – the greater the chances to build long-term collaboration.

### Embedding parent engagement strategies

While parent engagement is specifically identified as one of the eight state priority areas that all LCAPs must address, it is important to recognize that parent engagement is also a strategy that will enable school districts to achieve their goals in each of the other priority areas.

As such, districts should be sure to embed parent engagement components throughout their entire LCAP plans, and begin asking questions such as, “What is the role of parents in helping ensure positive school climates?” and “What do parents need to know about the Common Core Standards to support successful implementation?”

Our surveys show that parents also want to know where students and districts stand now, what programs and interventions their districts already have in place, and how those interventions are working. To assist in that understanding, PTA has developed new LCAP Quick Guides for each of

the eight state priority areas, which provide sample questions for parents to begin to engage in an open dialogue with school leaders as well.

### Services for students with greater needs

One of the core features of the LCFF is that it provides greater local school district decision-making authority. As Gov. Jerry Brown has said, those closest to the schools know best about their schools.

At the same time, the LCFF purposely focuses on making sure that students with greater needs – low-income students, English language learners and foster youth – receive the additional services and support the supplemental and concentration grants are intended to provide.

### Building bridges, breaking down barriers

When developing engagement plans, school districts must focus on what the parents in their communities need – it’s imperative that schools meet parents “where they are.” That means offering multiple meeting locations and times to accommodate schedules and transportation capabilities. It means providing translation and interpretation to break down language barriers.

It also means recognizing that parents come to the table with different levels of

knowledge about educational issues, different comfort levels about participating in meetings, and different past experiences interacting with schools.

As we’ve seen through the PTA School Smarts parent engagement program, parents from all backgrounds often desire more foundational training about the school system. They want to know more about how their children learn, and the different ways to get involved, before they feel comfortable and confident to attend or speak up at a school board meeting, especially on a specific budget matter.

As part of your next phase of LCAP planning, focus on developing a large pool of parents from all backgrounds who will feel comfortable participating in the process for years to come.

When we talk to parents, teachers, administrators and school board members, one of the key things we remind them is that perhaps the best part of the LCFF-LCAP process is that it creates more conversation and dialogue among us.

### Teachers and principals are vital links

Teachers are parents’ most important links to their schools. Any communications plan to reach parents that fails to include a role for teachers is an incomplete plan. Similarly, we know that the best outreach and engagement occurs at school sites where the principal has established it as a priority. Authentic engagement is a collaborative effort between parents and educators – when we all work together, students succeed.

### Be accessible, be transparent

Administrators set the tone for constructive engagement by being accessible and approaching it from the perspective of what parents need, rather than what the district can do, or what the minimum requirements may be.

Value the dialogue. This is about building greater common understanding so that our children are better served.

### Make it real and make it relevant

State policymakers are infamous for making education policy sound complicated. Jargon and acronyms abound: LCAP, Com-

mon Core, Smarter Balanced, NCLB – the list goes on – and it can quickly cause parents to rub their temples. One of the best ways to engage parents is to ditch the jargon and communicate in a straightforward way. Educators should explain clearly to parents how a particular program or service affects their child in his or her classroom.

#### **Show parents you genuinely valued their time and participation**

How did your school district process all of the initial input it received from parents, students and community members? Which feedback shaped your district's first LCAP? Parents will understand that not every idea makes it into the district's final plan – but they also want to see that their ideas were in fact listened to and thoughtfully considered.

Take every opportunity to share back with parents and your community summaries from input sessions, as well as brief reports on how the feedback is being incorporated into or informing the plan. If some suggestions from parents take the district longer

to achieve, be sure to note those and explain how the district plans to take action to move in those directions.

Also, don't rest once you've shared back with your district advisory committee.

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Their work is made more valuable when the district makes information and "report backs" accessible to all parents and the public. Transparency and frequent sharing back are some of the core ways to demonstrate how much you value participation.

Neither the new LCAP process nor parent engagement is static. The key to long-term success is evaluating what you're doing that is working well and what the additional needs are, and constantly striving to improve. Again, the Family-School Partnerships Standards Assessment Guide is a good place to start in terms of evaluating what is working.

Most of all ... seize the opportunity for a new spirit of collaboration. The greatest promise of the new era of engagement is that parents, educators and elected school board members will talk more often and work together even more. The results, when we do, will be amazing for children. ■

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*The association connects families and schools, and has nearly 800,000 members throughout the state working on behalf of public schools, children and families, with the motto, "Every child, one voice." For more information, visit [www.capta.org](http://www.capta.org).*

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