CCNETWORK Regional Comprehensive Center Midwest

Emerging Practices in Family Engagement to Support State Navigation Initiatives

Executive Summary

State and local education systems are exploring ways to strengthen how families and caregivers navigate the wide range of learning opportunities available to children and youth. As opportunities expand across schools, communities, and broader non-traditional learning settings (e.g., afterschool programs), families and caregivers play an important role in helping children and youth identify, access, and participate in opportunities that align with their needs, interests, and goals.

For more information about family and caregiver navigation, check out ***Supports for Family Navigation: State Models***.

To inform efforts to strengthen family and caregiver navigation, the Midwest Comprehensive Center conducted a scan of emerging practices across state and local systems. The scan examines initiatives, strategies, and approaches that use family engagement and system-level supports to help families access and navigate varied learning opportunities.[1] Together, these examples illustrate ways education agencies and community partners are working to make information, guidance, and connections to learning opportunities more accessible and responsive to family and youth needs.

The brief is intended to:

- synthesize how family engagement is embedded in state education agency (SEA)-led navigation and related initiatives;
- highlight best practices across system levels such as SEA, local education agency (LEA), and school/community; and
- provide a structured matrix of family engagement strategies (Exhibit 1) to inform design and implementation of family navigation efforts.

Exhibit 1 organizes emerging family engagement strategies by system level, highlighting the roles of SEAs, LEAs, and school/community partners alongside promising strategies, illustrative practices, and implementation considerations. Drawing from the examples featured throughout this brief, the matrix serves as a flexible menu of options that state leaders can adapt and combine to strengthen family navigation systems and expand access to varied learning opportunities.

[1] In these briefs, *varied learning opportunities* refers to a wide range of high-quality educational options, such as STEM academies, arts-integrated schools, and out-of-school-time programs that expand learning options by allowing families to choose learning environments and approaches that best meet their child's needs.

Family Engagement as a System Function

Across leading state models, parent and caregiver engagement is increasingly treated not as an added feature of a broader initiative but as a core system function embedded in infrastructure and governance and woven in throughout continuous improvement cycles.

Across states, these engagement strategies often operate at multiple levels of the education system. Some approaches focus on SEA-level infrastructure, policy, and statewide guidance; others emphasize how LEAs translate those structures into local implementation and coordination practices. Still others rely on schools, community organizations, and trusted intermediaries to build relationships, support communication, and help families navigate opportunities and services. The sections below highlight emerging practices across each of these levels and illustrate how states are integrating family engagement into broader **navigation systems**.[2]

SEA-Level Practices: Building Statewide Infrastructure and Policy Conditions

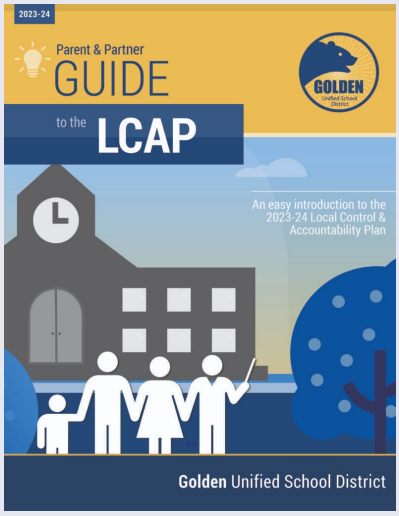
SEAs play an important role in establishing the policy conditions, partnerships, and infrastructure necessary to support families in navigating and accessing the varied learning opportunities available across schools, communities, and out-of-school settings. In many states, SEAs are developing statewide frameworks, guidance documents, and accountability structures that elevate family engagement as a shared responsibility across partners, including districts, schools, and community-based organizations.

For example, the California Department of Education developed its Family Engagement Framework to support districts in embedding family engagement in Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and broader continuous improvement efforts. **California requires each LEA to adopt an LCAP that addresses all applicable state priorities.** One priority focuses on parental involvement and family engagement, including efforts the school district makes to seek parent input in decision-making at both the district and school levels. The requirement also asks districts to describe how they will promote participation in programs for young people with varying needs.

In addition, SEAs are increasingly creating structures that elevate family voice in policy discussions. Kentucky's statewide family leadership and stakeholder engagement structures provide opportunities for families and caregivers to contribute to conversations related to school improvement and educational access initiatives. For example, the Kentucky Department of Education hosts a Family Partnership Council that draws on a statewide resource, *The Kentucky Family and School Partnership Guide*, to act as "a network of families, schools, districts and

[2] In these briefs, *navigation system* refers to a set of tools, supports, and partnerships that help families understand, access, and engage with choices offered through diverse learning opportunities.

community partners who are focused on increasing open communication, learning opportunities and shared decision-making power across the Kentucky education system" (Kentucky Collaborative for Families and Schools, 2023). Kentucky also supports these efforts through its Parent and Family Connection Hub, which provides centralized resources and tools designed to strengthen school–family partnerships across the state (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.).



California's Local Control and Accountability Plans

Established through the Local Control Funding Formula, the LCAP process requires LEAs to engage families, youth, educators, and community members in developing district goals, priorities, and resource allocation decisions. Importantly, the framework positions family engagement not simply as a communication strategy but as a shared governance and continuous improvement function connected to youth outcomes and access to varied learning opportunities.

Several features of the LCAP are used by LEAs to communicate information about academic pathways, out-of-school-time (OST) programs, college and career readiness initiatives, and other learning opportunities available to youth and families. For example, Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District's LCAP includes goals related to ensuring that students and families are "connected and informed" while elevating access to future-ready learning opportunities for adolescents (Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, 2025).

LEA-Level Practices: Local Implementation and Coordination

LEAs play a central role in translating statewide policies into locally responsive systems. Many districts have developed centralized enrollment systems and family support structures designed to simplify participation in school choice and diverse learning opportunities.

New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS), for example, operates EnrollNOLA, a unified enrollment system that allows families to apply to multiple schools through a single process and that also provides outreach and family support resources. Similarly, in Indianapolis, Enroll Indy reported that the first year of OneMatch, a common enrollment system used across participating schools, yielded an 84.5% overall match rate, with 81.9% of applicants matched to one of their top three choices (Hannon, 2018).

On its own, however, streamlining the application process does not necessarily ensure easy access. Families may still face challenges in navigating deadlines, understanding options, or completing applications, especially when digital access, language supports, transportation, or familiarity with systems are limited. These examples suggest that centralized enrollment

platforms are most effective when paired with family outreach and hands-on navigation support to help ensure that all families can benefit from the system.

New Orleans's EnrollNOLA

The EnrollNOLA app includes searchable school profiles, application guidance, enrollment timelines, information about varied learning opportunities, transportation eligibility, and broader youth services.

To complement the platform, NOLA-PS offers in-person and community-based engagement supports, including family resource centers, enrollment assistance, multilingual materials, community outreach events, and direct support staff who help families understand learning opportunities and complete the enrollment processes. The flyer pictured in this text box promotes a community event designed to support families in using the EnrollNOLA platform.

At the state level, the Louisiana Department of Education reinforces these efforts through policies and programs such as the Louisiana Scholarship program and the statewide Course Choice initiative, both of which provide additional pathways for students to access coursework and learning opportunities. The Course Choice initiative emphasizes the role of family engagement and provides resources such as communication toolkits with social media graphics and flyers.

School- and Community-Level Practices: Building Trust and Relationships

At the school and community levels, effective engagement strategies are often rooted in building trust, developing relationships, and ensuring that families have the information and supports they need to participate actively and benefit meaningfully.

Many schools have strengthened these efforts by implementing family liaison or engagement coordinator roles that improve communication and help families navigate and connect with a broad range of educational options, including school choice pathways, academic support, and wraparound services.

Community-based organizations can further support families as trusted intermediaries within school choice ecosystems. Organizations such as Families Empowered in Texas provide workshops and individualized support to help families understand school options and enrollment processes (Families Empowered, n.d.).

Similarly, Communities In Schools of Texas illustrates how relationship-based navigator models can strengthen student engagement and access to supports. Through school-based coordinators, the program helps students and families navigate academic, attendance, mental health, and social

service systems while connecting them to coordinated school and community supports. Research suggests that these integrated navigation approaches can improve attendance and student engagement and may contribute to reductions in achievement gaps when implemented at scale. States can support similar models through technical assistance, pilot funding, and guidance that helps districts coordinate student support systems for attendance, academics, and family engagement.

Key Takeaways

The practices highlighted throughout this brief suggest that strengthening family navigation of learning opportunities is most effective when family engagement is embedded as a system function rather than treated as a stand-alone activity. Across SEA, LEA, and school/community levels, states are leveraging a combination of policy infrastructures, local implementation structures, and trusted relationships to help families understand, access, and make decisions about available learning opportunities. Although approaches vary by governance context, promising models consistently integrate clearly articulated statewide expectations, locally adaptable implementation supports, and relationship-centered strategies that reduce persistent barriers for youth and families.

Strengthen SEA-Led Infrastructure and Shared Expectations

SEAs may consider continuing to build statewide frameworks, guidance, and accountability structures that explicitly and intentionally integrate family engagement into navigation systems. This process includes aligning policy tools (e.g., statewide engagement hubs) with expectations for how districts and partners communicate about the varied learning opportunities available. Strengthening opportunities for family voice in state-level decision-making can further ensure that navigation systems reflect the experiences of youth and families.

For example, Kentucky's Family Partnership Council and Parent and Family Connection Hub illustrates how states can formalize family voice in policy and provide centralized tools that support engagement across districts.

Support LEAs in Building Coherent and Accessible Navigation Systems

At the district level, SEAs can support LEAs in developing unified, user-friendly systems that reduce fragmentation across enrollment, program access, and youth supports. This includes providing guidance on centralized enrollment approaches, strengthening communication practices across schools, and addressing implementation challenges. Targeted technical assistance can help districts ensure that navigation systems are consistent.

New Orleans illustrates how centralized enrollment systems, paired with community engagement supports such as family resource centers and multilingual materials, can make it easier for families to understand available options and successfully navigate varied learning opportunities.

Invest in Relationship-Based and Community-Embedded Supports

Across school and community settings, evidence suggests that families are most effectively supported when navigation is grounded in trusted relationships. SEAs may consider expanding support for family liaison roles, community-based navigators, and cross-sector partnerships that help families interpret information and connect to opportunities.

Models such as Communities in Schools of Texas and local family support organizations demonstrate how embedded, relationship-based approaches can strengthen engagement, improve attendance, and support various other academic outcomes. Supporting the scale and coordination of these models can help ensure that navigation systems are both accessible and responsive to family needs.

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Exhibit 1. Engagement Strategies Matrix

System level	Engagement roles	Core strategies	Example practices	Implementation considerations
State education agency (SEA)	Establish statewide vision and infrastructure for intentional family engagement.	• Statewide frameworks • Accountability requirements • Advisory councils • Technical assistance • Centralized information systems	• California Family Engagement Framework, Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) • Colorado school comparison tool, SchoolView • Kentucky family engagement structures (e.g., Family Partnership Council)	• Align family engagement across school choice, out-of-school time (OST), college and career pathways, and broader educational access initiatives to reduce fragmentation. • Provide sustained implementation infrastructure, including technical assistance, professional learning, funding supports, and shared tools for districts and partners. • Establish statewide expectations for serving all students while allowing flexibility for local adaptation. • Use statewide family feedback and participation data to inform continuous improvement and identify gaps in awareness, access, and participation.
Local education agency (LEA)	Translate statewide policy into locally responsive engagement systems.	• Centralized enrollment systems • Family engagement coordinators • Community partnerships • District engagement plans	• New Orleans Public Schools, OneApp • Indianapolis, Enroll Indy	• Adapt SEA guidance into locally adapted engagement approaches that reflect community context, language needs, and family priorities. • Support the coordination of communication and outreach across schools, departments, and community organizations to create more coherent family experiences. • Invest in dedicated staffing structures, such as family engagement coordinators or navigators, to support relationship building and ongoing family support. • Pair navigation tools with personalized assistance and trusted intermediaries who can help families interpret information and access available learning opportunities.

System level	Engagement roles	Core strategies	Example practices	Implementation considerations
School/community	Build trust, relationships, and direct family support structures.	• Family liaisons • Two-way communication systems • Community partnerships • Peer networks	• Texas community-based organizations (CBOs) such as Families Empowered and Communities in Schools of Texas	• Prioritize relationship-based engagement strategies that position families as ongoing partners rather than recipients of information. • Leverage and support sustained partnerships with CBOs and OST providers that families already know and trust. • Create multiple opportunities for two-way communication, listening, and shared decision-making through family forums, peer networks, and involvement structures.
Cross-cutting	Promote access, usability, and continuous improvement across systems.	• Simplified communication • Feedback loops • Cross-sector coordination	• N/A	• Design systems that reduce complexity for families by simplifying communication, aligning messaging across programs, and providing actionable information. • Embed continuous family feedback loops into planning and implementation processes so that families can see how their input informs decisions and improvements.

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