DRIVER RESEARCH BRIEF: COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

A research brief to maximize the success of African American male students

About this brief

This research brief brings to life Kingmakers of Oakland's driver research through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding collaborative equity work nationally, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for African American/Black male youth.

The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for educators and community partners to use during professional learning and collaborative conversations. This research brief explores how schools and educators can work together to improve community and family engagement for the benefit of Black boys.

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Focus

Decades of research describe a compelling need to focus on community and family involvement to advance Black boys' educational experiences and success.[1] When schools create trusting partnerships with communities and families — students benefit significantly. Likewise, when schools and districts support these partnerships through thoughtful, equitable policies and practices, they pave powerful pathways to college and career readiness for Black boys by fostering and affirming a positive school culture of care.[2] Effective community and family engagement has been described as "an intentional and systemic partnership of educators, families, and community members...(who) share responsibility for a student's preparation for school, work and life, from the time the child is born to young adulthood." [3] Similarly, research indicates that the following two components are foundational to improving community and family engagement practices: (1) build trust and partnerships among community members, families, students, and educators, and (2) connect to student learning outcomes.[4]

Build Trust and Partnerships: Communities, Families, and Educators

When positive interactions among community members, families, students, and educators are characterized by mutual respect, trust, open communication, and inclusion in decision making, students and their families are more likely to report a sense of belonging at school.[5] Likewise, these positive interactions benefit students' health, social and emotional well-being, and cognitive skills.[6] Key factors to building trust across communities, families, and educators include planning to (1) strengthen the capacity of educators to build partnerships with communities and families; (2) ensure that all families feel welcome and respected at school; and (3) collaboratively lead community and family engagement activities.[7]

Research shows that a lack of trust is often what keeps historically marginalized families from spending time at school.[8] For this reason, trust in a school setting needs to be crafted intentionally. Trusting relationships across schools, communities, and families do not exist in a vacuum; they take time, understanding, and intentionality to build.[9] Trust is shaped by the culture of the school community —its beliefs, goals, social norms, practices, everyday routines, languages, and economic resources. This means that trusting school-community-family relationships are culturally responsive, co-constructed, and mutually beneficial. [10]

In order to create a trusting culture of care for Black boys, administrators, school districts, and state boards of education need to acknowledge the harmful effects of racism in school contexts, including historical and current exclusionary practices, and design professional learning to explore the effects of harmful practices and propose solutions to eradicate practices that lead to disparate outcomes for Black boys.[11] Similarly, cultivating culturally responsive family engagement with Black communities, families, and their schools creates a positive school culture of success for Black boys.[12] For example, this might include the

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selection of texts in coursework, displays of images of high-achieving Black men throughout the school, positive words of affirmation, and ongoing discussions to build asset-based mindsets about Black boys and their families and communities.[13] To begin, educators can discuss the following core beliefs to build strong collaborative relationships with Black communities and families: (1) All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them; (2) All families have the capacity to support their children's learning; (3) Families and school staff should be equal partners; and (4) Responsibility for building and sustaining partnerships between school, home, and community rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.[14]

Connect Community and Family Engagement Activities to Student Learning

When positive interactions among educators, community members and organizations, and families are characterized by mutual respect, trust, open communication, and inclusion in decision making, students and their families are more likely to report feeling confident about their roles as advocates and become more engaged in their children's learning.[15] Key factors to connecting community and family engagement activities to student learning include planning to (1) align with district goals for student outcomes; (2) engage in communication with community partners and families about what students are learning at school; (3) provide support at home for learning;[16] and (4) learn what students are learning in their community and family (cultural norms, community events, etc). Nevertheless, despite the vast research on parental involvement, little has been documented in the research about the specific contributions of Black families to student learning.[17] We do know, however, that connecting community and family engagement to what students are learning in school requires intentional, systemic, sustainable approaches.[18] For example, if the aim is to help community partners and families support student learning after school and at home, then educators must have the time and resources to provide

partners and families clear information on curriculum, student progress, instructional strategies, and student assessment data. Connecting to learning, then, requires support from school leaders, sufficient resources, frequent communication, and a shared vision for community and family engagement to create an affirming and positive school culture of care. Schools that engage community partners and families find that their students have higher grades, improved literacy, and higher attendance.[19]

Kingmakers of Oakland Community and Family Activities

Activity	Strengthens Trust	Connects to Student Learning	Next Steps and Improvements
Celebrations	Medium	Low	Integrate a connection to classroom learning.
Fundraisers	Medium	Low	Include examples (i.e., photos, student-led videos) of direct impact on student learning.
Potlucks	Medium	Low	Integrate a connection to classroom learning.
Parent Training	Medium	Medium	Select a district learning goal for discussion during each session.
Back-to School Night	Medium	Medium	Design activities to facilitate dialogue between educators and families.
Parent-Teacher Conference	High	Medium	Include a student-led component that focuses on students sharing their own learning progress, growth, areas of need, and experiences (i.e., writing portfolios).
Goal-Setting Tasks	High	Medium	Continue to build mutual respect over time and strengthen families' sense of agency over student learning.
Regular Personalized Communication	High	Medium	Continue to build mutual respect over time.
Positive Phone Calls Home	High	Medium	Continue to build mutual respect over time.

Kingmakers of Oakland Community and Family Activities (cont.)

Activity	Strengthens Trust	Connects to Student Learning	Next Steps and Improvements
Classroom Observations	High	Medium	Families observe what their children are learning and can use similar strategies to support at-home learning.
Weekly Data Sharing Folders (i.e., digital)	High	High	Families understand and monitor progress on what their children are learning to support at-home.
Home Visits	High	High	Continue to build mutual respect and connections over time.
Modeling of Learning Support Strategies	High	High	Families understand what and how their children are learning specific concepts to replicate at-home.
Parent Help on Learning Projects	High	High	Families understand what their children are learning to support at-home learning.

Implications and Actions

Community and family engagement matters. Manifesting this goal requires a collective commitment to change the way schools and districts engage Black families and communities in their children's learning and school experiences. Importantly, educators need to foster and affirm a culture of care for the Black community and families and elevate the importance of these families engaging in ways that are connected to their values, ways of being, and style. Likewise, educators, communities, and families need to see Black families as assets to the learning and leadership decision-making process, foster safe conditions for them to voice their thoughts and beliefs, listen to them as they advocate for their children and others, and ensure dynamic learning is happening every day for all Black students.

Actions for Educators
(Teachers, support staff, administrators):

- Identify current levels of trust across communities, families and schools
- Observe current practices of welcoming families at the school
- Hold community dialogues to bring people together to discuss racial equity, student outcomes, and collectively work toward positive change and sustained partnerships
- Actively engage and partner with Black families to ensure student success (i.e., send positive messages of affirmation about a quality asset, progress, or excellence)
- Incorporate an intersectional lens and increase awareness of oppressive structures
- Interrupt racist practices and systemic assaults towards Black youth, communities, and families

Actions for Policy Makers
(Boards of Education, Departments of Education, legislatures):

- Co-create a school, district, community and family engagement plan
  - Create an equitable and non-complicated process to invite community and family participation (i.e., administrator, staff, parent leads, community leads, student representatives)
  - Co-create a vision statement for community and family engagement
  - Identify current levels of trust across community, families, and school staff
  - Identify and reflect on existing community and family engagement initiatives; consider how well they (1) strengthen trust and (2) connect to student learning
  - Include action items, communication protocols, and evaluation process
- Include the voices of Black youth, adolescents, and families to create and evaluate the plan

Questions

1. In what ways do district and site administrators create the conditions for healthy community and family engagement?
2. Does staff understand and value the importance of community and family engagement? If so, how does it show up in our community? If not, how can it be fostered?
3. What are we doing to build trusting relationships across school, communities, and families to create a culture of care for Black boys and their families? What resources do we have? What resources do we need?
4. How are we connecting community and family engagement activities to student learning?
5. Are there structured opportunities for all staff to reflect and examine biases, invisible assumptions about Black communities and families?
6. What opportunities exist for staff to engage in deep listening of Black male students, communities, and families?

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